

11SHORT.DOC 1-11-01

The U.S. Treasury Division of Cuban Assets reserves five years to read reports by Americans on Cuba. Newspaper articles take a long time to resurface in livestock journals. Eight to nine hundred words of copy face-down, lying in the floorboard of a ranch pickup or lining the bottom of a sock drawer or a song bird cage are about as likely to reach the Department as your grandmother's May Day basket is of winning the National Flower Show.

Also, writer's and journalist's welcomes in Communist countries expire before the scribblers and the scribes ever leave home base. Cuba owns three television stations and five newspapers. (There were 55 newspapers and 12 television stations before the Revolution.) A country as short of media as five newspapers needs a bunch of foreign writers making nasty cracks about the roof caving in on the old houses, or 1959 cars stalling in the streets. But Mr. Castro is very sensitive of outside criticism, because that's the only kind ever expressed.

Over in Cuba, I sure knew better than to tell the other delegates my avocation. I was the only Texan along. The group knew I was traveling alone. The sharpest ventriloquist to ever place a dummy on his knee couldn't fake having a travel companion. Folks recognize right quick a fellow is a social misfit traveling solo from the second most populous state in the Union. Be understandable for a guy living on a small island off the Carolina coast to be on his own. But I

left over 21 million fellow citizens home when I flew from DFW to Miami.

One night in Havana, I did join a couple of guys to go out for dinner. We set out to find a family serving meals for tourists. Castro must have borrowed the idea from the People's Republic as the Chinese government allows citizens to open impromptu food stands on the sidewalks to make extra dough. Called "paladares" in Cuba, the home-cooked food is very reasonable. Also, good or cheap, supporting this small fragment of private enterprise makes one feel better about living in the plush hotels where the State and foreign cartels split the profits.

However, before eating, my companions wanted to see the famed district "La Rampa," once the haunt of Havana's high society. *Once* being the crux of the adventure. After a short bus ride, we plunged into a drunken melee of wild young Cubans that'd make a Saturday night street crowd in a Mexican border town resemble the pace of a quadrille in a formal ballroom. The crowd roared in blurred Spanish, backed by deafening bongo music pouring from swinging doors. Policemen eyed us; painted hustlers appraised the prospects of a business hit. Raw fumes from white rum expiration spiked the fog of blue streams of cigar smoke. One of my pals broke off to increase the danger by joining a political harangue by a gang of boys and girls.

Pushed to one side, a basic rule, a virtual law of international travel flashed in mind. To wit: "Unless you

are a drunk or a prostitute, stay away from the districts where they roam. Go to the botanical gardens, visit the cathedrals, pose for photographs in front of fountains, buy postcards and funny tee-shirts, but don't go around places where every night the despairing, lost souls of the street rob and kill each other."

In minutes, the rule went into effect. I turned to my new friend, Tom. "Tom, you know the next move?" A wave of celebrants shoved us apart. I all but shouted, "Tom, I'm catching a cab back to the hotel!" He nodded and waved goodbye. In 10 minutes I was on my way back to the serene surroundings of the hotel. My pals made it back safely by midnight.

A short flight from Havana to the Bahamas ended the trip. One minute we were a delegation, the next we gathered our gear from the overhead bins heading for the next leg, either a flight to Miami or a hotel in Nassau. After passing customs into the Bahamas, we passed through another room to enter United States Customs and never see each other again. My deaf act worked on each country's officials. I leaned over in the glassed booths, cupping my ear the way Uncle Remus cupped his in the Tar Baby stories. Being at such a close range shortened the interrogation procedure.

Waiting for a later flight, I watched the Americans trail down the concourse and rush from sight. Intellectually curious ranchers from Montana, a gruff professor stalking ahead of his wife, an older couple holding hands, and two

New York state agri-business consultants climbing back on the treadmill of airport speed, gone for good.

"We Americans," I thought, "are not Ugly Americans. We are a polite and generous people who stand for a slate of decent principles. Take only a slight cull to shape that delegation into a fine profile of countrymen."