

Dry Pipes, Liberated Water, and Struggles for Legitimacy: A Lesser-Known Story of the United States in Cuba

Description

Sixty years ago, the only US sea power platform in a communist country experienced a non-kinetic attack by a nation-state with the dual purposes of both influencing international opinion against its presence and making it uninhabitable. On February 6, 1964, just over a year after the [Cuban Missile Crisis](#), Cuban President Fidel Castro announced that he would cut off the sole water source of the US naval base at Guantanamo Bay if the US did not release 36 Cuban fishermen who had been arrested for illegally fishing near Florida. During those very tense times of the Cold War, tactical issues between the US and Soviet-sponsored Cuba had the potential for global, apocalyptic implications. Fortunately, like the better-known Missile Crisis, this crisis too was peacefully resolved, or at least its more dire impacts and potential were mitigated. A struggle for legitimacy and influence, played out by irregular warfare (IW) veterans, this Guantanamo Bay water crisis deserves a revisit and a review for its diamond anniversary.

The installation now called Naval Station Guantanamo Bay was established in 1903 via treaty with the then-compliant government of Cuba. That compliance went away with the coming of the Castro revolution in 1959 and its attachment to the Soviet Union, but the treaty, and the base it [facilitated, remained in place](#). The baseâ??s center of gravity and critical vulnerability was and is potable water. In 1898, its [freshwater well was the scene of the Battle of Cuzco Well](#), which wrested control of the area from the Spanish, and the U.S. Navyâ??s build-up and continued operations were possible only through train cars of water coming from off-base in the early days, and since the early 1940â??s, a pipe delivering water from a nearby river outside the base perimeter.

When Cuban President Fidel Castro announced his plans to use that water as a hostage and marker for the return of those fishermen, held in a Florida jail, Rear Admiral John Bulkeley, base commander (and [Medal of Honor recipient for his action evacuating General MacArthur from the Philippines](#)) immediately put the base on water restrictions, requested water barge services from the US and Jamaica, and cancelled personnel inspections to save water on uniform laundering. Although Castro said he would allow water to flow on base one hour per day for humanitarian reasons, Bulkeley directed that the flow â?? which came into the base at the [installationâ??s only accessible land corridor with the rest of Cuba](#) â?? be [completely secured](#).

At this stage, the objectives of each side, if not overtly stated, could be discerned by actions taken. The Cuban regime sought to highlight the continued, unwanted occupation of a part of their poor country by a belligerent superpower, have the Cuban fishermen returned from US custody, and negatively impact or even nullify the base as an operational platform. Maintaining the baseâ??s presence and operations while not provoking a war, were the USâ?? goals. Both countries wanted to prove the legitimacy of their respective authority over the base, at least to that segment of the world able to take action on their opinions.

The crisis evolved quickly over the next ten days. On February 8, an inspection team from the Joint Chiefs of Staff arrived to survey the situation and the possibility of installing a desalination plant to convert seawater. Two days later, a Navy tug towing water barges arrived from Jamaica with potable water. On February 12, 270 Cuban workers were fired as a result of a Presidential order to make the base more self-sufficient, and the next day, the Chief of Naval Personnel announced that no further dependents would be permitted to accompany military members to Guantanamo, in order to change the base into a â??garrison force.â?• On February 14, fourteen international news media representatives arrived. Finally, the Cuban government asserted the Naval Base was â??stealingâ? water from the pipe leading from Communist Cuba.

With that last public accusation, Bulkeley decided on an urgent, creative solution: he gathered the visiting newsmen, brought them to the spot where the water pipe came into the base, and had two Cuban workers cut open the water pipe. The U.S. Navy News Release from Naval Base Guantanamo Bay, Cuba, dated February 27, 1964, read that the base commander ordered that the pipe be cut and sealed â??â?to let the world know that the United States was not receiving water from Communist Cuba.â?•

The installation would, for the next year, have its water delivered by tanker and then, in time, be serviced by a desalinization plant. It would also â?? as directed by the President â?? fire most of the remaining Cuban commuting workforce, replacing them eventually with US civilians, Sailors, contractors, and Jamaican nationals, becoming and remaining independent of Communist Cuba for water and workforce.

Bulkeley said he made the decision to sever the pipe himself, but President Lyndon Johnson said four days later that: â??We believe it is far wiser to send an Admiral to cut the water off than to send a battalion of marines to turn it back on [meaning an invasion from the base into the neighboring area]. And we are making our base more secure now than it ever has been in its history.â?• The base newspaper from May, 1964, quoted â??the old ancient mariner: â??water, water, everywhereâ?nor any drop to drink.â?? What he needed was a desalination plant.â?•

Without historical and contemporary context – from the Spanish-American War to the Castro Revolution to the Cold War – this crisis could easily be interpreted as just a minor, bloodless, land-based competition over infrastructure solved by logistics. IW and maritime relevance are not, however, too far beneath the surface. Both belligerents – the government of Cuba and the tactical leadership of the naval base – had successful IW experiences in other wars. The Cuban regime had only a decade earlier been a decidedly non-state actor, a [guerrilla group](#) (and would continue in that role [abroad](#)), gaining experience and expertise in a violent struggle for legitimacy within Cuba which of course resulted in their overthrow of the existing Cuban government. Bulkeley, while a long-serving officer in the world's largest Navy, had his early combat experience serving in [small, outgunned vessels executing raids](#) and extractions against more [numerous and powerful enemies](#). Both belligerents used tactics associated with modern IW: each side portrayed itself as standing up to an unjust, stronger power, through non-kinetic means, and each attempted [to disrupt its competitor's warfighting advantage while reinforcing its own](#). Removing the base's water supply from Castro's control, and adding both water deliveries and a desalination plant, made the base more effective than would have additional conventional armaments. As long as the struggle remained [below the threshold](#) and the base and its inhabitants served as a [defacto tripwire](#), decreasing vulnerabilities was more effective than increasing capabilities.

By late summer, the base was being supplied with water from the still-under-construction plant and from water-carrying ships, but swimming pools were open. [By December the plant was operating at full capacity, and the families evacuated in February were returning](#). Tactically, this struggle – won by the US. The Cubans too, could claim victory, or at least a return to a shared version of status quo ante bellum, as within the year their [fishermen were released and returned home](#).

Six decades later, against the wishes and work of the opposing sides, both the US Naval Station and the Castro regime (without, of course, [Fidel](#)) remain in Cuba. Neither is particularly popular in the international community – the country is still an avowed communist state and [occasional pariah](#), and the base has [weathered all manner](#) of foreign and [domestic](#) attempts at its [removal](#), or at least cessation of some of its more notable missions. The competition and struggle for legitimacy and influence also remain, and fortunately, remain just that: a very, very long irregular war that has skillfully been kept from drifting into [war's more conventional](#) form. It is not the most joyful anniversary, but those 60 years could have been much worse.

J. Overton is the editor of [Seapower by Other Means: Naval Contributions to National Objectives Beyond Sea Control, Power Projection, and Traditional Service Missions](#) (ISPK Seapower Series 2023), and co-editor (with Timothy Heck) of the (in-progress) essay collection [Fighting Surrounded](#). He is a former Non-Resident Fellow with the Modern War Institute at West Point and US Coast Guard

veteran.

The views expressed are those of the author and do not reflect the official position of the United States Military Academy, Department of the Army, or Department of Defense.

Main image: View of the North East Gate at the U.S. Navy base at Guantanamo Bay, Cuba. ([US Navy via Wikimedia](#))

If you value reading the Irregular Warfare Initiative, please consider [supporting our work](#). And for the best gear, check out the [IWI store](#) for mugs, coasters, apparel, and other items.

Date Created

2024/02/29