

Can't Wait for my Cuban Cigars

My grandfather was a socialist, and my father a right-wing Republican; but one thing they agreed upon was the need for Cuban cigars. My family was in the cigar business, one of my ancestors, having obtained the patent for the machine that first rolled cigars automatically, rather than by hand. Another Rieders married into the famous Gompers family. It was Samuel Gompers who organized the Cigar Workers Union, virtually putting out of business the relative who obtained the patent on the machine variety of rolled cigars. Quite a complex story, but not nearly as important as the fact that Cuban cigars will soon invade our country thanks to President Obama's recognition and normalization of diplomatic relations with the old hard line communist state.

Is it possible that cigars can bring diplomatic advances and world peace? It was the growing of tobacco that helped establish this country, enrich the likes of George Washington, and create a bustling human slave trade in the United States. According to Wikipedia, the origins of cigar smoking are unknown; but a ceramic pot dating back to the 10th century features a Mayan breaking tobacco leaves tied together with a string. According to the same website, Sikar, the term for smoking used by the Maya, may have inspired the name "cigar." Who knows and who cares; the fact is that we can now drink our single malt scotch with our favorite Cuban cigars.

Fast forward to the '60s and the communist revolution. So distraught was America by the idea of communist infiltration into the Americas, that even a man careful on foreign affairs like John Kennedy wound up supporting the failed Bay of Pigs invasion. Like many Americans, I have always suspected whether the assassination of Kennedy had anything to do with his policy decisions on Cuba. I am no conspiracy theorist, but both communists and ultra-right nationalists believe they had a reason to be ticked off at the young President.

Right-wingers did not uniformly support American policy of isolating Cuba. Some of them thought that America had no place dictating the national policy of other nations, so long as those nations left us alone. The problem with Cuba, under the leadership of the enigmatic Fidel Castro, was that the island nation did its best to foment unrest and revolution throughout Central and South America. Those on the left, thought that the best way to destabilize Cuba was to buy its products, especially cigars, thus Americanizing the communist island economy.

While Barack Obama has made his fair share of foreign policy mistakes, he is probably right to sidle up to Castro's brother. American culture has had a way of overcoming the resistance of our enemies. By the same token, our lust for foreign products is hard for any nation to resist. The sale of oil has made wealthy and emboldened our enemies, but it also made them dependent on us. There is a co-

dependency between oil seller and oil purchaser which has guided our foreign policy since 1911.

Can the Cuban sale and the American purchase of cigars overcome old suspicions and result in the conquest of the world by a New Capitalism? Hardly, but at least we will have a better time fretting about American foreign policy with the smooth, unique tobacco of Cuba aromatically filling our legislative halls and board rooms.

What of restrictions on smoking? How about the health concerns? Does cigar smoking still attract the rich and powerful, as well as the poor and downtrodden, to a way of life that is endemic to male culture? Perhaps Cuban cigars do not have the allure that they once did, since we are now better informed concerning the health risks of tobacco. There are even those who claim that Cuban cigars are not really that good anymore. I have smoked a few of the Cubans while traveling in foreign countries which did not ban the importation of the Habana. Were they great? Well, it depended on how much I had to drink at the time and who I was with. There were circumstances where I thought there was nothing better than the Cuban cigar and others where they were simply so-so.

The government will no longer be telling me that I cannot smoke Cuban cigars, only that I should not be smoking them for health reasons, and probably taxing them beyond recognition. This leads to the more provocative question as to when the federal government will lift restrictions on marijuana, take it off the Schedule I drug list and tax the heck out of the weed. Only a few years before I graduated from Georgetown Law School, one of my predecessors at the Law School began an organization called NORML, National Organization for the Reform of Marijuana Laws. Keith Stroup started NORML after talking with the Attorney General who helped author the study, *The Challenge of Crime in a Free Society*. In the seminal work on Crime in America, it was suggested that marijuana be sold and taxed like any other plant leaf that could be smoked. Stroup asked the former Attorney General what he thought about an effort to normalize marijuana laws, and he was encouraged in his endeavor. By the mid-'70s, it appeared that marijuana legalization was right around the corner. Then came the campaign against drugs, and marijuana got lumped in with all the other bad stuff.

It now appears that we are in a new era, where states and governments are studying the medicinal qualities of Mary Jane, thus legitimizing its use not only for those who suffer from pain, but those who just like to get stoned. Is there some symmetry here between the recognition of Cuba and the normalization of marijuana? I watched my father and grandfather stand on the corner of Booth Lane in Rego Park, smoking their cigars on a cold winter's night because they were kicked out of the house by their wives. The ladies could not stand the smell of their cheap White Owl cigars or their talk about which cigars were the best; Nicaraguan, Jamaican, or the old Cubans. Those men standing on the street corner under the dim light certainly seemed happy to me, as a 7-year-old watching their great pleasure at smoking, shivering in the cold, and talking.

Well everybody, light up and enjoy the pleasures of cigar smoking. Perhaps cigars from Cuba laced with marijuana are not far behind. To everyone, a Happy Holiday and a marvelous New Year in the brave new world that we are entering upon.

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