Cuban initiative

by James M. Wall in the November 17, 1999 issue

From a trip to Havana in the fall of 1980, I returned with two small statues of African female warriors, one with a machete, the other carrying a rifle. These were gifts from a government official who handed them to me after I stopped to admire them. It wasn't until I approached a Cuban customs clerk that I noticed that at the bottom of each statue was a metal stamp that read "Property of the Central Committee." My traveling companions, a group of Protestant church officials, suggested that maybe I was being set up.

Their fear had more to do with a cold-war mentality than the manners of our host in Havana. As it turned out, no custom official bothered to check the stamp and no one asked for my purchase papers. We were, after all, U.S. visitors on a trip designed to build bridges between Cuba and the U.S. What the incident suggested to me then, and what seems even more significant now, is that Cuba's communist leaders were always more Cuban than communist.

The absurd, ridiculously punitive and failed U.S. policy toward Cuba will soon end. How do I know this? The signs are evident in the October trip to Cuba made by Illinois Governor George Ryan.

Ryan met with Fidel Castro and declared his opposition to the continuation of the U.S. economic embargo, echoing the sentiments of most U.S. religious groups, including Ryan's own United Methodist denomination. Ryan defied State Department warnings not to make the trip, and took along a delegation of political, religious and business leaders. He returned determined "to push for an end to the near 40-year-old economic sanctions" against Cuba. His fellow governors are listening; trade talk is in the air.

Ryan, a Republican, was asked if he was concerned about criticism from Cuban Americans in South Florida who support the embargo.

"I don't represent Miami," he replied—a clear declaration that he knows the source of the embargo's defenders. Ryan's stance was echoed by G. Allen Andreas, chairman and chief executive officer of Archer Daniels Midland Co., based in Decatur, Illinois, who sees Cuba as a good market for his company. "I have no reason to think [the embargo] has been constructive in any way to reach its originally described objective," Andreas said. "I would say 40 years of the embargo have demonstrated, perhaps, the folly of its origination."

Cuba is famous for its patched-together U.S. automobiles built in the 1950s. What attracted the attention of Governor Ryan was the aged condition of the island's farming technology. Cuban farmers need the farm machinery readily available from Illinois companies like John Deere and Caterpillar.

Another midwestern Republican politician, Senator John Ashcroft of Missouri, also has taken steps to counter the strong lobby of Cuban Americans by proposing an amendment to the agricultural appropriations bill which would move toward lifting the economic sanctions. The bill could be voted on before Thanksgiving.

It would be ironic if it were the efforts of conservative Republicans that resulted in the end of the embargo. Democrats have usually claimed to support human rights in foreign policy.

Unfortunately, the definition of human rights during the Clinton administration has been highly selective, as Peter Schwab points out in his recent book, *Cuba: Confronting the U.S. Embargo*. Schwab writes that early in 1998, in a debate during the 50th anniversary celebration of the signing of the Universal Declaration of Human

Rights, the U.S. argued that Cuba should be censured for human rights violations. Cuba argued that the U.S. was more focused on individual rights than it was on social rights, and that its criticisms reflected Western values rather than the position of poor countries still emerging from the effects of colonialism.

At the time, Carl Johan Groth of Sweden, the UN Special Rapporteur on Human Rights in Cuba, said "that while Castro's government did repress its domestic critics, the U.S. embargo was partly to blame, since it caused a 'tragic shortage of material goods [and] untold hardships.'" Schwab adds that the "preamble of the charter of the United Nations refers to the determination of the peoples of the UN to 'practice tolerance and live together in peace with one another as good neighbors.'"

Looking back on the late 1970s, Schwab praises Jimmy Carter's efforts to reach out to Cuba under even more difficult political circumstances. Had Carter been reelected in 1980, there was every indication that he would have ended the embargo despite Castro's insistence on conducting military activities in Angola and Ethiopia, an enterprise that further angered Carter's congressional critics.

Carter the religious man of compassion would have ended the embargo because it was a violation of basic human rights. Carter the politician would have ended the embargo because it was a failed policy that was depriving the U.S. of markets. It's the lure of those markets that is now moving people like Governor Ryan to push for a new policy.