

Cuban opposition. The upper classes in Cuba were very much self-consciously white, segregationist, and strongly Negrophobic. They were indeed the product, and modern representatives, of the ideology and economic class interests of the slave-holders in Cuba's immediate past. The "Negro question" was equally Washington's Achilles' heel. Castro would direct increasingly heavier blows to that soft spot: the more both countries squared off for a violent confrontation. Fearing an American intervention, Cuban leaders attempted to shore up the U.S. by canvassing the sort of support that could allow their revolution to survive if Washington decided to concretely intervene. Hence, on both sides—particularly on Cuba's—a vast propaganda campaign was set in motion. Denouncing American racism and stressing that racial discrimination was eradicated in Cuba, Castro now redoubled his efforts to canvass the support of American Negroes in his struggle against imperialism.¹³

The Fan Play for Cuba Committee, a U.S.-based pro-Castro organization, was set up in the spring of 1960. The FPCC was to become the chief vehicle through which the Cuban leadership sought access to America's black population. Founded by two American television journalists, Robert Taber, a white, and Richard Gibson, a Black, the FPCC was from the outset an effective organ for conveying Castro's message in the black American community. A well-regarded journalist, Taber was a personal friend of Castro, whom he had interviewed in 1958 during the Sierra Maestra campaign. Taber certainly had been instrumental in creating an early awareness in Havana of the importance of canvassing black American support. Gibson, in contrast, seems to have played more of a window-dressing role.

In May 1960, former heavyweight champion Joe Louis, one of the prominent U.S. Blacks invited to Cuba by Castro the previous year, was named U.S. publicity agent to promote tourism to Cuba.¹⁴ Louis, dancer Josephine Baker, novelist Richard Wright and James Baldwin, and a host of other black American celebrities were on Cuba's invitation list, drawn up by the FPCC. Prominent U.S. black intellectuals, associated with leftist and/or civil rights causes, were also eagerly sought out by the FPCC for projected tours of Cuba.

In July 1960, a group of black U.S. intellectuals finally arrived in Cuba on an organized FPCC tour. Among them were poet Leroi Jones (Amiri Baraka), the historian sociologist Harold Cruse, writer Julian Mayfield, historian John Henrik Clarke, and civil rights activist Robert Williams, whose features were on the rise. Recalling this second organized trip of American Blacks to revolutionary Cuba,

Harold Cruse wrote about his misgivings: "I noticeably held back all outward exuberance for the Cuban situation," he said. "I was admittedly pro-Castro, but there were too many Communists around acting imperious and important. Moreover, there was the obvious and unclarified position of the Cuban Negro to consider. Yet we were all treated with such overwhelming deference, consideration and privilege, it was difficult to be critical" (italics added).¹⁵ Others in the second group of guests wrote favorably about the trip upon their return to the U.S.¹⁶

The visitor who would prove instrumental in Havana's attempts to win U.S. Blacks to its side was Robert Williams. A former Marine and Korean War veteran, Williams was at the time the most militant civil rights leader in the United States. Head of the Monroe, North Carolina, chapter of the NAACP, he had since 1958 advocated armed self-defense as the only road to obtaining the basic rights of black Americans. He had immediately attracted the attention of Cuban intelligence and of Fidel Castro himself.

Williams was born and raised in the Deep South. Accustomed to a racially segregated environment, he was wonder-struck by his Cuban trip. "A Negro, for example, was head of the Cuban armed forces and no one could hide that fact from us here in America," he marveled.¹⁷ Williams said that in Cuba he was "made to feel that I was a member of the human race for the first time in my life" (ibid.). He thanked "Fidel Castro and Free Cuba [for] granting persons of African descent entrance into the human race" (ibid., 70). Such language could only delight white Cuban leaders, who presumably had already begun to regard themselves as the saviors of black Americans, whom they increasingly described in terms such as "wretched U.S. Negroes."

Williams's exaggerated reactions to Castro's "racial reform" made him the most fervent and influential supporter of the Cuban regime among U.S. Blacks. The full weight of his prestige, he warned, would be placed at the service of Castro's cause. "As for my being 'used' as a pawn in the struggle of Cuba against imperialist and racist North America, I prefer to be used as an instrument to convey the truth of a people who respect the rights of man, rather than to be used as an Uncle Tom whitewasher of black oppression and injustice and an apologist for America's hypocrisy" (ibid.). He defended Havana's right to criticize the U.S. racial situation: "Cuba's aversion to America's inhumanity to man is not an interference in a 'native American problem' . . . Racism in the U.S.A. is as much a world