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by Lionel martin

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politics

havana, july 20, reuter -- wayne smith, chief of the united states' diplomatic mission in havana since july 1979, leaves cuba tomorrow evening on his way to retirement from government service which, according to western diplomats here, was encouraged by his disagreement with u.s. policy toward cuba.

the fifty year old diplomat, who will retire in mid-august after twenty five years in the u.s. department of state, is known by fellow diplomats here to have felt +uncomfortable+ with the inflexible cuban policy of the reagan administration.

the six foot three inch, fourth generation texan will vent his ideas on u.s.-cuban policy in a book which he will write as a fellow at the carnegie endowment in washington.

smith served with the u.s. marine corp during the korean war and later received his b.a. and m.a. degrees at the universidad de las americas in mexico city. the first phase of his cuban experience began when the u.s. state department sent him to havana in july, 1958, during the regime of cuban dictator fulgencio batista, as political officer.

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he left havana in january 1961 when the united states severed diplomatic relations with the revolutionary government of fidel castro and became executive secretary of president kennedy's latin american task force. in subsequent years he served in brasil, the soviet union and argentina.

the second phase of smith's cuban experience began in 1977 when he was appointed director of cuban affairs at the state department and, in 1979, chief of mission at the interest section in havana.

the outgoing chief of the u.s. mission in havana has been a vociferous critic of cuban intervention in central america, the presence of cuban troops in africa and what he considers, cuba's excessive dependence on the soviet union, according to diplomatic sources.

but they say that smith believes that a policy aimed at isolating cuba and attempting to strangle it through an economic embargo is self-defeating. he is perceived as advocating a more open and moderate u.s. policy because it would exert a greater restraining influence on cuba than bare confrontation.

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smith told a western diplomat that on the evening before leaving for his post in havana, then secretary of state cyrus vance told him: +we are really going to try to narrow the gap and improve relations, that is why we are sending you.+

when smith arrived in havana, he told foreign correspondents that he believed relations between cuba and the united states could be improved, despite the fact that cuban troops were in africa.

smith, diplomatic sources say, was given easy access to high policy making levels of the cuban government and felt he was in a position to encourage the opening of a useful dialogue between the two nations.

the sources said that smith saw his hopes of dialogue dashed when the hardline views of u.s. national security advisor bryzhinski began to prevail within the carter administration.

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the sources recall that smith opposed certain u.s. military maneuvers off the cuban coast in 1979 and 1980 because they were perceived as provocations by the castro government.

at the same time, he chastised the cuban government for dumping unwanted cuban refugees on the united states during the mariel exodus of 1980, and by doing so, set^{back} the possibilities of dialogue and detente between the two nations.

during the mariel events, smith was lampooned mercilessly by the cuban news media, especially after some 400 cuban refugees sought asylum at the old u.s. embassy building which presently houses the u.s. interest section on may 2, 1980. smith and other u.s. diplomats were publicly accused by the cuban government of having provoked a battle in front of the diplomatic mission between cuban revolutionaries and former cuban political prisoners which led to the mass intrusion into the building.

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Last october, the new york times published what it said was a confidential memorandum from the u.s. interest section in havana to the state department in washington, which strongly criticised the idea of creating +radio marti+ which would beam programmes to cuba from florida.

among the arguments against the establishment of a cuban version +radio free europe+ was that such a station was unnecessary inasmuch as the voice of america had already gained certain credibility in cuba. the memorandum contended that it be better to expand voice of america broadcasting than to created a new station without experience and clear guideliness which would risk the loss of credibility and at the same time needlessly risk cuban retaliation in the form of deliberate interference in u.s. commercial broadcasting channels.

A hearing on +radio marti+ will take place shortly in the united states' senate. a reliable western diplomatic source said that smith had indicated that if he was called to testify on +radio marti+ before a senate committee +he would be willing to do so but only if he got the green light from his superiors at the state department.+

--reuter/lem