

# America bars Cuban prison experts

By ADRIAN DeWIND  
and JULIA SWEIG

This year Cuba has permitted at least a half-dozen American delegations into its prisons. In May 1988 the State Department denied visas to a delegation of Cubans requesting visits in American prisons. Four Cuban prison experts applied for visas after an unprecedented visit by a U.S. human rights delegation to six Cuban prisons.

The U.S. group, which included prominent American human rights experts, gained full access to the Cuban prisons requested in advance and confidential interviews with more than 120 political prisoners and common criminals. The State Department was informed of the intended reciprocal nature of the visit before the Cubans requested access to American prisons.

The State Department explained the denial by stating that "permitting such a delegation into American prisons would allow Castro to deflect attention from Cuba's own abysmal human rights conditions and convert human rights into a bilateral issue."

As the legal basis for the denial, the State Department cited the October 1985 Presidential Proclamation which closely limits non-migrant travel from Cuba to the United States. The proclamation was issued after Cuba suspended the 1984 immigration agreement, but that agreement was restored in November 1987, when the State Department announced a policy of greater flexibility in reviewing visa applications — a flexibility denied to human rights delegations.

Ironically, the State Department's denial of visas seems to derive not from fear that the Cubans would discover scandalous conditions in U.S. prisons but from a posture of arrogance and a habit of double standard. If U.S. officials making policy toward Cuba wish to gain international credibility, they should send a signal of genuine commitment to human rights, and a willingness to encourage human rights missions by U.S. groups abroad, by opening U.S. doors — particularly to ideological adversaries.

Human rights is the concern and responsibility of the international

community, not an issue on which the State Department holds a unique mandate. Bilateral prison inspections would set a valuable international human rights precedent. Denying visas to respected Cuban penologists reflects the U.S. priority of punishing Cuba, not a commitment to human rights.

Today, having opened its prisons, Cuba sets a better example, while the United States embarrasses itself in the international eye.

Why fear this precedent of reciprocity? Prison authorities at prisons on the Cuban visiting list do not. Corrections officials from the Bureau of Prisons and several states told us that the Cuban visit was entirely acceptable. They welcomed the reciprocal nature of the agreement, understood the value of these exchanges and the need to avoid any appearance that there is something to hide.

The Cuban delegation's choice of U.S. prisons demonstrates a serious interest in viewing a range of prisons in this country — from the best the U.S. has to offer to the most controversial and internationally condemned. Had the delegation intended to politicize the trip, it surely would have chosen only the latter.

The counterproductive nature of U.S. hostility toward Cuba was demonstrated early this month when Cuba won a majority vote to a seat on the United Nations Human Rights Commission. The vote came despite the two-year U.S. campaign to condemn Cuba at the commission. Indeed, in Geneva this February at the commission's annual meeting, Cuba opened itself to further international scrutiny by inviting a U.N. delegation to conduct an investigation similar to our own.

Likewise, Cuba permitted the International Committee of the Red Cross to begin a month-long investigation of 15 Cuban prisons this week. Surely a country wishing to deflect attention from itself opens up neither upon request nor under pressure.

The United States is ending the Cold War with its leading adversary, the Soviet Union. President Reagan returned from the Moscow summit with plans for agreements on exchanges between Soviet and

American high school students, psychiatrists, artists and scientists. Indeed, Soviet doctors have visited an American prison, and Soviet scientists have inspected our nuclear test site. Americans are moving to do the same in the Soviet Union, with hopes for openings to Soviet prisons, labor camps and psychiatric hospitals.

In its last months in office, the Reagan administration is demonstrating flexibility with an ideological adversary. Could it not also do that with Cuba? Secretary of State George Shultz would show that the United States stands ready to promote human rights through exchanges of missions by granting visas to the Cuban delegation.

*DeWind is chairman of Americas Watch and a trustee of the Institute for Policy Studies. Sweig is coordinator of the U.S.-Cuba Dialogue Project at the Institute for Policy Studies. Both authors participated in the visit to Cuban prisons.*