Ambassador Vicki Huddleston, head of the US Interests Section in Havana from 1999 to 2002, has written an interesting memoir that should be read by all scholars interested in US-Cuban relations and the practice of international diplomacy. The author is a retired US Foreign Service Officer, and publication of her book is clearly timed to the reversal of the US opening to Cuba by US President Donald Trump. Huddleston is clearly committed to engagement rather than confrontation and therefore is sharply critical of the path chosen by the current administration in Washington. The basis of her opposition to the Trump administration’s return to a hard line against Cuba is grounded in the fact that she was basically forced from her position in 2002 after trying to maintain the Clinton administration’s policy of engagement in the early days of the Bush administration. Her tenure in Havana ended when President George W. Bush ultimately sided with neo-conservatives and Cuban American hardliners and moved US policy on the island to a confrontational one under her successor, James Cason; a policy shift that, she notes, failed miserably in its stated objective of regime change in Havana. The real strength of her book lies in details she provides on how the ultimate policy shifts came about in spite of her good faith efforts to continue dialogue with Cuban authorities, while at the same time stepping up US involvement with political opponents of the Cuban government. The book also provides some interesting details on the ongoing efforts of Cuban authorities to monitor the activities of the US diplomats, though she is not able to shed any particular light on the current ‘sonic attack’ issue.

Near the beginning of her time in Havana, she had to manage a solution to the Elián González affairs, the Cuban boy picked up at sea who became the subject of an international custody battle between Cuban authorities and sections of the Cuban American community in Florida. Since on this issue the Cuban and US governments were on the same side, arguing for the return of Elián to Cuba, what became clear to Huddleston was the degree to which she and the State Department had to dialogue with Cuban American politicians on what should have been a fairly straightforward return of the boy to Cuba, but which ultimately took several months. From there forward she details how, on several occasions, she had to meet as head of the Interests Section with Cuban American politicians who were

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highly sceptical of Clinton’s policy of engagement in her effort to maintain the
effort to maintain the engagement policy she supported. It is clear that she was able to maintain some
credibility with the hard-line Cuban Americans through her engagement with the
disidents through her signature program, the distribution of transistor
radios that circumvented the jamming of US-sponsored Radio Martí. Not surpris-
ingly, this active engagement with the political opposition earned her enmity from
the Cuban authorities, especially President Fidel Castro. To this day, Cuban ac-
demics who specialise in US-Cuban relations remember Huddleston somewhat
negatively as the ‘woman with the radios’. Near the end of the book, she provides
an insider’s description of the battles within the Bush administration over whether
or not to continue Clinton’s policy of engagement. While not talking much about
the role of Secretary of State Colin Powell, she describes how the views of Cuban
American Republicans like Mel Martínez, Secretary of Housing and Urban
Development, and Emilio González, Senior Director for Western Hemisphere
Affairs at the National Security Council, aided by conversations with her on the
efficacy of working with the dissidents, kept the engagement policy in place for the
first two years of the Bush administration. However, she is also clear how, once
hard-line Cuban American Otto Reich and neo-conservative John Bolton got the
president’s ear, the policy of engagement and her time in Havana were over.

Readers should not expect a book that presents a positive picture of Cuban
revolution, though she does acknowledge the achievements in the areas of health
and education. Rather her political perspective is that of the opponents of the
revolutionary government, especially those who have stayed on the island and
worked for political reform. She writes in some detail about her involvement with
those who promoted the ultimately failed reform effort, Project Verela. Her affin-
ity for those Cuban opponents of the government comes through very strongly,
combined with vivid descriptions of her efforts to distribute the radios through-
out the island, in spite of Cuban government efforts to limit her effectiveness.

In some aspects, Woman in Havana parallels Wayne Smith’s book The
Closest of Enemies. His book, written in the 1980s, by the first head of the US
Interests Section, describes Smith’s efforts to maintain the Carter-inspired opening
to Cuba in the face of hardliners in Carter’s cabinet and eventually the return
to the Cold War policies of the incoming Reagan administration. Like Huddleston,
Smith was basically forced from his position and, after leaving the Foreign
Service, he devoted himself to getting a full reengagement with Cuba, a quest
that took more than thirty years to fulfil. Ambassador Huddleston is making the
same case for re-engagement; only time will tell if her quest takes so long.