

Overwhelming Force

Promoting Democratization in Cuba Requires a Radically Different Approach

Introduction

Visitors to Cuba are prone to comment that visiting the Caribbean nation is like traveling back in time to the 1950s when heavy cars ruled the highways and televisions were as likely as not to be black and white. Half a century of Castro's grotesque economic mismanagement and the squandering of billions of dollars of Soviet subsidies have impoverished Cuba even by Latin American standards, and the American embargo against Cuba – America's longest-running economic sanction – has exacerbated the economic stagnation. But as desperately as Castro's government needs to reassess its devotion to the socialist policies that have failed in Eastern Europe, the American government must reassess its anachronistic loyalty to a policy that has brought about no obvious benefit: the embargo.

Ambassador Roger F. Noriega, Assistant Secretary of State for Western Hemisphere Affairs, in a statement before the Senate Foreign Relations Committee, reiterated in October of last year, "Our hemisphere will be a safer, happier place when Castro leaves the scene, whether by natural processes or, as is the goal of U.S. policy, as the result of the will of the Cuban people and the concerted action of advocates of peaceful change in Cuba."¹ But it's now more obvious than ever that America's foreign policy towards Cuba – the trade embargo and travel restrictions – has instead had the opposite effect: after over 40 years, Castro's grip on power is no weaker and his regime has been unaffected politically, while the brunt of the economic sanctions have been borne by the Cuban people. It is time for a radical change of policy.

Current Policy Has Failed

The Department of State Consular Information Sheet of May 2003 declares that due to the requirements of the "Cuban Assets Control Regulations" of the U.S. Treasury Department, a special license is required for all persons subject to U.S. jurisdiction in order to engage in any transaction related to travel to, from, and within Cuba, including tourist travel to Cuba or through a third country like Mexico. Only certain categories of travelers are permitted to engage in financial transactions with Cuban organizations or citizens, including declared journalists, Cuban Americans making a maximum of one trip per year to visit relatives, and certain professionals, such as athletes and some scientists.² The effective ban on financial transactions and travel to Cuba have effectively sealed off Cuba for access by Americans, while Europeans and the rest of the world are unaffected.

The most glaring failure of the United States' policy towards Cuba is the economic embargo. Only the altruistically myopic continue to have faith that unilateral embargoes – and the embargo against Cuba in particular – have had any real success in achieving their stated goals. From 1996 to 2001, the American government either imposed or threatened to impose 85 new unilateral economic sanctions, most of them against Libya, Cuba, Syria, North Korea, and Burma. These unilateral sanctions, at an estimated cost of \$19 billion per year to American companies, have done little to advance the policy agenda of the American government, and have had overwhelmingly detrimental effects on the people the policies are allegedly intended to protect. For example, UNICEF reports indicate that economic sanctions against Iraq were responsible for the death of nearly 500,000 Iraqi children through malnutrition and child mortality; in Myanmar, the American ban on imported textiles has led to a layoff of between 30,000 and 40,000 garment workers. These workers, many of them young women who lack alternative ways to make a living, are often forced into the sex trade, where they are exposed to AIDS and worse. But while the embargo was undeniably detrimental to the welfare of these women, it has had no

obvious effect on the Myanmar generals, whose power has not been seriously challenged.³ The effect on Cuba has been no better, where the sex trade has grown to proportions higher than pre-Revolution days in an economy distorted by lack of other opportunities.⁴

Only the multilateral embargo against Libya had any noticeable effect, and the reason is the steadfast unanimity with which the international community upheld it together: in 2004 after 20 years of withering multilateral sanctions and concerted international pressure, Moammar Qaddafi succumbed to the growing discontent within Libya and made concessions to the West in exchange for the dropping of the economic embargo that had isolated Libya economically.⁵ But even Qaddafi's reconciliation can be considered no more than half a win: he is still very much in power, as was Saddam Hussein at the end of a decade of the embargo implemented against his regime. Elsewhere, lack of international consensus on the embargoes enervates their efficacy.⁶ Embargoes – especially unilateral embargoes – do not work.

But the sanctions against Cuba have been largely ineffective. Besides the fact that they're unilateral, they have been weakened by several loopholes, most prominent of which are the special exceptions granted to Cuban Americans. It is estimated that remittances of hard currency by overseas Cuban Americans as part of their nearly 120,000 annual visits to the island lead to revenues for the Castro government of more than \$1 billion per year, most of which is generated through purchases at the Cuban dollar stores where markups can reach 240%, as well as through currency exchange mechanisms. That figure makes family remittances a better profit earner of crucial hard currency for the Castro government than both tourist activities or the sugar and nickel exports combined.⁷

In addition to being inefficient and nearly impossible to enact multilaterally, economic embargoes cause human suffering. Amnesty International has not faltered in its criticism of the United States' embargo, which has had “undeniably negative consequences for the enjoyment of human rights in Cuba.” The embargo has clearly had a detrimental effect on nutrition, health, and education on the island, and has particularly affected – as embargoes have been shown to do – the weakest and most vulnerable members of society.⁸

While the embargo was imposed on Cuba to weaken the nation and promote democratization, paradoxically the harm the economic embargo has caused the Cuban people has unequivocally strengthened Castro's hand. Analysts postulate that the embargo helps Castro rally support for Cuba and alienate the United States from Europe over the embargo's detrimental effects on the Cuban population, pointing out Castro's propensity to provoke the United States in times of political rapprochement to ensure the continuation of the embargo. Castro manipulated the United States in this way for example in 1996, when Cuban jets shot down two small planes belonging to the Cuban exile group Brothers to the Rescue, which immediately led the American Congress to adopt legislation again tightening the embargo.⁹ The embargo has given Castro an opportunity to legitimize his repressive policies and deny civil freedoms such as the freedom of association, expression, and assembly. Moreover, the United States' stipulation that certain aid allocations be used for democracy-building activities has played directly into Castro's hands, facilitating Castro's effort to portray suspected dissidents as foreign sympathizers. This has ultimately diminished the prospect for a strong and independent human rights movement.¹⁰

Finally, American policy in the determination of where to apply economic sanctions is decidedly both lopsided and hypocritical. President Bush in 2002 told Cuban Americans, “I want you to know I know what trade means with a tyrant. It means that we will underwrite tyranny, and we cannot make that happen,” proceeding to list the major human rights abuses for which the Castro regime is responsible. But where China is concerned – a state whose human rights record is not remarkably better than Cuba's – the Bush administration has favored the use of quite a different policy tool –

expanded trade – to provide opportunities to engage rogue states with the goal of expanding democracy. Clearly, this is inconsistent.

Castro has masterfully manipulated the American government through more than four decades of political sparring. At this point, two policy options remain. The first is to close the loopholes in the embargo, which would mean forbidding all trade with the island as well as family remittances by Cuban Americans. Since it would be both unquestionably inhumane to deny the Cuban American community the right to contribute economically to their families in Cuba and would simultaneously furnish Castro with yet another reason to blame the United States for the social and economic distress caused by the blockade of remittances, not to mention that it would be political suicide in an already tense political climate, it is clear that the embargo in its current form is an untenable policy option. It is therefore necessary to abandon this outdated policy and evaluate another mechanism to contribute to the democratization of Cuba. It's time to rescind the economic embargo, remove travel restrictions to the island, and submit the Castro regime to the overwhelming force of foreign capital and international influence.

A Chance To Reform

The time to promote democracy is now. While Cuba, when allied with the Soviet Union, represented a formidable threat to United States' national interests in the 1960s, the fall of the Soviet Union stripped Cuba of its geopolitical threat. And consequently, Latin America as a whole slipped remarkably quickly from the American government's policy agenda. But even in the absence of a Soviet threat, the United States, whose stated foreign policy goals are defined not by territorial ambition but rather by a desire to foster the spread of freedom, prosperity, and peace would be wise not to forget Latin America, where the gap in economic inequality has widened and growth has not been sustained. The United States should not overlook this opportunity to promote free trade and democracy.¹¹

European nations, once more inclined to rail against the American embargo than against Castro's human rights abuses, are now reevaluating their relationship with the dictator in light of recent events. In April of 2003, while an American Senate working group on Cuba was reevaluating the embargo, Castro rounded up 78 journalists, economists, and social workers in a crackdown unprecedented in scale since the 1960s. These included respected journalist Raul Rivero and economist Marta Beatriz Roque. Cuban prosecutors tried them for collaborating to undermine the Cuban revolution, in some cases, asking for life sentences. For crimes such as associating with U.S. diplomats, writing counter-revolutionary articles, and operating independent magazines and libraries, some of the accused received sentences of up to 20 years.¹² The Cuban government simultaneously ended a three-year de facto moratorium on executions in order to execute by firing squad three men who had been involved in a hijacking. They were given a summary trial and executed within one week of its start.

The European Union, the Organization of American States and numerous United Nations bodies all protested vociferously, and Amnesty International published a scathing report of the crackdown in which biographies of the 78 persons imprisoned were detailed.¹³ This marks the first time Castro's relentless oppression has received more attention in Europe than have the negative effects of the American embargo. The Inter-American Commission on Human Rights manifested its profound concern for the human rights of Cubans imprisoned by Castro's regime shortly after the crackdown, and by May 17 OAS member states, including 14 from Latin America, issued a declaration against the regime's treatment of dissidents. In April the United Nations Commission on Human Rights passed a resolution calling for a visit to Cuba by a representative of the U.N. High Commissioner (Cuba refused to permit the visit). Both the Chilean Congress and the Central American Parliament passed resolutions condemning the crackdown. The European Union, condemning the arrests, decided

to postpone indefinitely Cuba's bid to join the Cotonou agreement,¹⁴ a preferential trade framework that will provide the basis for bilateral trade agreements between Europe and 79 of the least developed countries until 2020.¹⁵ The United States government is imprudently but not uncharacteristically missing an opportunity to strengthen democracy in Cuba by foregoing the opportunity to build a coalition with Europe.

At the same time a new Cuban American Community is looking for other options, and there is reason to believe the dynamics of the Cuban American population are changing in ways that make policy change towards Cuba a reasonable action. The newest generation of Cuban Americans is on the whole less hardline than earlier generations have been and they're looking for new policy responses. The Cuban American National Foundation (CANF) – by far the most influential Cuban American lobbying group – recently argued that tightening the embargo through the denial of food sales and family remittances would play into Castro's hands, giving him yet another excuse to blame the suffering of the Cuban population on the embargo and other U.S. policies. This represents a radical departure from the CANF's past, in which it never passed up an opportunity to increase the pressure against Castro.¹⁶ The drastic change in mindset among the Cuban American population is partly due to the political fallout from the Elian Gonzalez case, in which political hard-liners intent on keeping Gonzalez in the country regardless of the implications cost the Cuban American crowd politically. The televised images of exiles demonstrating, blocking traffic, and flying American flags upside down led to a backlash against the hard-liners who are popularly perceived in the Latin American community to have damaged the reputation of Cuban Americans as a whole.¹⁷

Most propitiously, the American Congress too, is ready to contemplate innovative policy options in light of the failure of the embargo to provide any real results. In October 2003 the Senate joined the House in voting to ease travel restrictions to Cuba. The House bill, part of a \$90 billion spending bill for the Treasury and Transportation Departments, was nearly identical to the Senate's bill. That such a coordinated policy in Congress was defeated just a month later when the House and Senate met to reconcile their spending bills is prima facie evidence that Republican electoral concerns again trumped coherent foreign policy.¹⁸ It is claimed that the provision was dropped to save President Bush the ignominy of having to veto it. Commented Congressman Jeff Flake (R: Arizona), "For the same reason we will never have a rational farm policy as long as presidential campaigns begin in Iowa, we will never have a rational Cuba policy as long as presidential campaigns are perceived to end in Florida."¹⁹

But the most powerful reason to move now in revamping American policy is found, not surprisingly, in Cuba itself. The dissident movement in Cuba is growing more vocal in spite of the 2002 arrests, and American policy can help strengthen it. In 2002 dissident leader Oswaldo Paya gathered approximately 11,000 signatures asking the Cuban National Assembly to consider a referendum that would allow free elections and free speech in Cuba. The request was categorically denied, but the movement was emboldened as a result, which led to support among the Cuban American community in Miami for national political movements and increased political pressure from within Cuba. Remarkably the CANF is promoting a measured policy response to Castro's April 2003 crackdown, arguing that Castro will simply use tightened American foreign policy as a pretext to throttle the dissident movement further. The CANF argues that Cuba's economy is near complete failure just as the Cuban dissident movement has grown in visibility (for which the crackdown galvanized international support), and Castro is eager for a justification of his silencing of political opinion.²⁰

In light of the favorable conditions for radical change in policy against Cuba, the American government should not miss the opportunity to promote democracy in Cuba in a drastic new way: by opening up the borders, that is, by dropping the embargo against Cuba and more importantly, by removing all existing travel

restrictions to the island. The resulting pressure on the Castro regime, generated not just by American businesses and entrepreneurs infiltrating the island in search of the business opportunities provided by 40 years of economic stagnation, but also by tourists and travelers engaging and interacting culturally with the locals, will be a powerful force for change. Most importantly, the change will happen through the Cuban people. By insisting that America will drop the embargo only upon the condition of Castro making sweeping reforms, President Bush has put the ball squarely in Castro's court, from where he can not expect a volley.

Overwhelming Force

The economic benefits alone to both countries would be enormous, a fact that has not been overlooked by the American Congress. Ten American senators formed a special Senate Commission on Cuba in March 2003 with the goal of reevaluating the current trade and travel restrictions on Cuba, including an expansion of the types of products that Cuba can purchase with cash, and a lifting of restrictions on remittances. Consisting mostly of representatives of the midwestern states who are eager to capitalize on food sales to Cuba, the Senate commission is similar to but not affiliated with the bipartisan Cuba Working Group in the House, which in 2003 had 44 members. Sale of agricultural products and medicines have been legal since 2000, though Cuba is forced to pay cash or arrange for financing through a third party.²¹

Under the Trade Sanctions and Reform Act of 2000, U.S. companies exporting permitted goods to Cuba earned \$138.6 million in revenues in 2001, making Cuba one of the top 50 customers of U.S. food exports. Nine basic commodities – wheat, corn, soybeans, lard, soybean oil, rice, frozen chicken, eggs, and dicalcium phosphate – represent more than 99% of the 875,000 metric tons of U.S. commodities exported to Cuba in 2002, with branded food products making up the remaining one percent.²² There is no reason to believe dropping the embargo would negatively impact trade. On the contrary, the U.S. International Trade Commission found that in the absence of the embargo, U.S.-Cuba trade in the late 1990s would have been \$700 million to \$1 billion annually.²³

The fact that in impoverished Cuba, a thriving underground economy has not yet been quashed by the state-run apparatus is the biggest weapon in the policy arsenal. As any tourist to Cuba is aware, outside of the government-run establishments that keep tourists in careful isolation from Cubans, there is a parallel economy run in U.S. dollars, where for cash one can obtain consumer goods and services. The risk to these market entrepreneurs is not to be underestimated, for being caught could mean imprisonment or worse. Yet these are the risk takers who would most support overthrow of the Communist regime if they were only supported. Supporting them means providing them with a source of income, which means nothing more than opening the market to America's most potent weapon: throngs of tourists armed with U.S. dollars.²⁴ Critical to this approach is ensuring the number of visitors is overwhelmingly large. The Castro government has attempted to monitor, cordon off, and control the 1.7 million tourists that visit Cuba. It would be unable to do so if tourism and travel to the island were so great that entrepreneurs' demands for opportunities would increase the pressure on Castro for change.

There is no doubt that the swelling number of tourists would provide income for Castro's state-run tourism industry. But it would have a much more subtle – and thus dangerous – effect as well: it would make glaringly obvious the inefficiencies and limitations of the state-run industries and provide a strong impetus among Cuban entrepreneurs to capitalize on the opportunity. Should Castro refuse the groundswell of demands the political pressure on his administration for reform will grow and rifts among the ruling elite are inevitable. But absent significant opportunities for profit, the political pressure on Castro will be muted.²⁵

Opening up trade with Cuba would go a long way to fostering democracy in Cuba as well. The power of economic development as an endogenous and developmental

force has been much studied: economic advancement – through which lives are improved – is a powerful engine for political progress, and mutual interests would go a long way towards increasing the leverage of the American government with Cuba. But the brunt of this ideational and developmental force would have its effect not with the Castro government, which has over the past four decades proved to be more obstinate than wise, but with the Cuban people, who would press their government harder for reform in order to conduct business with the United States. In this case, by appealing directly to the entrepreneur class, the carrot of trade could well wield more weight than the stick of sanctions.²⁶

Most importantly, releasing a flood of capital on Cuba would put Castro in a very uncomfortable position. Castro has regularly used inflammatory war rhetoric to mobilize the Cuban people against an outside aggressor – America and its trade policy – as a way of distracting attention from the island's untenable economic position. Cubans are used to the rhetoric and probably don't believe it any longer. Removing the embargo is the most efficient way of torpedoing his argument. In an open economy, Cuba's industries – particularly its failing sugar industry, which since the withdrawal of Soviet subsidies in 1989 has diminished to 20% of its former production, closed half of its plants, laid off 100,000 workers, and is thought to be near collapse – will be forced to compete on their own merits. Let it compete then, in the absence of a convenient American scapegoat. Should Castro retaliate with trade barriers, let the blame fall where it may.²⁷

The tourism industry, equally important to the Cuban economy, has also suffered a slowdown since the Al Qaeda attacks of September 11, 2001. With such a desperate need for hard currency, the Castro government would likely expand the tourism sector to capitalize on the foreign exchange, but in opening up the borders to a flood of American tourists Cuba would be unable to prevent a tremendous growth of contact between Cubans and foreign visitors. Castro has long fought to isolate his island from the information age: television programming and the radio are controlled with an iron fist, and listening to America's Radio Marti is considered a subversive activity; internet use is almost completely forbidden. But it would be patently impossible to regulate, control, or even effectively monitor the conversations and interactions of thousands and thousands of visitors to the island. Tourists and their conversations are a highly visible reminder of the pleasures and freedoms that democracy provides, and would go a long way towards energizing both the Cuban business community and civil society. At a minimum, the contact would shatter the veil Castro has kept over the eyes and ears of his people.²⁸

From 1989 to 1992 the Communist regimes of Eastern Europe moved towards market economies because they had no alternative in the face of a hostile economic climate and political pressure *from within* to do so. More than a decade later, Cuba finds itself in a similar position: three essential elements have all been met. First, the increasing strength of the dissident movement indicates that there is widespread support from within Cuba for change, and most importantly, that the will to change is to be found both within and without the political elite, as exemplified by the diversity of dissenters from within the intelligentsia, journalist, and scientist groups. The middle class of industrialists, businessmen, and financiers who participate in the Cuban economy, even as actors of the state, are well aware of the gains to be made from economic growth and to rationalize their own personal gains in welfare in the context of a different economic environment. These groups are the most likely to participate in the support of the dissent movement, visibly or behind the scenes, and to add to the ideological fractures that are inevitable during times of economic hardship.²⁹

Second, Cuba's position at the periphery of the international political economy implies domestic conditions are strongly shaped by international factors, but that domestic pressure is most effective in motivating regime change, and a regime like Cuba whose government seeks to insulate his nation from that force subjects its people to semi-autarky and economic stagnation. Any shift in loyalty by the system's

economic elite causes a disruption to the power of the ruling coalition and increases both the pressure for – and likelihood of success of – regime change. This force is magnified, not diminished, by the presence and penetration of international capital, and this is precisely why 40 years of economic isolation in Cuba has had no effect. The embargo, essentially a hands-off approach to confronting Castro, has diminished the presence of American capital and Cuban exposure to democracy.³⁰

Third, the growing strength of the dissent movement indicates a fair degree of regime disunity. These fissures in the surface of the regime are the elements most likely to bring about change in the regime, if they are representative of disunity within the ruling coalition – the second and third tiers of Castro's state structure – and if these factions can be exploited politically, for example by providing alternatives or by encouraging the promotion of different interests, such as those of the business or industrial class. The very existence of disunity within a regime's elite leads to a collapse of authoritarianism, if through a process of accommodation the regime delegitimizes itself. This was the experience of Eastern Europe. Here again, American policy has failed, by neglecting the opportunity to foster that disunity economically and politically. By failing to engage this class and foster – even support – dissent, the American government has failed to engage the system and effectively strengthened Castro's hand.³¹

Challenges

Reshaping American foreign policy towards Cuba will take a tremendous amount of collective political willpower, which will be difficult if not impossible to surmount in an election year. The nation's largest minority since 2003, the 35 million-strong Latino vote is more important than ever to American politics and rocking the Latino vote has become political death. 32 million Latinos live and vote in the United States now, and they are concentrated in the 5 most populous states: New York, Texas, California, Illinois, and Florida.³² The latter provides 25 of the 538 electoral votes.³³

Former presidential candidate Al Gore learned that to his disadvantage in 2000, when general disaffection with how the Clinton administration handled the Elian Gonzalez affair – the so-called “Elian Gonzalez effect” – strengthened Bush's rapport with Cuban Americans and translated into a dramatic loss of 80% of the Cuban American vote for Al Gore in Florida in 2000. The 833,000-member Cuban community in South Florida is the only Latino group that regularly supports the Republican party and in the 2000 election their support of Bush contributed in no small way to Bush's 537 vote win.³⁴

Bush is not guaranteed the same political goodwill this year. The Cuban-American believes Bush has failed to deliver on some of the promises he made during his 2000 election campaign: that he would thoroughly review the immigration policies and all other Clinton policies on Cuba, that he would ease travel and trade restrictions only if Castro instituted sweeping reforms like the release of political prisoners and the institution of free and fair elections. Most important to the Cuban-American community was the promise to revise the historic “wet foot, dry foot” policy drafted in 1994 by Castro and Clinton, in which Cubans attempting to emigrate to the United States by raft that are picked up at sea are repatriated to Cuba, and those that reach land are granted asylum. The Cuban-American community's belief that Bush has not made good on his promises could result in the loss of critical votes in an election year predicted to be contentious, even by recent standards. Bush is unlikely to want to rock the Cuban electoral boat at a time when it is so crucial to him.³⁵ And so it is no surprise that in February 2004, with rhetoric typical to his presidency in the post September 11 period, Bush has tightened travel rules in regard to off-shore shipping, vowing to cut off traffic to Cuba within American territorial waters. This move is typical of the Bush administration: superficially defensible, but against better judgment in light of better alternatives.³⁶

Conclusion

There is no doubt that in the 21st century, a remarkable number of tyrants still run repressive, violent, brutal regimes in which justice, truth, and liberty are not to be found, and Castro's Cuba is without doubt among the worst of them. His failed economic policy, iron-handed control of the media and of the repression of perceived dissidents is unconscionable and the ruthlessness with which he attacks any perceived threat to his failed socialist experiment is appalling.

But the time to make a change is upon us, and President Bush is at best misguided and at worst foolish by letting electoral politics cloud his vision on Cuba policy. Castro is a sworn enemy of the United States, but inappropriate American policies only strengthen him. The overall consensus among the American people, Congress, and European opinion make this an propitious moment to press for social justice and the democratization of our island neighbor. The embargo has over the course of 40 years, proven to be an inappropriate weapon to promote that change and a tool used to the detriment of the most vulnerable people. In light of this, as well as the willingness of Castro to use the embargo as a scapegoat for his failed economic policy and as a rallying point for support, not to mention as a means of distracting his people from domestic problems, it's time to drop the embargo. Engage Cuba and let America's most powerful diplomats – its dollars and its citizens – do what 40 years of ineffective policy have been unable to do: promote the democratization of Cuba. Open the doors.

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