



Washington's Irrational Cuba Policy

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Washington's policy toward Cuba over the years can best be described as an extension of Florida politics by other means. The influence of Cuban Americans in South Florida who support the U.S. unilateral embargo on Cuba has proved enduringly potent, despite deepening divisions within that community. Florida will again be a contentious battleground state this election year. The Bush administration has placed its bet on the established formula, and dangerously risks heightening the pitch of complaints against Cuba to satisfy Miami hardliners, some of whom, emboldened by Iraq, are pushing for a similar intervention in Havana.

The administration recently broke off bilateral migration talks and named a commission to find ways to hasten regime change in Cuba. Its hardline officials have accused Cuba of "at least a limited offensive biological warfare research and development effort" and of "interfering in the internal processes of neighboring democracies." So hazardous are expectations thus raised that President Bush and his brother, Florida governor Jeb Bush, have begun to hedge their language.

For his part, Fidel Castro, Cuba's unquestioned left-wing commandante since his rebels seized power in 1959, has long used threatening rhetoric to consolidate support at home and internationally. From the beginning, his most potent claim to legitimacy derived from his ending Cuba's economic and political peonage to the United States. Castro has invoked the U.S. embargo to excuse Cuba's economic problems and

justify political crackdowns, the latest of which occurred when the government jailed 75 dissidents days after the U.S. invasion of Iraq, accusing them of conspiring with the Bush administration to overthrow the Cuban president.

Castro is also keenly aware of the utility of election year maneuvers. During the 1980 campaign year, the so-called Mariel boatlift brought more than 125,000 Cuban refugees, convicted criminals among them, to Florida's shores. The Cuban government issued a statement earlier this year warning of potential consequences should Washington engage in provocative acts. "Both sides are playing a dangerous game of chicken," in the estimate of Professor Jorge Domínguez, a Cuban American who heads Harvard University's Weatherhead Center for International Affairs, "while at the same time deepening cooperation and trying to limit practical disputes."¹

Antonio Zamora, a Miami attorney and Bay of Pigs veteran who for a decade served as counsel to the powerful pro-embargo Cuban-American National Foundation (CANF), says a ticking clock could lead hardliners to provoke a crisis: "The right-wingers see the Bush administration as their last chance to achieve regime change in Cuba. Since Bush could lose the election, or could change the policy in favor of business and agricultural interests after a reelection, the few months before the election are critical. If they don't succeed then, they see a gradual long-term transition in Cuba where they will not have a role. In other words, political and historical death."²

Although the Bush team is placing its bet on the old horse, new factors are changing the political equation nationally and within the state of Florida. Food sales to Cuba (of more than \$700 million since the first sale in December 2001) resulting from a law loosening the embargo passed just prior to the last presidential election, have significantly changed the terms of debate. Votes in 2003 by both Senate and House to lift a longstanding travel ban (reinstated in conference at the behest of the White House), a reorienting of the Cuban-American community, lobbying by U.S. business interests to end a unilateral trade and travel embargo, and editorial attacks on the present Cuba policy by such staunchly conservative papers as the *Chicago Tribune* and writers like William F. Buckley, Jr. have all contributed to the shift. There is a growing recognition of how the embargo undercuts American leadership and prestige worldwide at a time when Washington seeks to win “hearts and minds” abroad.

Democrats, too, are pondering their Cuban options. John Kerry, the likely Democratic presidential nominee and a longtime member of the Senate Committee on Foreign Relations, has a past record of voting against Cuban embargo measures. With a prudent eye toward an uncertain Florida dynamic, he says he would institute a review of the policy once in office. But he unabashedly opposes travel restrictions, a position he reiterated late last year by voting to drop the travel ban. Democrats are well aware that George W. Bush won about 80 percent of the state’s 400,000 Cuban-American voters in 2000 but carried Florida by just 537 votes.

So what are the prospects for modifying or scrapping a lichen-coated U.S. Cuba policy, and how might hardliners, driven by a “now or never” sensibility, seek to push the president and the country into a dangerous corner this election year? This essay will look at the roots of the embargo and the interests behind the policy; it will consider as

well the political, economic, and demographic factors—both without and within Cuba—that in the writer’s view argue for increased engagement, even if Fidel Castro lives to be a hundred.

The Roots of Estrangement

North Americans remember the *Maine*, but Cubans recall that their rebellion against Spanish rule was nearing victory when that U.S. battleship blew up (cause still unknown) in Havana harbor in 1898. In the Spanish-Cuban-American war that followed, the United States acquired as colonies Puerto Rico and the Philippines, with Cuba becoming a virtual protectorate, bound by a military base and a peace treaty giving Washington veto rights over Cuba’s national legislation. As part of FDR’s Good Neighbor Policy, the demeaning Platt Amendment, which made Cuba a quasi-protectorate of the United States, was abrogated in 1934. But Cuba remained a U.S. political and economic dependency, prompting a broad-based rebellion in the 1950s against the military tyranny of President Fulgencio Batista.

This was the setting on January 1, 1959, when rebel forces led by Fidel Castro Ruz, a 32-year-old Jesuit-educated lawyer from a wealthy family of Galician descent, overthrew Batista. Initially, the new regime seemed more nationalist than leftist, and the U.S. embargo came about incrementally. A brief honeymoon with the Eisenhower administration ended when Cuba took control of the U.S.-owned telephone company, closed all gambling casinos, reestablished diplomatic relations with the Soviet Union (which had been severed by Batista in 1952), and instituted the Agrarian Reform Law, which nationalized the 75 percent of arable land in foreign hands (roughly 90 percent American-owned), offering compensation based on current tax values.

In January 1961, the outgoing Eisenhower administration broke off diplomatic ties with Havana, barred travel to Cuba

without government approval, and authorized training by the Central Intelligence Agency of an exile army to oust Castro. Reluctant to disband the tiny army, the incoming Kennedy administration gave its approval to the failed Bay of Pigs invasion in April 1961; it later developed that the CIA had also authorized botched attempts on Castro's life. In reprisal, Castro turned to Moscow, openly embraced Marxism, and agreed to the deployment of Soviet missiles, precipitating a crisis in October 1962 that brought the world closer to a nuclear holocaust than leaders on either side were aware.

Yielding to a U.S. naval blockade, Soviet premier Nikita Khrushchev agreed to remove the missiles if President Kennedy reciprocated by pulling U.S. missiles from Turkey and pledged not to invade Cuba. In a letter to the Soviet leader, JFK elaborated that "if Cuba is not used for the export of aggressive Communist purposes, there will be peace in the Caribbean." Thereafter, the unilateral U.S. embargo has mostly waxed and sometimes waned through eight successive U.S. presidencies, the avowed purpose being to contain Castro and build the pressure that supposedly will encourage the Cuban people to revolt.

The embargo has proved the most stringent in U.S. history. Each country maintains a presence in the other's capital through "Interest Sections" established in 1977 by President Jimmy Carter. With minor exceptions, Americans are prohibited from investing in Cuba, exporting U.S. products to Cuba, or importing Cuban goods. Americans are prohibited from traveling in Cuba (enforced by the prohibition on spending money there), although Cuban Americans are allowed family visits once a year.

Recently allowed food sales to Cuba must be licensed and paid for in cash—no public or private credit is available. The absence of credit and the onerous red tape requiring U.S. companies to monitor the end-use of medical products make American medicines and medical machinery unavail-

able to Cubans. Medical organizations, including the American College of Physicians, have protested this de facto medical embargo. A ban on direct financial transactions and complex shipping restrictions significantly raise Cuba's costs. The embargo also prohibits the importation of cost-effective Cuban pharmaceuticals and impedes foreign drug companies from testing important Cuban products, such as a vaccine against meningitis B (a disease that takes around 120 mostly young lives annually in the United States).

In 1991, Soviet president Mikhail Gorbachev cut Soviet subsidies and "normalized" relations with Cuba, ending importation of cheap Soviet oil and shrinking markets for Cuban sugar. This touched off a severe economic depression in Cuba. In 1992, candidate Bill Clinton backed the Cuban Democracy Act promoted by New Jersey's former senator Robert Torricelli, who claimed the law would bring Castro to his knees in six months. This draconian measure—decried by human rights groups—severely curtailed Cuba's food supply by banning all U.S. subsidiary trade to Cuba, such as Argentine wheat sold by a subsidiary of Cargill, the U.S. grain powerhouse. The law's extraterritorial reach has provoked continuing protests, notably from Europeans.

The Soviet pullout led Cuba in 1994 to adopt a long-debated law to open the island to foreign investment. There followed a joint venture between Cuba and the French spirits giant, Pernod-Ricard, to market "Havana Club" and other rum products internationally. Bacardi, a Bahamas-based corporation that fled Cuba during Batista's rule, sought U.S. help to thwart the venture. Its chief lobbyist was Otto Reich (now the White House's special envoy for the Americas) who worked with former senator Jesse Helms, then chairman of the Foreign Relations Committee, and a key Helms staff member, Roger Noriega, now assistant secretary of state for the Western Hemisphere. The result was the Cuban Liberty and Dem-

ocratic Solidarity Act (usually referred to as Helms-Burton after its sponsors), which permits legal action in U.S. courts against foreign companies or persons accused of “trafficking” with formerly American-owned properties confiscated by the Castro regime. It also gives Cuban Americans the right to sue even if they were not U.S. citizens at the time of the confiscation, a significant departure from international norms.

President Clinton signed the legislation in reaction to Cuba’s downing of two U.S. planes piloted by Cuban Americans in February 1996 (tellingly, an election year). This represented a turnabout by Clinton, whose secretary of state, Warren Christopher, had argued that the law would “damage prospects for a peaceful transition in Cuba” and jeopardize “key U.S. interests around the world.” In another kick, Helms-Burton earmarked some \$6 million annually for the U.S. Agency for International Development (USAID) to fund groups providing material support to dissidents in Cuba. (As president of the U.S.-Cuba Business Council, Otto Reich was a major recipient of such funding.) The legislation also strictly defines the conditions for a “transition” in Cuba: it calls for “free and fair elections” but would bar recognizing the outcome if either Fidel or Raúl Castro were victors.

Although Clinton signed Helms-Burton, he waived enforcement of the contentious extraterritorial provisions to deflect a potential trade war with the European Union. It should also be noted that before leaving office Clinton signed (in 2000) the Trade Sanctions Reform Act that lifted the ban on food sales to Cuba.

The Bush Record

In an editorial titled “Bush’s Cuba Pickle,” published on May 9, 2002, the *Wall Street Journal* urged a liberalization of the embargo and portrayed a president trying to play both ends against the middle. Despite his recent crackdown on travel to Cuba, and his vow to veto any legislation that would ease

the embargo, Bush has so far been a disappointment to his hardline Cuban-American supporters who hoped for harsher measures that might spark regime change in Havana. Like Clinton, Bush has continued to suspend the extraterritorial implementation of the Helms-Burton legislation. He has also, to his credit, returned 12 hijackers to Cuba after obtaining assurances that they would not receive death sentences, despite objections from his brother, Gov. Jeb Bush. At the same time, critics say he has fostered a growing division within the Republican Party over Cuba, alienated moderate Cuban Americans, made life more difficult for Cuban dissidents, and alarmed those concerned that rising rhetoric and the January 2004 cutoff of migration accords might have a negative impact on the nation and, specifically, the state of Florida.

While there are reportedly real differences on Cuba within the Bush administration (Vice President Dick Cheney, Secretary of Defense Donald Rumsfeld, and Secretary of State Colin Powell spoke in favor of a more open approach to Cuba in the past, and Attorney General John Ashcroft, as senator from Missouri, led the Senate campaign to allow food sales to the island), preoccupation with Florida has trumped the dissenters. This was evident in the president’s naming of hardline Cuban Americans to his team, chief among them the Bacardi lobbyist Otto Reich. He was nominated as assistant secretary of state for Western Hemisphere affairs, reportedly over Colin Powell’s objections. But the Senate Committee on Foreign Relations warned that confirmation was in doubt owing to Reich’s past involvement in the 1980s Iran-contra controversy—investigators found that his office had engaged in “prohibited covert propaganda activities.” Nevertheless, the president appointed Reich during the congressional recess, allowing him to hold the job for a year, and eventually created the position of White House special envoy when the recess appointment ran out.

The net effect of the Reich affair was to leave the United States without credible leadership on Latin American policy for the first three years of the Bush administration. This added to the loose-cannon impact of extravagant and unfounded charges against Cuba. Thus, on the eve of Jimmy Carter's 2002 visit to the island, John Bolton, the under secretary of state for arms control and international security, declared that "the U.S. believes Cuba has at least a limited offensive biological warfare research and development effort" and that "Cuba is collaborating with other state sponsors of terror" and had "provided dual use technology to other rogue states." Carter found no corroboration for these charges and pointedly noted that in his many pre-trip briefings with the White House no such allegations had been made.

Similarly, in a peculiar twist, none other than former Soviet president Mikhail Gorbachev, addressing hundreds of pro-engagement Cuban Americans in Miami last year, exhorted Bush to "tear down the U.S. wall of embargo on Cuba." As if in response, days later President Bush told a select group of the most hardline Cuban Americans: "Clearly, the Castro regime will not change by its own choice. But Cuba must change." He announced the formation of a governmental Commission for Assistance to a Free Cuba whose goal is to prevent anyone within the current leadership from succeeding Castro when the commandante leaves office or dies and to promote a "rapid and peaceful transition" in Cuba. The announcement and the audience underscored the widening differences between Bush administration policies and the changing attitudes among Cuban Americans, in the business community, and in the U.S. Congress concerning the anachronistic embargo.

What Cuban Americans Think

Polls consistently record a fading ardor for the travel and trade restrictions among the approximately 1.2 million Cuban Ameri-

cans, 56 percent of whom live in Miami-Dade County. (Cuban Americans account for half of the county's Hispanic population and nearly 30 percent of its overall population.) Several factors have led to this change. Pope John Paul II's visit to Cuba in 1998 marked a turning point in this overwhelmingly Catholic community. Thousands of Cuban Americans traveled to Cuba for the first time to see the pope and came back with a more human view of the long-forbidden island. At the same time, the deep divisions within the exile community surfaced in the impassioned arguments over the repatriation of five-year-old Elian Gonzalez to his Cuban father. The decisive fault line tends to be the year in which exiles left Cuba.

Cubans who have departed since 1985 are generally motivated less by politics than by the classic immigrant quest for economic opportunity. Unlike newcomers from other countries, they can obtain coveted permanent residency status within one year, a legacy of the 1966 Cuban Adjustment Act. Those intercepted at sea are returned to Cuba in a problematic "wet foot, dry foot" immigration policy that encourages Cubans to risk their lives on rickety boats, just as Elian's mother did. Polls show that this large group is more concerned with local issues such as education and social services than with Washington's policy toward Cuba, although when asked about the latter they generally favor policies that ease their ability to interact with their homeland.

The more recent émigrés travel back to Cuba frequently to maintain their ties to their families. Under U.S. law, they are limited to one visit a year, but they get around the restriction by traveling illegally through third countries, just like the vast majority of Americans who travel to Cuba. Cuban Americans carry or send cash back home at a rate of \$1 billion a year, according to U.N. statistics. Most of this money is also transmitted in violation of the embargo, which sets low limits on such remittances. Cubans on the island are thus able to spend the

money in government-run enterprises. That makes the Cuban-American community a principle source of revenue for the Castro regime, and the number one factor undermining the effectiveness of the U.S. embargo.

A generational shift is also changing the political views of the community. This change is apparent even in such organizations as the Cuban-American National Foundation. CANF was created and led by a Miami builder and Bay of Pigs veteran, Jorge Mas Canosa, a millionaire who was persona maxima grata in the Reagan White House. It was Mas Canosa who developed the political network that brought Cuban-American representatives to Congress, and it is CANF that still works to keep the embargo, though it is fraying, in place. When Mas Canosa died in 1998, his son, Jorge Mas Santos, provisionally took the reins. With Jorge, as with others of his generation, the old fires have cooled. The son has never been to Cuba, he is said to have no political ambitions there, and his organization recently signaled its willingness to enter discussions with the Cuban government (but not with Fidel Castro or his brother Raúl). And in a telling sign of a changing climate, CANF is reportedly engaged in an internal debate about dropping its opposition to free travel to Cuba.

The foundation lost financial support when some of its wealthiest and most radical hardliners broke off to form the Cuban Liberty Council. This occurred after Jorge Mas Santos angered the Bush brothers by appearing at his father's grave with Democratic vice presidential candidate Joe Lieberman (who captured his Senate seat in Connecticut with the generous help of CANF). The most significant difference between CANF and the new Cuban Liberty Council is in their respective attitudes toward internal Cuban dissidents. The foundation has followed the trajectory of the wider community in that it now believes change from the island must come from within, whereas the

council generally questions the credibility of domestic dissidents. It favors promoting change from the outside, i.e., through President Bush's Commission for Assistance to a Free Cuba. To hasten that process, the council supports restricting remittances and travel rights.

One development in the émigré community was the surprise return to Cuba of the aged exile Eloy Gutiérrez Menoyo to Cuba in summer 2003. He had languished for 23 years in Cuban jails before resettling in Miami, where he lived for 17 years. He returned to Cuba with the express purpose of nurturing a legal and homegrown political opposition on the island, and thus far has been unmolested.

For its part, the Castro regime has actively courted the diaspora. During the 1990s, Cuba significantly eased regulations on allowing visits by former citizens. This year, it eliminated the visa requirement for Cuban nationals. It has hosted several conferences to encourage reconciliation and contacts with moderate Cuban-American leaders, and Havana expects some 300 U.S.-based exiles to attend the next meeting in May (unless Washington steps in to prevent their travel). Still, remnants of the old guard engage in the familiar fusillades. Sixteen Cuban-American members of the Florida state legislature, all Republicans, recently sent a joint letter to President Bush warning that he would lose their votes if he did not adopt a tougher stance toward Cuba. (The organizer of the letter, first-term representative David Rivera, who was born in New York, told the *Miami Herald* on February 23, "I want to be mayor of Cienfuegos in a free Cuba.")

These palpable changes in the exile community, however, have yet to be reflected in the House of Representatives, where four Cuban Americans—three Florida Republicans, and one New Jersey Democrat—now hold seats. They remain almost totally focused on upholding the embargo at all costs. Interestingly, two from Florida, the

brothers Lincoln and Mario Diaz-Balart, are Fidel Castro's nephews by marriage. Their father was Batista's minister of the interior at the time of the revolution.

By contrast, the stirrings within the Cuban-American community have emboldened other Florida actors to risk advocating open trade with Cuba. Florida ports and companies like Crowley Liner Services in Jacksonville now benefit from food trade, and so could the state at large. The mayors of St. Augustine and Tampa have supported increased engagement and, with the exception of the *Miami Herald*, all other leading state daily newspapers support engagement. Kenneth Lipner, a University of Miami economist, estimates that the Florida economy loses between \$750 million and \$1 billion annually due to the embargo. Delegations from fruit and sugar industries have discovered they stand to benefit from synergistic investment relationships with Cuba. A Florida-Cuba Business Council has been formed to press for the further lifting of trade restrictions and to promote ties with the island.

Congress: The Real Battleground

Just as the Cuban-American community and Florida are changing, so is the U.S. Congress. Sentiment among lawmakers has shifted dramatically in favor of easing the embargo on Cuba. The passage of the 2000 Trade Sanctions Reform and Export Enhancement Act, which lifted the ban on food sales to Cuba, was propelled chiefly by farm-state Republicans, one of the leaders being the former senator from Missouri, John Ashcroft. The new law encourages those who doubted the embargo could be eased in an election year. Momentum has continued to build. Fifty-two members of the House and twelve senators have formed bipartisan Cuba working groups, which function as caucuses to help rally action on Cuba.

While the Bush administration has clamped down, Congress has focused its ef-

forts on opening travel to Cuba. Rep. Jeff Flake, an Arizona Republican and former executive director of the Barry Goldwater Institute, has led the fight in the House: "At some point, we need to concede that our current approach has failed and try something new.... If we are serious about undermining Castro and bringing freedom and democracy to that island, why not let Americans travel there with that message?"³

Yet legislative action on Cuba by the House is blocked by a Republican leadership ready to circumvent normal procedures to protect the embargo. Majority Leader Tom DeLay knows he can count on those four Cuban Americans (one a Democrat) in a closely divided House. Eighty-year-old Henry Hyde (R/IL), who heads the House Committee on Foreign Affairs, also blocks committee votes that might result in changes in the embargo. Thus, those seeking a change must move legislation through floor amendments on appropriations bills. The easing of food sales, for instance, came about through an amendment to an agricultural appropriations bill.

Restrictions on American travel to Cuba are enforced by the Treasury Department's Office of Foreign Assets Control. This agency, which is also responsible for sniffing out al-Qaeda's financial trail, expends as much as a fourth of its time on what Sen. Byron Dorgan, a North Dakota Democrat, characterized as "tracking down grannies on bike trips to Cuba." Yet President Bush annually threatens to veto the entire Treasury appropriations bill if it contains language that would loosen the travel ban to Cuba. Nevertheless, in 2003, for the fourth year running, the House passed amendments that would impinge upon the Treasury's ability to enforce the travel ban. The Senate went one step further: the Foreign Relations Committee, by a 14 to 5 vote, approved S.950, the Freedom to Travel to Cuba Act (which currently has 33 sponsors, including Sen. John Kerry) that would lift the travel ban once and for all.

Despite the votes, Congressman DeLay and Senate Majority Leader Bill Frist, a Tennessee Republican, stripped out the Cuba language to spare the president from having to carry out his veto threat. “I was outraged that this issue was taken out of the final omnibus bill,” Sen. Max Baucus (D/MT) says on his website. “In stripping that provision, leadership broke the rules of conference—and defied the will of the majority of both Houses. That is simply undemocratic.” Baucus says he is fighting to get the Majority Leader to allow the bill to come up for a floor vote this year.

Incentives for Change

National business groups such as the U.S. Chamber of Commerce support normalizing commercial relations with Cuba. Agricultural companies such as Archer Daniels Midland and Cargill are leading efforts to allow food sales, and agricultural interests such as the American Farm Bureau Federation also back open travel. Congress has been influenced, too, by the surprisingly strong regional economic support for thawing trade with Cuba, as reflected by the unanimous passage of resolutions to that end in the legislatures of California (2002), Texas (2001), Illinois (House, 1999), and Louisiana (2000), among others.

Economic studies commissioned by various groups underscore the real benefits of trade with, and travel to, Cuba. A 2002 study by former Department of Transportation economists at the Washington-based Brattle Group found that the total impact on the U.S. economy of unrestricted travel to Cuba would generate up to \$1.6 billion annually, and somewhere between 17,000 and 23,000 jobs.

Corporate interests represented by the National Foreign Trade Council’s USA Engage coalition have joined forces with the congressional Cuba working groups to repeal “Section 211,” a law that protects the Bahamas-based Bacardi Corporation at the potential expense of more than 4,000 U.S.

trademarks currently registered in Cuba. Like Helms-Burton and the Cuban Democracy Act, laws passed to protect Cuban special interests have a damaging impact on American business and commercial leadership worldwide.

For many, ending the embargo is also an issue of regional fairness. “For 44 years communities in the South have borne the brunt of separation from our natural trading partners. It is time for Washington and Miami to bury the hatchet and give [us] a chance, through free travel and trade, to deal more effectively with Cubans at all levels,” says Michael Dow, the mayor of Mobile, Alabama,⁴ a sentiment echoed by ports, shippers, owners of small businesses, and farmers nationwide.

Migration and Security

The avowed goal of the embargo—the overthrow of the Cuban government—puts front and center the likelihood of destabilization that would be profoundly traumatic to the United States, and particularly to Florida, forcing thousands of Cuban refugees to seek the safety of our shores and requiring the vast commitment of personnel and resources. “During an earlier, smaller Haitian boatlift, for example, the U.S. needed 17 Coast Guard cutters, 5 Navy ships, and 9 aircraft to interdict, rescue, and transport,” said Robert Bach, a former Immigration and Naturalization Service official at an October 2003 National Summit on Cuba in Miami.

In rashly cutting off migration accords, the Bush administration has all but invited Castro to allow a mass exodus. On February 27, President Bush issued an emergency proclamation directing Homeland Security personnel to patrol the seas between Florida and Cuba to prevent U.S. pleasure boats from illegally entering Cuban waters. This allows U.S. authorities to be prepared for a potential Cuban exodus as the weather turns warmer, while warning Cuba that Washington would view any increased number of rafters as a hostile act. *A Chicago Tribune*

editorial of October 27, 2003, expresses the sentiment of many members of Congress and military personnel whom this writer has interviewed: "In an age of very real terrorist threats, Cuba hardly makes the list. For the Department of Homeland Security to redouble its efforts and tie up more money and personnel in enforcing the travel ban against Cuba...is an incredible waste of resources."

Retired general Charles Wilhelm, former chief of the U.S. Southern Command, says: "I'm convinced that a pragmatic relationship with Cuba will further the national security interests of the U.S." The lack of relations with Cuba, he said at the National Summit on Cuba in Washington, D.C. in 2002, translates into "a 47,000 square mile blind spot in our national security rearview mirror ninety miles south of Key West." Retired general Jack Sheehan and former Clinton drug czar Gen. Barry McCaffrey, among others, have called for increased interaction with the Cuban authorities and many military leaders have decried the administration's politicization of the Cuban threat.

The changed mood in Congress also springs from the realization that the embargo is condemned by the most important human rights groups. Holly Ackerman of Amnesty International puts it this way: "Specific embargo provisions such as the allocation of significant amounts of aid for 'democracy-building' have facilitated the [Cuban] government's efforts to paint dissidents as foreign sympathizers and ultimately weakened prospects for a strong and independent human rights movement."⁵

Human Rights Watch's José Vivanco concurs. "If the U.S. is interested in improving human rights conditions in Cuba, it must change this policy. If it is just interested in satisfying the electoral population in Florida, then continue this policy because the embargo is not achieving any goals or results in Cuba." He also stresses the counterproductive nature of the embargo inter-

nationally. "Because the embargo is bitterly opposed by most nations, it enables the Cuban government to divide the international community, leading, ironically, to less international pressure on Fidel Castro, not more."⁶

Internationally, the U.S. finds itself alone in upholding Cuba sanctions. When the European Union decried Cuba's crack-down on dissidents last year, it condemned the U.S. policy in the same breath. The 1996 Helms-Burton law that extends the embargo to foreign subsidiaries of U.S. corporations violates the very international legal standards Washington has worked for decades to create. For ten years running, the U.N. General Assembly has censured the embargo by increasing margins, most recently 157 to 3, with the negative votes coming from the United States, Israel (notwithstanding its extensive investments in Cuba), and the Marshall Islands. In the last year or so, the United States has lost its seats on the human rights commissions of both the United Nations and the Organization of American States, which many people see as rebukes to Washington over its Cuba policy. A change in that policy would signal that the United States is willing to work toward a multilateral approach to Cuban human rights that would necessarily involve diplomacy and engagement.

The Transition Is Now

Hardliners—almost none of whom have visited Cuba in recent years, if ever—speak of a stagnant nation whose aging leaders are mired in the past. In contrast, people who visit the island regularly report that Cuba is undergoing a gradual transition toward a market-oriented economy. Kirby Jones, president of Alamar Associates, a Cuba consulting firm established in 1974, says, "Cuba is creating its own mixture of socialism and capitalism. The Cuban government has cut subsidies, decentralized its economic structure, established joint ventures with hundreds of foreign private companies in a

clear form of privatization, and has introduced competition between its own enterprises and companies.”⁷ Many people like Jones who have regular contact with Cuba think that Washington’s punitive policies are impeding what would otherwise be a natural economic and political evolution in Cuba.

The USAID-financed Cuba Transition Project at the University of Miami has found that even when Castro dies, there will likely be no immediate change in the Cuban government’s fundamental political orientation due to the influence of a new generation of Cuban leaders, many in their thirties and forties, who appear to be committed to “revolutionary” principles. “There are a lot of good people working within the government down there,” says Tom Donahue, the president of the U.S. Chamber of Commerce.⁸ He thinks that we should be engaging them now. When the United States bars Cuba’s participation (against the wishes of other member nations) in important venues like the Organization of American States, the World Bank, and the Inter-American Development Bank, it keeps these young Cuban leaders isolated from ideas and opinions that could encourage new thinking at home. Current U.S. policy forces these young leaders into a box, making it extremely difficult for them to encourage reform for fear of being seen to be “on the side of the U.S.”

Political and economic dissidents in Cuba have long criticized the embargo for the continued sustenance it provides Castro and Cuba’s old guard. They have repeatedly called for an easing of U.S. pressure in order to give them more room for maneuver and greater legitimacy. It is telling that the few dissident movements with any popular support, such as the Varela Project, which Jimmy Carter acknowledged during his visit to Cuba, advocates working for change from within Cuba’s institutional structures.

In a recent essay, “Cuba After Castro,” Cuba Transition Project director and long-

time embargo supporter Jaime Suchlicki says that state enterprises, the government bureaucracy, and other Cuban institutions are strong, that “the continued loyalty of the armed forces appears highly likely,” and that Cuba’s dissidents are weak and incapable of mounting a real challenge to the government.⁹ Such findings point to the folly of trying to speed a Cuba transition that would dismantle existing institutions, causing unnecessary pain for the Cuban people.

Whoever occupies the White House in 2005 will need to begin addressing the inexorable forces that compel us to chart a new course of principled engagement with Cuba. A new approach would deflate Castro and focus on how best to support the people of Cuba. It should begin with the president allowing Congress to lift the ban on travel to the island. The president should then work with Congress to remove all impediments to two-way humanitarian trade and repeal the problematic Helms-Burton law. These changes would promote the reconciliation of the divided Cuban family. They would build American credibility in the international community. And they would show true support for the Cuban people and for dissidents who have the courage to work for change from within Cuba itself. ●

Notes

1. Interview with the author, February 27, 2004.
2. Interview with the author, February 26, 2004.
3. Interview with the author, September 2003.
4. Interview with the author, February 13, 2004.
5. Speaking at the National Summit on Cuba, Miami, October 2003.
6. Ibid.
7. Interview with the author, June 2002.
8. Presentation at a Capitol Hill conference organized by the World Policy Institute, June 15, 2000.
9. The text of this essay is available on the Web, at worlddandi.com, January 2004.