

Tom Moran

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What Should U.S. Foreign Policy be Towards Cuba?

In March of 2013, I was privileged enough to take a trip to the country of Cuba. As an American, I had a preconceived notion of the Cuban people that turned out to be entirely false; I anticipated to see people that resented America, people that had no desire to associate themselves with the Yankee Imperialists to the North. What I saw, however, was a group of people that wanted very much to be on good terms with the Americans; because, as they saw it, the embargo with the United States was the only thing keeping them from once again being a prosperous nation. Cuba has undergone a major transition in the last few years; allowing some privatization of business and even opening up to foreign investments from certain countries. Seeing these changes first-hand and realizing that they were not sufficient, it became very transparent to me throughout this trip that the Castro Regime in Cuba used the embargo with the United States as their crutch for every domestic and foreign problem that the country had, thus setting up my thesis for this paper. I believe that the embargo with Cuba should be lifted immediately and trade should once again be regularized. Not only would American business, particularly agriculture, benefit, but the oppressive regime in Cuba would no longer

have anything to blame for their inefficiencies, thus rendering them without an excuse for their short-comings and leading to a new, hopefully democratic, form of government.

The Cuban Revolution brings a great sense of pride to the Cuban people. However, I often got a sense that the Cuban people were very much confused about what their Revolution had accomplished. With that being said, this is in no way a slight to the Cuban people, as they were some of the most intelligent and kind people I have ever had the pleasure of encountering; yet, they were very much off base on what the Revolution accomplished. It did bring equality, but that equality did not mean a good life. The only thing the people were equal in was their grave poverty. This was no more evident than when our tour guide Alejandro told us that all extraneous (not government issued) clothing being worn by the Cuban people had more than likely been a gift from relatives abroad. So what did the Revolution accomplish?

Free education is a positive of the revolution, this leads to a very much literate public in Cuba and a large pool of college educated people, namely doctors; this leads me to my next assertion. In my assessment, the main triumph of the Cuban Revolution was their free health care system. Granted the technology is not even comparable with the medical system in the United States, but every Cuban citizen is guaranteed basic health-care. There are “barefoot” doctors throughout the countryside that live in small villages and provide basic health-care to villagers even in the most rural areas. Compared to third-world countries across the globe, Cuba has done an excellent job in assuring that their citizens are ensured basic health care free of charge.

My group was fortunate enough to be able to speak to the Dr. Alvarez Cambra, the man more or less in charge of the health-care system in Cuba. He was very open with us in his responses to our questions, which really shed light on what a high ranking official even thinks about the embargo. The question that I posed to him regarded information sharing between The United States and Cuba. He informed me that there is very little sharing in terms of information, breakthroughs, and technology; he then explained what a burden this had been on Cuba. "We always have to go through a third party, because something as simple as a phone call or visit simply is not possible; and direct contact with the United States would be much less expensive than going through a third party." The fact that the head of Cuba's health-care system, arguably the greatest triumph of the Cuban Revolution, wishes he could converse with physicians in the United States was shocking to me. Not only did he wish that the embargo was lifted, he was saying it openly to a group of Yankee students.

The other observation that led to my thesis was when we spoke with a professor of Economics at the University of Havana, who was not shy about expressing his views on how the Cuban economy should operate. While he chose his words carefully, it became clear that not only did he want the embargo with the United States to be lifted, but also that he thought Cuba would benefit greatly from more private investment, otherwise known as Capitalism. Now, keep in mind that this man is molding minds at a Cuban university, and if his opinion shined through this greatly in the hour we met with him, it must be unbelievably apparent in his classes.

I referenced earlier how privatization was starting to be permitted throughout Cuba; our group had the privilege of meeting with a few different business owners throughout our trip in Cuba. The first one I will talk about went by the name of Mongo. He had an organic farm near the city of Cienfuego and he was able to keep a staggering eighty-percent of his profits on his farm, even though the government still owned the land. However, Mongo had to do almost all of his farming by hand; this would be considered back breaking work even to the most fit of bodies. He made it very clear to us that he would like to continue to expand his farm as far as the government would allow. This expansion would be much easier for Mongo if he was able to get tractors and equipment directly from the United States; he would not have to hire more field-hands and he would still be able to expand his farm, thus the eighty-percent he keeps an even larger number. In talking with Mongo, it was clear that he was very grateful to be able to keep his eighty-percent, however his desire to expand brought something crucial to my eyes: the Cuban people are going to want more now that they have seen the benefits of private business.

Another business owner that we met was in the city of Santa Clara. He ran a hotel out of his house and he was not shy about letting us know how he felt about the restrictions and taxes on his business. He told us that before the restrictions, he let people stay at his previous home without the government's knowledge. He also told us that he was not happy about the high tax rates that he receives on each occupant he has; a very fair point considering that he relied solely on investments from friends outside of Cuba to make his home beautiful and welcoming to guests. This also calls to mind the fact that only Israel, Brazil, and Canada are allowed to invest in capital improvement projects in the country; so if you want to make a massive

overhaul to better you business, those are the only three countries a private business owner can turn to. Another crippling issue is the fact that business and private loans do not exist in Cuba; in my opinion, to make it very difficult for people to get start up costs under their belt for their businesses.

Privatization is eventually going to make the citizens of Cuba dissatisfied. Our tour guide Alejandro told us that one of the “better” government jobs in Cuba pays roughly \$35 a month. Whereas, people like Mongo are able to make more than that if they have a good harvest, etc. Eventually, people will start to catch on to the fact that they can make more money in a thriving private business, and the \$35 a month will no longer be sufficient for them, as they see others doing a little better than they are. Granted, Mongo is one of the few people fortunate enough to be able to keep eighty-percent; that extra \$5 or \$10 a month can mean an unbelievable amount to an impoverished family in Cuba. Something very similar happened to the Soviet Bloc countries in the late 1980s. The government realized that Communism was an inefficient way to run an economy and began to make gradual changes. One change would lead to the people requesting yet another change, eventually leading to a complete overhaul of their governments and leading to many former Communist countries now being liberal democracies.

The Cuban people would benefit greatly from the embargo with the United States being lifted. Many important people believe the same thing, and yet the embargo is the only thing remaining to give the Castro Regime legitimacy among the population. The writing is on the wall, the embargo needs to be lifted. The United States Government should realize that lifting the embargo would only help industries in America, benefit the citizens of Cuba, and more or

less bring the Castro Regime to its knees. If only our government would stop being so blinded by the last name Castro and start realizing how much regularized trade with Cuba would benefit not only Americans, but the amazing citizens of that country as well; taking the embargo away would take away the only crutch that the current regime in Cuba has to stand on, particularly after the loss of Hugo Chavez.