

What Should U.S. Policy be Towards Cuba?

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At this very moment, Cuba is an island in the world spotlight. With its changing and ambiguous leadership, political system, economy, and relations with Venezuela, Cuba could not be more of a topic of interest. Its current regime leadership is led by Fidel Castro's brother Raul, who in his old age, will be stepping down within the upcoming decade. The regime's socialist economy has incurred new policies of questionable basis and sustainability, as the government seems to be opening up to allow entrepreneur activity, within reason that is. All the while, the indistinct direction of Cuba is further muddled by the recent death of Venezuela's late Hugo Chavez. Oil-rich and supportive Chavez had excellent relations with Cuba and the Castro regime. As Cuba's crony country moves into its new presidential election, the world and the Cuban people wonder how this change will affect Cuba.

With so much change and uncertainty occurring with such a close United States neighbor, this moves Americans to focus in on Cuba. The U.S. relations with Cuba in the past fifty years have been centered on the embargo. The embargo has always been debated and questioned, and now more than ever, we here in the U.S. ask ourselves: "What should U.S. policy be towards Cuba, given these new developments?".

In this paper I argue that the United States should keep its embargo against Cuba, while seriously assessing the embargo's current prohibitions. This policy position is in the best United States interest, since our country is not looking to change its policy to merely benefit another nation, specifically a Communist nation. Overall, my policy stance is: "If it ain't broke, don't fix it."

President Obama could choose to move forward with gradual increases in exchange with Cuba, as he has already loosened up some of the embargo's strings. Yet, a full-blown dissolution of the embargo would be foolish. Perhaps loosening the embargo could lead to democratic encouragement in a nation whose governmental system and statues we oppose. Yet, we started this embargo for a reason. While compromise should be considered as times change, at the present time or in the near future, there seems to be no huge economic, political or safety gain for the United States to dramatically change its policy towards a Communist regime.

Commentators on this topic voice that the U.S. leadership should stop trying to tighten the screws of the trade embargo against Cuba, and they should instead encourage economic and political action to lead Cuba towards democracy.¹ While, I do recommend that the United States encourages democracy in Cuba, since the embargo was formed in opposition to an anti-democratic regime, I do not think Cuba's current or new regime will change because of the U.S. commencing trade with them. Additionally, in this time of political and economic change for Cuba, I do recommend for conversations to be held with Raul before he relinquishes his title and also with the new leadership. We as the U.S. can continue to reinforce our stance against their Communist regime, while also encouraging the beneficial switch towards democracy that would be fully supported by our country and could lead to the suspension of the embargo.

While I witnessed the receiving-end of the U.S. embargo, the evidence only indicates that Cuba could use the U.S. to improve itself. The U.S. does not need Cuba nor does it heavily rely on Cuban trade that could marginally bolster revenue. In evidence I provide, you will see that our policy is "not broke" towards Cuba, because Cuba is the only real party that has been suffering because of the embargo. Our stance against Communism and for democracy is still

¹ Tim Padgett, "Florida Takes Cuba Policy to the Absurd," Time, May 04, 2012.

strong, while Cuba's Communism has led them into dismay and into pointing fingers at the not-so-responsible U.S.

After collecting research via literature searches and online data collection while at my college in Ohio, I researched in the actual field, on the Cuban island itself. My data from Cuba includes observations, conversations, lectures and question-and-answer sessions with various Cuban citizens. Some of my interactions were with the tour guide, Alejandro, an entrepreneur farmer, Mr. Mongo, Dr. Alvarez Cambra, Professor Rene Caparros Aguiar from the University of Havana and another Cuban Professor of history and economics. I was able to observe the educational systems, governmental effects and programs, medical facilities, ideologies, history and many more elements while in Cuba. From this variety of data and source materials, I have formed my position and policy suggestions on U.S.-Cuba Relations. I will use this data to support my argument that the United States should not alter its policy towards Cuba.

First, when talking about the start of the economic and commercial blockade in 1962, an esteemed Cuban Professor of History and Economics described it as “a pity” and “a failure.”² He went on to share that lifting the ban on tourism from the United States would increase and bring in revenue for the island. He estimated that 2.3 to 2.7 million Americans are predicted to visit Cuba yearly should the ban be lifted.³ His final comments on United States-Cuba relations were that he and the Cuban people, “will continue waiting with all the necessary patience” for this embargo to be lifted so life can move on.⁴

In response to the professor, I want to point out the focus on the benefit *for Cuba*, not for both the U.S. and Cuba. Cuba is suffering economically, and I feel for them, but these are the only benefits listed. How will the U.S. justify backing down on a longstanding embargo, a

² Cuban Professor of History and Economics, morning lecture on March 6, 2013, Havana, Cuba.

³ Ibid.

⁴ Ibid.

symbol against the Communist regime, for reasons of bringing more revenue and economic development to citizens of another nation? Would the American people like its government acting dramatically for the jobs of another nation, especially a Communist nation, instead of its own people first? I also argue that this professor was very much seeking empathy in his word choice and descriptions, making Cuba seem like the pitiful victims waiting on the change that needs to come from our nation. The blame is being put here on the U.S., as if ending its impositions would solve all of Cuba's economic issues. However, there is more at play than just the U.S. embargo. In fact, expert and field investigator Cynthia Gorney observes that the economic model is broken in Cuba, as state employees survive on their tiny salaries only by stealing and the government worsens situations by circulating two national currencies at once. In all, the U.S. is not the one cause or the one solution to Cuba's pitiful economic problems.⁵

Second, Cubans are educating more doctors in its small country than we are in the United States.⁶ Cuba, with its unique 'family doctor' program also boasts an average life expectancy that is higher than any other Latin American country and an infant mortality rate similar to that of the U.S. Cuba's mortality rate is similar to those in developed countries like the United States with the top two causes of death being circulatory diseases followed by cancer.⁷ While it seems that the U.S. should consider taking pointers and exchanging doctors and ideas with those in socialist Cuba, more should be considered before dropping the embargo to do so.

Consider what I observed firsthand at Frank Pais Orthopedic Complex of the Public Health Ministry of Cuba on the west side of Havana. I sat in conversation and in a presentation

⁵ Gorney, Cynthia. "Cuba's New Now," *National Geographic*, November 2012, <http://ngm.nationalgeographic.com/2012/11/new-cuba/gorney-text>

⁶ Antonio Maria de Gordon. "Health and Health Care In Cuba: The Transition from Socialism to the Future. " *Finlay Albarran Medical Institute*, n.d., <http://www.finlay-online.com/finlayinstitute/healthandhealth.html> (29 December 2012).

⁷ Steve Brouwer, *The Cuban Revolutionary Doctor: The Ultimate Weapon of Solidarity*. 2009, Monthly Review. p.28-42.

in the conference room of Frank Pais with one of Cuba's leading and most revered medical professionals, Dr. Sc. Rodrigo Alvarez Cambras. After the video presentation rolled through commercialized, biased accounts of the Complex's greatness in the medical arena and statistics on the number of beds, doctors, nurses, tourist services, and education programs, Dr. Cambras dove right into the U.S.-Cuba issue. The doctor went right to the point of talking about how their medical system and his hospital complex specifically do not buy or obtain anything from the United States.⁸ In fact, they get their supplies from China. He played on the empathy heartstrings again when discussing that they need medicines that only the U.S. pharmaceutical agencies patent and produce. He went on to give an example of certain cancer treatments they would like to have to treat their patients but cannot import and use them because of the embargo.

Here again, we see that Cuba would indeed benefit from the exchange that could happen after the dissolution of the embargo. Ethically, it is important that these Cubans receive the best and newest medicines, which may be U.S.-made. However, is it politically sound to drop the embargo for the care and medical exchange for Cubans? One could argue that it could be helpful to have Cuba as a marketplace for U.S. drugs and medical equipment. Yet, our stance and isolation from exchange with Cuba has stood thus far and throughout medical advances. Morally our nation is in protest of Communist practices and would fundamentally not consider a market for itself in a land of undemocratic injustice. Our position should be unwavering, especially since Cuba is already obviously doing alright according to the high life expectancy and low infant mortality rates.

Overall, the consequences of this policy stance include the hindrance of beneficial exchange between Cuba and the United States. While it has been cited that medicinal advances

⁸ Dr. Sc. Rodrigo Alvarez Cambras, Profesor de Merito Academico Titular and Director of the International Scientific Orthopedic Complex of Frank Pais on March 5, 2013.

and the quality of care is being compromised because the inability to swap improved ideas or products, this is not a heavy enough reason for the United States. While my empathy for the doctor, professor, and common man of Cuba swelled during my stay in Cuba, back in the United States I can see more clearly that we are not suffering or compromising our real quality of life or quality of care in not trading with Cuba. We have the technology. Cuba wants a piece of it.

Third and lastly, the members of current Cuban leadership have unquestionable loyalty to the state and to the leadership of the Communist Party.⁹ I recommend that our government stay in dialogue with Cuba and assess situations as time goes on, so as not to be completely ignorant to opportune times for change and reform, especially if the current changes in Cuba increase. However, as the leadership transitions with a retained loyalty to the Communist regime, we will see the same Communist practices continuing in Cuba that the U.S. is opposed to. No change is predicted in Cuba's far distance from a form of democracy.

On the counter-argument, former Vice-Presidential candidate Paul Ryan speaks to the ineffectiveness of the embargo in saying that, "The embargo doesn't work. It is a failed policy. It was probably justified when the Soviet Union existed and posed a threat through Cuba. I think it's become more of a crutch for Castro to use to repress his people. All the problems he has, he blames the American embargo."¹⁰ Furthermore, lifting the embargo is said to possibly bring revenue and political alignments to the U.S. It is estimated that the embargo costs the United States \$1.2 billion annually.¹¹ While this is a substantial amount of money, I argue that a worthy standpoint against such a close Communist neighbor does need funding to be sustained. We cannot act as a nation and stay strong without a cost. Furthermore, we need to see a cost analysis for what opening up trade with Cuba would cost.

⁹ Bardach, Ann Louise. "We'll Always Have Fidel."

¹⁰ <http://nationalinterest.org/commentary/the-pointless-cuba-embargo-7834?page=1>

¹¹ U.S. International Trade Commission.

Also, the lack of trade with the United States forces Cuba to seek trade alliances elsewhere. One of Cuba's main allies is Venezuela. According to the CIA World Factbook "Since late 2000, Venezuela has been providing oil on preferential terms, and it currently supplies over 100,000 barrels per day of petroleum products. Cuba has been paying for the oil, in part, with the services of Cuban personnel in Venezuela including some 30,000 medical professionals."¹² With the death of Venezuela's leader, Chavez, the question arises about the continuance of Venezuela's generous relationship with Cuba. Cuba could be impacted financially if the ties are lost. Also how will Cuba obtain its oil before it is capable of offshore drilling? Obviously, the trade and funding relationship between Cuba and Venezuela is crucial to the existence of the nearby island nation.¹³

Some argue that if the embargo was lifted, the United States would be open to create a political relationship with Cuba that would be beneficial to reduce the Cuban alliance with Venezuela. Especially now, with the uncertainty of the Cuba-Venezuela relationship in Venezuela's new presidential elections, it is seen as a good move for the U.S. to suddenly cave in its stance against Communism so that it might be able to scoop up Cuba as a new, dependent ally. I repudiate the relevance of this move at this point in time for the United States. While it does seem like an opportune time to initiate an alliance with Communist Cuba in its moment of weakness and uncertainty, it would not be in the U.S. best interest still.

Overall, the opposition points towards my policy stance include U.S. cost, losing possible opportune relationship initiatives with Cuba after Chavez's death, and the inability to exchange medical goods, as mentioned previously.

¹² The World Factbook 2013. Washington, DC: Central Intelligence Agency, 2013.

¹³ Romero, Carlos A. South-South Cooperation between Venezuela and Cuba. Rep. Reality of Aid, n.d. Web. 31 Jan. 2013.

Though consequences and opposition do exist, it is still in the United States' best interest to maintain the embargo as a public statement towards Cuba. While the embargo's details and the changing political situations should keep being assessed, the U.S. position against Communism should remain. The humanitarian rewards and benefits for Cubans alone are not enough to justify a dramatic change or dissolution in the U.S. policy towards Cuba.

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