

What should U.S. policy be towards Cuba?

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10 April 2013

There is a beautiful Caribbean Island less than 100 miles South of Florida where the people enjoy free health care—that has given citizens a life expectancy of 79 years—and free education—which has led to a stellar 100 percent literacy rate.<sup>1</sup> But nothing is truly free. These luxuries do come at a cost; a cost of \$8.9 billion in external debt, to be exact. This cost also extends directly to the people, many of whom live off of 448 pesos or \$20.36 a month.<sup>2</sup> This nation, which houses an unlimited number of paradoxes, is known as communist Cuba. To resolve the country's inefficiencies, such as the high national debt, President Raul Castro and Cuba's Sixth Party Congress approved "The Guidelines for Economic and Social Policies of the Party and the Revolution" in 2011.<sup>3</sup> Now, in 2013, as Cuba continues to carry out reforms that are changing some fundamental aspects of its economy, a question arises: is it time for the United States to adjust its policy towards Cuba? If so, what should those adjustments look like? Through this paper, I will combine research with personal experiences to explain why the United States of America should have diplomatic relations immediately while lifting the embargo at a slow and steady pace. To do this, America needs to come to the table with nothing more than the willingness to discuss issues that face both nations. By being open to discuss issues like drilling for oil in the Gulf, drug trafficking, and health care, America will show its intentions for normalized relations. Then, when the time is right, the U.S. should ask for free and fair elections in exchange for the lifting of the embargo.

I am not the only one who thinks the United States should lift the embargo. There were 188 nations who voted for embargo resolution at the U.N.'s 2012 General Assembly, many of our allies included. As for those who backed the U.S. in keeping the embargo, there were only

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<sup>1</sup> Richard E. Feinberg, "Reaching Out: Cuba's New Economy and the International Response," *Latin America Initiative at Brookings* (November 2011) 5.

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid*, pg. 6, 14.

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid*, pg. 15.

two countries: Israel and Palau.<sup>4</sup> Although I agree with the vast majority of the U.N., to me, the best route for U.S. to take is one that goes at a slow and steady pace. To achieve this, America should require nothing from Cuba before engaging in talks about problems that face both countries. Doing so will show America's willingness to move forward. Then, by the time Raul Castro is ready to step down from office, in 2018,<sup>5</sup> the United States can leverage the progress it has made to request a fair and free election for the next president of Cuba. If this is accomplished, the U.S. can lift areas of the blockade and eventually the entire embargo. How long this will take, I do not know, but it is important that both countries move at a pace that allows their citizens to progress with their governments towards the trusting of the other country. In order to reach this goal, the U.S. can put forth the inclination to discuss mutual issues that affect both countries like oil drilling, drug trafficking, and health care.

First, let's start with the issue of drilling for oil in the Gulf. One problem that the embargo poses is that U.S. companies cannot work on the Cuban wells. Therefore, American corporations, and consequently the American economy, are losing out on potential business opportunities. Next is an issue that is significantly more problematic and that will occur in the event of an oil spill. "The U.S. [currently has a] ban on drilling off of Florida, however, [it] doesn't affect America's Caribbean neighbors."<sup>6</sup> If anything were to go wrong and a spill occurred, there are several problems that would arise. For one, as stated above, the embargo's restrictions keep U.S. companies from working on the wells, even in the event of an oil spill. In a state where the wellbeing of the environment and economy are so closely linked, an oil spill

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<sup>4</sup> Louis Charbonneau, "U.N. urges end to U.S. Cuba embargo for 21<sup>st</sup> year," Reuters, November 13, 2012, accessed April 5, 2013, <http://www.reuters.com/article/2012/11/13/us-cuba-embargo-un-idUSBRE8AC11820121113>.

<sup>5</sup> "Cuban President Raul Castro to retire in 2018," *BBC*, February 24, 2013, accessed April 4, 2013, <http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-latin-america-21568158>.

<sup>6</sup> "U.S. Watches Closely As Oil Drilling Begins Off Cuba," narrated by Greg Allen, NPR, February 13, 2012, accessed April 5, 2013, <http://www.npr.org/2012/02/13/146635957/u-s-watches-closely-as-oil-drilling-begins-off-cuba>.

would devastate the Florida coastline.<sup>7</sup> In addition, if a spill was to occur and oil did get to Florida's coast, which country would be responsible for the clean-up? If U.S. and Cuban officials spoke to one another about this potential issue, a crisis management plan could be put into place.

The second mutual issue I mentioned was drug trafficking. Cuba is in a prime location to transport illegal drugs from South America to the United States; however, because of its continual effort against drugs, smugglers have not been able to use Cuba as a base. Currently, U.S. and Cuban officials work together to fight drug trafficking through limited teamwork efforts. For instance, if smugglers evade Cuban arrest, the U.S. coastguard will receive information so that it can pick up the pursuit.<sup>8</sup> Yet, even with their communication on the waters, the American government recognizes that more cooperation needs to take place. According to the U.S. Department of State's 2013 International Narcotics Control Strategy Report, "Upgraded links between the United States, Cuba, and regional partners, along with improved tactics, techniques, and procedures, would likely lead to increased interdictions and disruptions of illegal trafficking."<sup>9</sup> But such teamwork can only occur through improved relations.

Finally, healthcare is a central part of the Cuban life, and it is also a hot topic here in the U.S. While in the country, we traveled to a hospital to get a better understanding of what their world renowned healthcare system was like. This experience took me by surprise because in America, when we think of superb healthcare, many of us think of innovation and technology. However, while walking around this *elite* facility, I saw little state of the art technology. Based on sight, the seemingly unimpressive hospital did not look like the world renowned healthcare system I had imagined. It was not until meeting with Cuban physician Dr. Alvarez Cambra that I

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<sup>7</sup> Ibid.

<sup>8</sup> Sarah Rainsfor, "Cuba and US find common ground in war on drugs," *BBC*, September 8, 2012, accessed April 5, 2013, <http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-latin-america-19528416>.

<sup>9</sup> "2013 International Narcotics Control Strategy Report (INCSR)," U.S. Department of State, March 5, 2013, accessed April 5, 2013, <http://www.state.gov/j/inl/rls/nrcrpt/2013/vol1/204049.htm>.

began to understand exactly why their system has become internationally recognized. We asked Dr. Cambra, what makes Cuban healthcare so good? His answer was that they focus on elimination of illnesses for children and adults—preventative healthcare. In part, Dr. Cambra attributed this to having in-town clinics. These clinics are spread across the country in every community. They allow locals to have quick and easy access to their general physicians free of charge.

As of now, the embargo prohibits trade of medicines and medical equipment.<sup>10</sup> Nevertheless, over the years, “...strategies developed in Cuba that have resulted in consistent improvement in the population’s health status, to the extent that today the country’s health indicators resemble those of industrialized nations.”<sup>11</sup> Now, based on my description of the hospital and the accomplishments just stated, I want you to imagine what Cuba’s already internationally recognized system could look like if it had access to American technologies. Dr. Cambra touched upon this briefly saying, the U.S. is a powerful country with highly developed medicine sitting just 90 miles away; he believes that Cuba could greatly benefit from the lifting of the embargo, as could the United States. Then again, how can capitalist America use ideas that are based on a socialist ideology?

In the article, “Curious Case of Cuba,” authors William Keck MD, MPH and Gail Reed, MS argue that the United States should use Cuba’s healthcare system to model new principles and practices. “...in particular we suggest the Accountable Care Community (ACC) concept as a viable model to apply such insights in our capitalist context.”<sup>12</sup> In Cuba, AAC looks like the in-town clinics I described above—where doctors live within communities providing preventative

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<sup>10</sup> William Keck, MD, MPH and Gail Reed, MS, “The Curious Case of Cuba,” *American Journal of Public Health*, 102, no. 8 (August 2012): 1, accessed April 6, 2013, <http://search.ebscohost.com/login.aspx?direct=true&db=s3h&AN=78276828&site=ehost-live>.

<sup>11</sup> Ibid.

<sup>12</sup> Ibid.

healthcare to all. In Cuba, such universal access to preventative care has given 98 percent of children ages two and up full immunizations. In addition, the infant mortality rate has become less than 5 per 1,000 births.<sup>13</sup>

Although these accomplishments are based on the fact that Cubans get free healthcare, that does not mean that the U.S. cannot find a way to make this program work in our society. For example, the authors cite Project Access in Buncombe County, North Carolina. Project Access “...enlists local physicians and hospitals to participate in a preventively oriented volunteer medical service program for almost every community resident without health coverage.”<sup>14</sup> This example shows how the U.S. can tailor Cuba’s model to fit the needs of our nation. Neither I nor the authors of this article believe that the United States will go to a socialized payment system; but we do agree that Cuba has some socialistic practices that the U.S. should draw from. In sum, open talks between the nations can provide both countries with information on how to improve upon their respective healthcare systems. In addition, the lifting of the embargo can give the Cuban people access to American medicines and medical equipment.

With all of that being said, I do recognize that if the United States follows my step-by-step resolution strategy, there will be backlash from the many Americans, including those in Congress, who believe the embargo should stay in place. In this section, I will argue against some of the counterarguments I expect to come across.

For one, some may say that the embargo should stay in place because it has yet to achieve its true purpose. Over the past 50 years, the embargo “...has not accomplished its core mission of

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<sup>13</sup> Ibid, pg. 5.

<sup>14</sup> Ibid, pg. 8.

toppling Fidel Castro or his brother and successor, Raul.”<sup>15</sup> Supporters of the embargo acknowledge this failure but believe that there is a “...need to press for greater freedoms on the island,”<sup>16</sup> and they think the embargo can accomplish this task. To these individuals, I would respond by saying that the U.S. cannot push for freedoms without having diplomatic relations. Furthermore, by keeping the embargo in place, the U.S. is actually hurting the Cubans more so than the regime itself. Proof of this is in the fact that for the last 50 plus years the regime has survived under the embargo while the Cuban people have dealt with starvation and poor living conditions.

While in Cuba, I saw the poor conditions that I am referring to, and let me confirm, the poverty is vast. Actually seeing these conditions really shed light on the fact that the embargo truly is hurting the citizens of Cuba more than the government. According to Forbes Magazine, Fidel Castro was ranked 7<sup>th</sup> on the “Kings, Queens and Dictators” list, with an estimated \$900 million. But the former Cuban President adamantly denies that he has any wealth what so ever. He claims to make a modest Cuban salary equivalent to \$36 American dollars per month.<sup>17</sup> However, the magazine stands by the ranking, claiming, “...[Castro’s] wealth comes from his position of power. ‘And the lines often blur between what is owned by the country and what is owned by the individual.’”<sup>18</sup> Whether one believes that Castro’s net worth is \$900 million or one cent, the fact of the matter is Castro is indeed in a position of power, and with that position comes the power over money.

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<sup>15</sup> “50 Years After Kennedy’s Ban, Embargo on Cuba Remains,” *The New York Times*, February 7, 2012, accessed April 8, 2013, <http://www.nytimes.com/2012/02/08/world/americas/american-embargo-on-cuba-has-50th-anniversary.html>.

<sup>16</sup> Ibid.

<sup>17</sup> Portia Siegelbaum, “Castro: I Am Not Rich,” *CBS News*, February 11, 2009, accessed April 5, 2013, [http://www.cbsnews.com/2100-202\\_162-1622957.html](http://www.cbsnews.com/2100-202_162-1622957.html).

<sup>18</sup> Ibid.

Another counterargument that someone may make is that lifting the embargo could extend the life of the Castro regime. In response, I would say that by having the embargo, the U.S. government has actually fueled the regime's ability to resist America's dominance in the Western hemisphere. The regime has done this by using the embargo as a crutch, blaming the blockade for things like supply and medical shortages. While at the hospital, we heard Dr. Cambra refer to such shortages by saying the Cuban people know and understand that sometimes it will be a long wait for medication because of the embargo's restrictions. This doctor's statement showed me how the Revolution has indeed been using the U.S. government as a scape goat.

The next counterargument is a quick one to deflate. To those who take the stance that the embargo should stay in place because the United States should not compromise with a communist country I ask them, do we not have diplomatic relations with China? My general point here is that this is a hypocritical argument. Even if one were to argue this by pointing out the Cuban Missile Crisis as evidence, I would say that is a thing of the past. The United States claims to be a humanitarian country, so it is about time the U.S. moves forward and actually provides Cubans with the humanitarian rights they deserve.

The final counterargument that I would like to raise is that the people of both countries are not ready for normalized relations. To that I would say, I agree. Some Cubans still see us as the Yankee imperialists while many Americans still see the Cubans as the Soviet backed communists from the 1960s. Fortunately, my plan allows for these built up tensions to progressively be resolved. By taking small steps, the citizens of both countries can begin to trust, and once there is trust there is a foundation to build upon. To this, someone may argue that the Cuban people are communists and that they would not trust us. I would use my experiences on

the island to counter this by saying, I know that the Cuban people can trust Americans and that many of them can or even want to see changes in their system. One example comes from when we met with an agricultural entrepreneur named Mongo. During our encounter, I saw two amazing things. One, he—consciously or subconsciously—wanted the system to change. I realized this after we asked him if he likes the agricultural reforms (which have changed the way he receives his pay). Our translator did not even need to tell us what his answer was because Mongo's nonverbal gestures said it all: he smiled, held his hand in front of his face, and moved his fingers in the way that indicated the universal sign for money. Mongo liked the reforms because they allowed him to make more money, and as we all know, making more money is not a feature of a socialist society, but rather, a capitalist society.

The second thing that I observed was the way Mongo and his distributor (a government worker who came along to make sure Mongo was not saying anything that could get them into trouble) warmed up to us over the course of our exchange. We were the first Americans Mongo had ever met. At first I could tell that both he and his distributor were wary of us, but after conversing for some time, they both started to warm up. They had smiles on their faces, and Mongo even offered us the opportunity to try some of his freshly picked organic tomatoes. As we left the farm, I asked our guide Alejandro if he thought we had made an impression on Mongo. Alejandro said yes, and that Mongo would probably go into town that night and tell everyone about these Americans who came to his farm. This encounter was one of my most memorable experiences from the trip, and based on my descriptions of Mongo's experience, it seems like it was quite memorable for him as well.

By sharing this story, there are two points that I am trying to make. One is that Cubans are individuals separate from their government. Unlike us, they do not have direct control (or

votes) over aspects of their lives. This means that they are not all 100 percent sold on the idea that a socialist society is the best society. Mongo indicating that he likes making more money is an indicator of just that. Furthermore, Mongo and his distributor's ability to change their perceptions of us so quickly shows that Cubans are able to change the way they perceive Americans. I believe that it is easy for Cubans to do this because they are able to distinguish our government from us as citizens. This concept is a difficult one for most Americans to grasp because we are a "...government of the people, by the people, for the people..."<sup>19</sup> From this experience, as well as many others, I draw the conclusion that the Cuban people can accept Americans.

In conclusion, the United States has flexed its muscles for over 50 year, and now it is time to move forward and become the humanitarian country we say we are. The U.S. should reach out to Cuba and discuss mutual issues such as oil drilling in the Gulf, drug trafficking, and health care. Both countries can benefit from regular conversations about all three of these issues. Then, when Raul is out of office, the United States can use the improved relations to leverage the lifting of the embargo for a free and fair election. Although the embargo has proved to be ineffective in bringing down the Castro regime that does not mean it has been in place for nothing. By using the lifting of the blockade as leverage, the U.S. can accomplish its original intentions. However, such a deal will only occur if there is trust between the neighboring nations, and trust can ultimately be cultivated through communication. Cuba can become a trading partner, a tourist destination, *an ally*, and so much more.

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<sup>19</sup> Abraham Lincoln, "Gettysburg Address," Speech, Gettysburg, Pennsylvania, November 19, 1863. Abraham Lincoln Online, accessed April 10, 2013, [www.abrahamlincolnonline.org/lincoln/speeches/gettysburg.htm](http://www.abrahamlincolnonline.org/lincoln/speeches/gettysburg.htm).

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