

# The Detroit News

## Normalizing Cuba relations the right move

Doug Bandow

December 20, 2014

President Barack Obama used negotiations over a couple of imprisoned Americans to refashion the entire U.S.-Cuba relationship. He's aiming to reopen the embassy, relax trade and travel restrictions and improve communication systems.

Of course, sustained caterwauling began immediately. For instance, Sen. Marco Rubio of Florida charged the administration with appeasement because the president proposed to treat Cuba like the U.S. treats other repressive states.

But President Barack Obama only suggested that government officials talk to one another. And that people visit and trade with one another.

Republicans once attempted to present themselves as the Daddy Party, the serious folks who got things done and accepted the world as it was, rather than treated it as they wished it to be.

Well, no longer, at least on Cuba.

More than a half-century ago, Fidel Castro took power in Havana. In the midst of the Cold War, the Kennedy administration feared that Cuba would serve as an advanced base for the Soviet Union.

Having tried and failed to overthrow the regime militarily, Washington saw an economic embargo as the next best option.

But that didn't work either. Even after the Soviet Union collapsed and Moscow ended subsidies for Cuba, sanctions achieved nothing.

Today Cuba's Communist system continues to stagger along. Everyone assumes that it cannot last much longer, but two decades ago people were saying the same thing when the USSR left Cuba. The only certainty is that economic sanctions have failed.

Failed to bring down the regime. Failed to liberalize the system. Failed to free political prisoners. Failed to win the return of nationalized assets. Failed to isolate Cuba. Failed to achieve much of anything useful.

After more than 50 years.

But that should surprise no one, least of all free market conservatives. Sanctions are most likely to work if they are universal and narrowly focused. For instance, the Institute for International Economics found that economic sanctions did best with limited objectives, such as "modest" policy change.

Similarly, a Government Accountability Office review noted that "sanctions are more effective in achieving such modest goals as upholding international norms and deterring future objectionable actions" than in forcing major changes, such as committing political suicide. Unilaterally demand that Havana release political prisoners, return property and hold free elections? For the regime, sanctions obviously are the lesser evil.

Yet for a half-century, Washington has been insisting that the Castros dismantle their Communist dictatorship. A great goal. But until Havana's Gorbachev appears, it ain't going to happen, whatever sanctions the U.S. imposes.

The embargo also is advanced as moral recompense, punishing the Communist revolutionaries who oppressed the Cuban people and stole their property. Of course, the same could be said of most every other government arising from revolution, insurrection, coup and sometimes even election. Democratic governments, including America's, also sometimes seize property without adequate compensation.

Moreover, if Raul Castro & Co. is being punished, those in charge don't seem to notice. General embargoes hurt average folks far more than elites, who are most able to manipulate the system.

In fact, the embargo has provided the regime with a wonderful excuse for its failings. The Castros always could point to Yanqui imperialism as the cause of the Cuban people's travails. Many regime opponents, such as Elizardo Sanchez Santa Cruz, whom I met on my (legal) trip a decade ago, criticized U.S. policy.

Perhaps the worst consequence of the embargo, however, was helping to turn a murderous windbag into a towering international figure. Fidel Castro never much mattered, but he became a symbol of resistance to America because Washington focused attention on him. Ignoring him and flooding his island with tourists and businessmen would have denied him his global podium and claim of victimhood.

Encouraging travel and trade would promote regime change better than all the money spent on Radio Marti. There's no need to oversell the political impact of commerce. But it's hard to name a dictatorship anywhere ended by isolation. And if the latter policy hasn't worked for 50 years in Cuba, it's time to try something else.

There are plenty of good reasons to criticize Obama on foreign policy. However, he's got Cuba policy right, in contrast to Marco Rubio, Jeb Bush and most of the cast of GOP presidential wannabes.

Long ago it was evident that the embargo had failed and deserved to be repealed. (And that America's embassy should be reopened, as the president also proposed.) If conservative Republicans believe in recognizing reality and getting results, as they claim, they should back trade and engagement with Cuba.

*Doug Bandow is a Senior Fellow at the Cato Institute.*