

The Japan Times

U.S. would be wise to end sanctions on Cuba

Doug Bandow

December 8, 2016

U.S. President-elect Donald Trump is facing his first international challenge, the death of former Cuban dictator Fidel Castro. Unfortunately, Trump looks set to flunk the test.

Anyone who believes in human liberty should welcome Castro's passing. Whatever the alleged social progress of his communist regime — in fact, it left the Cuban people mired in poverty — cannot justify a half century of repression.

When Castro's forces ousted the corrupt and brutal Fulgencio Batista, many Americans admired the young, English-speaking revolutionary. But Castro showed his true beliefs when he embraced the Soviet Union.

The U.S. backed a military invasion, which failed spectacularly, and a series of sometimes comical assassination attempts, which failed embarrassingly. This left economic war.

The Eisenhower administration cut Cuban sugar imports in July 1960. Later presidents and Congresses successively limited U.S.-Cuban commercial relations.

Failure never fazed embargo advocates. Congress desperately desired to do something and intensified sanctions over the years.

When the Soviet Union collapsed, ending subsidies for the Castro regime, many analysts believed that Cuban communism was doomed. But 22 years later the Castro regime staggers on, an embarrassing specter from the past.

Vintage 1950s autos held together with wire and tape compete with primitive Soviet models and modern luxury vehicles. Buildings look like they were last painted during the Mesozoic era. Food supplies are limited, even with a ration book.

But anything is available for a price. When I visited Havana (legally) with a journalism group a decade ago, we stayed at a very nice European-owned hotel. Hard currency stores offered foreign goods. So much for Fidel Castro's revolutionary society.

The belief that doing ever more of the same decades after imposing the embargo would yield a different result suggests that U.S. policymakers suffer from at least a touch of insanity. More

than a half century of sanctions have not sparked a popular uprising, forced the Castro's and allies from power, moderated the regime, delivered democracy, promoted economic liberalization, cut regime ties with other communist systems, stopped foreign investment, or achieved much else of note.

In fact, this is a fairly common experience for sanctions. Few governments are inclined to dismantle themselves under foreign pressure.

That shouldn't surprise Trump. Yet during the campaign he told a Florida audience that unless the Castro regime allowed political and religious freedom and released political prisoners, he would reverse President Barack Obama's opening to Cuba.

Such is the political power of Cuban Americans and political significance of Florida. Even serious Republicans who know better must act as if they believe a few more years of sanctions will turn Cuba into the beau ideal of capitalist democracy. Yet another ethnic lobby has badly distorted U.S. foreign policy.

It would be wonderful, of course, if the Donald could end Cuban communism by simply speaking the word. Alas, the system doesn't appear likely to collapse or surrender. It almost certainly will have to be pushed into history's trash can by its own people.

But the embargo won't help them to do that. Better to flood Cuba with Americans bearing dollars.

Then the rewards from engagement will be obvious to all. That doesn't guarantee Cuba will become free — the fearful regime actually has stepped up political repression and religious persecution over the last two years — but openness offers a better long-term alternative. The more the country is immersed in the world, the harder it would be for the regime to preserve the sclerotic, impoverished, repressive system.

One of the most important benefits of eliminating the embargo would be to prevent Raul Castro from blaming America for Cuba's problems. In fact, for this reason Cuban dissidents who I met more than a decade ago were skeptical of the embargo. In fact, Cuba's poverty reflects socialist mismanagement, not U.S. sanctions.

Fidel was unique in the way that he was transformed from murderous windbag into international icon. Nevertheless, even he would have gained little foreign acclaim had he not been able to present himself as the heroic defender against arrogant Yanqui Imperialists. In effect, Washington made Commandant Fidel.

The Cuban people deserve to be free, but neither Trump nor America can liberate them. The embargo certainly won't do so. Washington's experiment has failed.

Fidel Castro's death increases hope for positive change in Cuba. True liberation is most likely if the U.S. government allows Americans to visit Cuba, invest in the Cuban economy, and trade with the Cuban people. Trump should seize the opportunity to help transform this communist dictatorship by expanding the opening begun by Obama.

Doug Bandow is a senior fellow at the Cato Institute and a former special assistant to President Ronald Reagan.