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Engage with Cuba, but push freedoms

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There's such a thing as doing the right thing — but doing it badly. It's high time the U.S. lifts the ineffective Cuban embargo, which has served only to provide the communist dictators there with a convenient excuse for the permanently wrecked economy.

But the way President Barack Obama went about it — with no concessions from the Cubans, and sitting through a speech castigating the U.S.'s imaginary crimes from a literal dictator — was the worst possible way to re-engage with Cuba.

Normalizing relations with Cuba is a huge gift to the Castro regime. That move could have been used to force Cuba to release some of its political prisoners while at the same time increasing political and economic freedom.

But Obama asked for nothing in return. What a waste.

Still, writing for the Cato Institute, Doug Bandow outlines the solid reasons why even conservative opponents of most of Obama's policies should applaud this shift.

“A half century ago the Castros created a nasty dictatorship and allied with the Soviet Union,” he says. “But the Soviet Union, Cold War, Soviet-Cuban alliance, and Moscow subsidies for Cuba are all gone. Only the Castro dictatorship lives on, despite the embargo. Over the years the rest of the world ignored Washington's ban. Even after the cut-off of Soviet transfers, the sanctions did not bring Havana to heel.”

So it's time to try something new.

“Normalization is long overdue,” Bandow contends. “There's no longer a security argument for isolating Cuba. At home the Castros are thugs, but that's old news and hasn't been affected by a half century of sanctions. What we know as a result of essentially a controlled experiment with the embargo is that sanctions do not release political prisoners, generate competitive elections, unseat dictators, create a free press, or foster a market economy.”

Bandow says we can expect improvements, but not an immediate transformation.

“Cuba is not only poor, but also suffers from the ravages of a state-controlled economy,” he says. “Cubans are limited in what they can buy and also in what they can produce to sell. However, Washington should not offer aid, whether for commercial or developmental reasons, to Havana in response. Moreover, while greater economic and political contact will be naturally seditious and undermine Communist Party rule, the regime has carefully controlled past foreign investment, limiting its impact. But foreign visitors and businessmen still will have a positive influence. Of course, much more will still need to be done to encourage a freer society.”

Bandow doesn't (at least in this case) make the more fundamental argument for lifting the embargo. The conservative movement should be willing to put its policy where its mouth is.

We know that free markets are the superior economic system, lifting more people out of poverty and raising life expectancies and standards of living for billions of people worldwide. Capitalism always and everywhere proves superior to socialism.

So let's allow free markets to work their magic. An embargo, of course, is the opposite of free market economics.

If only Obama had asked for something in return.

Doug Bandow is a Senior Fellow at the Cato Institute.