

Trump Panders on Cuba, Preferring Cold War Over Progress

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Last week, President Donald Trump announced his outrage at Cuba's poor human rights record. On his recent Mideast trip the president did not even mention the issue in totalitarian Saudi Arabia. But of Cuba, he declared: "We will not be silent in the face of Communist oppression any longer." A cynic might observe that more Cuban-Americans than Saudi-Americans voted for him last November.

Cuba has been on Washington's "bad" list since Fidel Castro's revolutionaries took power in 1959. The island would have been of little geopolitical importance had Castro not turned to the Soviet Union for support in the Cold War. Washington feared a hostile base so near and targeted the regime.

Instead of disappearing into obscurity as his impoverished nation floundered, Castro gained international acclaim by posing as the heroic opponent of Yankee imperialism. His government relied on Soviet subsidies for sustenance, but survived, with difficulty, even after the USSR dissolved. Castro reluctantly adopted modest economic reforms to attract more foreign cash and spur more domestic enterprise.

Cuban Communism's record is dismal. When I visited (legally) a dozen years ago, I found crumbling infrastructure, homes which hadn't seen paint in decades, cars held together with wire and tape, and seemingly half the population touting cigars stolen from state factories. But the elite lived well: in fine homes behind high walls, with luxury cars in driveways, serving lobster and other fine foods to guests, and deploying guard dogs for security.

The U.S. economic embargo failed to overly disturb Castro & Co. Europeans invested in Cuba; I stayed at a Dutch hotel. Hard currency stores were full of foreign goods. Fidel Castro remained in charge, along with brother Raul and other aging revolutionaries. None of them had to produce a ration book to eat.

Dissidents complained that the regime covered up its economic failures by blaming the embargo. When I visited Elizardo Sanchez Santa Cruz, who had been imprisoned by Castro, he told me that the "sanctions policy gives the government a good alibi to justify the failure of the totalitarian model in Cuba."

In the face of this reality, American policy was brain dead, determined by a diminishing number of hardline Cuban-Americans who opposed any softening of sanctions. U.S. policy illustrated the definition of insanity: doing more of the same while expecting a different result. Younger Cuban-Americans, who spent their entire lives in the U.S. and had few, if any, memories of Cuba, increasingly questioned the embargo. However, rabid proponents of the half-century-old restrictions still delivered a sizeable vote in Florida, one of the nation's biggest pools of electoral votes.

President Barack Obama did little about the issue until shortly before leaving office. Then he established diplomatic relations with Havana and relaxed restrictions on travel and business, though he lacked legal authority to lift the embargo.

In his typical fact-free approach, President Trump last week criticized “the last administration’s completely one-sided deal with Cuba.” The U.S. had diplomatic relations with the Soviet Union, Eastern European nations, and assorted Third World dictatorships throughout the Cold War. An embassy is a communication channel, not a political endorsement.

Moreover, trade and investment benefit both sides economically. Commerce with freer societies also tends to destabilize authoritarian regimes, encouraging economic and political liberalization. Trade links and economic growth helped spur democratization in such nations as Mexico, South Korea, and Taiwan.

Of course, economic liberalization does not guarantee political transformation. The (Raúl) Castro regime is aware of the risks and intensified repression of political dissidents and religious believers. But communism’s appeal is dwindling.

Columbia University’s Christopher Sabatini argued that “The dam has broken. When I was in Cuba last year, the difference in people’s willingness to speak out, the growing prosperity of a new class of independent entrepreneurs and—as the Committee to Protect Journalists has also reported—the growth of new space for independent, investigative online journalism was undeniable.” Over time, state controls will further erode. Greater involvement by ethnic Cubans from Florida will increasingly challenge a regime that has failed to serve its people.

At least, such change seemed likely before the president proclaimed he was “canceling” Obama’s Cuban policy. President Trump announced limits on tourism and banned business with companies linked to the island’s military or intelligence services. The first restricts individual travel by normal folks. The second puts much of the Cuban economy off-limits for U.S. involvement.

Alas, returning to yesterday’s failed policies of isolation will not free the Cuban people. The Castro government worries most about regime preservation. The elite will not end repression to satisfy Washington, even if doing so might bring in a few more tourist dollars. But President Trump’s retreat will hurt the island’s growing private sector. When informed of the Trump administration’s plans, a waitress complained to the *Washington Post*: “We’re the ones who are going to lose.”

There will be fewer American tourists and the ones who still come will be pushed toward government-approved tours and guides, going where the Castro regime wants them to. There will be fewer U.S. enterprises and less contact between Americans and Cubans. Citizens in the “land of the free” will lack travel opportunities available to Europeans, South Americans, and most everyone else in the world. Trump’s policy will end up strengthening Castro’s communist dictatorship. The system will stagger on a few years longer, despite the embargo.

The presidential campaign is over. President Trump should do what is best for both the American and Cuban people, and end economic restrictions on the island. Freedom eventually will come to Cuba. Flooding the island with foreign people and money would make that day arrive sooner.

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