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The Cuban Embargo Has Failed

The U.S. should stop punishing the people of Cuba for their government's crimes.

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Six decades ago the Kennedy administration imposed an embargo on Cuba. A dozen American presidents have enforced the island's economic isolation, substantially tightening controls in recent years. For a time Washington even cited Havana as a state sponsor of terrorism. The U.S. campaign, observed Mauricio Vicent of *El Pais*, is "without doubt the longest punitive measure ever imposed on a country in modern history."

Washington's efforts were reinforced by the collapse of the Soviet Union, which ended outside subsidies for the island. Cuba's GDP shrank by more than a third during what was called the "Special Period." Venezuela's Hugo Chavez later stepped in, but Caracas's economic collapse ended its bountiful subsidies as well. Through it all U.S. policymakers, Florida Cuban expatriates, and vote-seeking Republican politicians collaborated to wage economic war on the island.

Now, finally, the communist government has fallen. Political prisoners have been released. Castro family and friends have fled. Elections have brought to power officials promising to dismantle the socialist economy. The incoming government even proposed expanding Guantanamo Bay for the U.S.

Only kidding!

Washington's policy has completely and utterly failed.

Fidel Castro has died and Raúl Castro has retired, but the communist government remains and includes several Castro family members. The jails are bulging after protests in July, with hundreds arrested and many simply disappeared without notice to their families. Trump administration sanctions, left in place by President Joe Biden, continue to cripple the private economy, which had been expanding and undermining government authority.

While it was expected to at least roll back the Trump administration's measures, which hurt private entrepreneurs in Cuba more than government apparatchiks, the Biden administration has done nothing. Some Democrats speculate that the administration is waiting for the midterm

elections to pass, or perhaps even for Biden's reelection, just as President Barack Obama held off until his second term to act. Of course, Biden may not get a second chance.

The embargo may be the most complete, longest, and most enduring policy failure in American history. In 1959 Fidel Castro led a revolution against a U.S.-backed strongman, Fulgencio Batista. Castro proved to be even more despotic and turned to the Soviet Union for support. Washington imposed an embargo, which has metastasized through subsequent regulations and laws. The embargo was proposed, the outgoing Eisenhower administration admitted, to impoverish the Cuban people. The State Department's Lester Mallory urged action that "while as adroit and inconspicuous as possible makes the greatest inroads in denying money and supplies to Cuba, to decrease monetary and real wages, to bring about hunger, desperation and overthrow of government."

Decades later, Fidel Castro is dead and brother Raúl is formally retired. The presidency and party leadership have devolved upon the colorless functionary Miguel Díaz-Canel, who retains the founders' willingness to suppress dissent and enforce obedience. Alas, the reality of Cuban communism does not reflect the rosy assessments of the happy lefty tourists who wander the island in search of a collectivist paradise.

Ever since Lincoln Steffens proclaimed of the Soviet Union, "I've seen the future, and it works," progressives have visited new dictatorships hoping to spy the long-awaited utopia. Fidel Castro eventually became an enduring revolutionary hero. Where better for lefty intellectuals to vacation than Cuba for a guided tour?

Even today, many on the left excuse the repression of Castro's regime. Cuban officials might occasionally make a mistake, they say, but most blame can be reliably placed upon the U.S. Last July Cuban demonstrators turned out shouting *libertad!* and were promptly dispatched in the usual communist fashion. Yet left-wing commentators were uncomfortable that the Cuban people desire what most people elsewhere desire: liberty.

Despite its remarkably good public relations, Cuba remains a dictatorship. Last year Freedom House rated Cuba toward the bottom of its global freedom rankings, deeming the country "not free" and giving it just 13 of 100 available points for its political and civil liberties. Explained Freedom House: "Cuba's one-party communist state outlaws political pluralism, bans independent media, suppresses dissent, and severely restricts basic civil liberties. The government continues to dominate the economy despite recent reforms that permit some private-sector activity. The regime's undemocratic character has not changed despite a generational transition in political leadership between 2018 and 2019 that included the introduction of a new constitution."

The latest report from Human Rights Watch covered last year's events, including the dramatic summer protests:

The Cuban government continues to repress and punish virtually all forms of dissent and public criticism. At the same time, Cubans continue to endure a dire economic crisis, which impacts their social and economic rights. ... The government employs arbitrary detention to harass and

intimidate critics, independent activists, political opponents, and others. Security officers rarely present arrest warrants to justify detaining critics. In some cases, detainees are released after receiving official warnings, which prosecutors may use in subsequent criminal trials to show a pattern of what they call “delinquent” behavior.

All this despite six decades of the U.S. generally increasing economic sanctions. Only President Barack Obama broke that pattern, rolling back some penalties and reestablishing full diplomatic relations. The Cuban people loved him for it. When I visited in 2017, cars still sported decals with Obama’s picture from his visit the previous year. The government underestimated his popularity. Foreign Minister Bruno Rodriguez complained about Obama’s “deep attack on our ideas, our history, our culture, and our symbols” and desire to use economic appeals to force political change.

However, President Donald Trump cared more about Cuban-American votes than Cuban lives and imposed additional sanctions, even adding a new twist, allowing U.S. lawsuits against foreign investors in Cuba. Human-rights activists long had criticized the embargo as counterproductive, used by the regime to excuse its failings and justify its crimes. Cuba’s small businesspeople and their employees, who invested or worked in tourist-friendly industries—restaurants, Airbnbs, and taxis—were even more critical. By discouraging U.S. visitors, Trump wrecked the nascent public sector, which at its height provided 40 percent of the island’s jobs.

Airbnb owner Julia de la Rosa complained to me that “So many people opened businesses for American tourists” who then were prohibited from coming. Workers had to return to unproductive state employment, strengthening the Castro regime’s control. In short, sanctions worked no better in Cuba than in Venezuela, Syria, Iran, North Korea, and Russia, whose governments refused to abandon their most important political objectives despite U.S. economic pressure.

Cubans expected Biden to return to the reform path. After all, he had pledged to “try to reverse the failed Trump policies that inflicted harm on Cubans.” Instead, after the July protests, he added new sanctions “to bolster the cause of the Cuban people.” And that was just a start, he warned: “There will be more, unless there’s some drastic change in Cuba, which I don’t anticipate.” Biden matched Trump in pious hypocrisy, announcing “we hear the cries of freedom coming from the island. We’re holding the regime accountable.”

Alas, the Díaz-Canel government did not fold. In fact, the invincibly ignorant Cuba hawks—most notably Marco Rubio, Ted Cruz, and Robert Menendez—did the communist regime a favor by discouraging contact with America. Collin Laverty of Cuba Educational Travel, which develops trips to conform with U.S. law (and organized my second visit), observed: “If you want to create more space for debate, expanding the entrepreneurial class is one way.” Indeed, after encouraging the development of private business in a desperate attempt to spur the economy, the regime came to fear the rapid increase in private sector firms and cracked down.

Some on the left agree. Antoni Kapcia, who has written sympathetically of the Cuban revolution, noted:

I've always argued that if an American president really wanted to destabilize the Cuban system, they would get rid of the embargo, or promise to get rid of the embargo. To some extent, this is what Barack Obama did, at least in the sense of saying the established policy had failed and slightly easing some restrictions, although he certainly didn't lift the embargo altogether. But most of the US presidents have done precisely the opposite, and tightened it, or at least continued the involvement. That gives the system and the leadership an alibi in Cuba. But it also plays into nationalism.

John F. Kennedy might be excused for not knowing any better when he embargoed the new revolutionary state. Joe Biden has no such excuse. Cuba's continuing oppression of its people is a tragedy. However, after six decades of futile economic warfare, the U.S. should stop punishing the Cuban people for the sins of their government. Biden should live up to his campaign promise to empower "the Cuban people to freely determine their own outcome, their own future."

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