

## Why the United States should end its embargo on Cuba

By Bill Lewis April 17, 2013

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For over 50 years the United States has held firm on its embargo against Cuba, even as the world condemned it for doing so. It is now time that the United States accept that the embargo has failed and move on.

When Fidel Castro came to power in 1959 and installed an authoritarian communist regime aligned with the Soviet Union, the United States began applying diplomatic and economic pressure to the small island nation 90 miles off of the Florida coast. After the Cuban Missile Crisis President John F. Kennedy took the pressure a step further by imposing a full trade embargo and urging US allies to do the same. At the time, the embargo seemed the logical thing to do in order to pressure Castro to make political reforms and to stop what many saw as an inevitable spread of communism during the height of the Cold War. Over 50 years later, however, many have begun to question the efficacy of the embargo and believe the time has come to end it.

Before going over the many reasons why the United States should end the embargo on Cuba it is important to understand the goal of the embargo – both past and present. The Council on Foreign Relations notes that the embargo was initially placed on Cuba in an attempt to pressure Havana into making democratic reforms and aligning itself with the United States, as opposed to the Soviet Union which it had allied with. In the aftermath of the Cuban Missile Crisis fears of Cuba being used as a forward base for the Soviet Union to threaten the United States and to spread communism in the region seemed to be fully realized – with some validity – and it seemed prudent for the United States and its allies to squash any possible threat that Cuba might represent. Since the fall of the Soviet Union, the reason given for the continuation of the embargo has been twofold according to the Washington Times; a continued desire to put pressure on Havana to make democratic reforms and end human rights violations, and Cuba's continued status as a supporter of terror organizations. Let us then review each of these in order to determine if the embargo has been effective and if its continuation is justified.

The first reason given for the continued embargo on Cuba is that it is the only way for the United States to put pressure on Havana to end human rights violations and make democratic reforms. Proponents further state that we have a moral responsibility to show our support for Cuban citizens through the embargo. While this seems to make sense on face value this argument falls apart under close scrutiny. To begin with, the embargo is not supported or enforced by the majority of the world. In fact, according to Brett Wilkins of the Digital Journal, "Israel and the tiny Pacific island nation of Palau (population 20,000)" were the only other nations to have voted against a resolution in the UN calling for an end to the embargo in 2012 (the 21st such annual resolution). This simple fact alone means that whatever effect we might hope the embargo would have toward pressuring Havana disappears. Cuba's largest industry – tourism – is booming due to European and Canadian travelers who flock to the islands many beaches. Additionally, trade with countries like Venezuela ensure a steady supply of oil and the European Union has begun working on closer trade ties with Cuba. Even U.S. companies find it easy to circumvent the embargo by

routing the trades through foreign branches. It cannot be denied, however, that Cuba's economy has been affected by the embargo – even if not to the point that we would hope. In fact, Havana reports that they have lost more than a trillion dollars since the implementation of the embargo. The issue is, however, that even if the embargo had been fully enforced and crippling to the Cuban economy it would likely have failed because trade sanctions and embargoes are notoriously ineffectual at causing reform.

The sad reality is that the first people to be hurt by any embargo are the innocent civilians; the very people who we are purportedly trying to help by forcing reforms. When a country such as Cuba begins to feel the effect of an embargo they do not cut amenities for the leader or military readiness – though Cuba did cut its military slightly when the embargoes were first put in place it was never truly a military threat and it's military was never a concern; a look at nations like North Korea whose military is at the core of concerns is an indicator of the effect of sanctions on a country's military. Instead they slash programs that improve the lives of their citizens. Worse, they then blame the United States for causing all of their economic woes; thus relieving them of the need to show action toward improving the situation. Therefore, rather than weakening Castro's government through the sanctions as we had hoped, we in fact strengthen it by allowing it to use the United States as a scapegoat. It is for this reason that human rights groups have actually called for an end to the embargo pointing to the hardship it causes the Cuban people without any real effect on the control the government has over them.

As for the moral responsibility that we have to stand with the citizens of Cuba against an oppressive regime; to put it simply, what a bunch of hogwash. If we really want to stand with the citizens of Cuba, then rather than imposing an embargo that has hurt the people while strengthening the government we should take the same stance we did with the Marshall Plan which was used in post World War II Europe. Faced with the same potential problem – the potential spread of communism – we poured millions of dollars of aid and trade into European nations to help them rebuild and get their economies strong again. We used the same tactic in South Korea and several other countries since; and it has continued to work gloriously. While the issue has changed since the fall of the USSR the solution remains the same. By allowing trade with Cuba and ensuring that the people gain access to the many great things that capitalism and democracy allow we give the best chance that the people will call for reforms. It won't happen overnight and it won't be easy; however, it will surely be more effective than an embargo that has been in place for over 50 years with no success whatsoever. Furthermore, given that Raul Castro has already begun making some reforms – albeit small ones – the time seems ripe for the US to make a move.

The final argument given for continuing the embargo is the fact that Cuba remains on the United State's list as a state sponsor of terrorist organizations for their supposed support of groups like FARC and the ELN. There are, however, a few issues with this line of thought. First of all, as the Council on Foreign Relations indicates many experts state that there is no proof that Cuba has supported these organizations. Second, while the United States labels these organizations terrorist groups others call them freedom fighters and would point out that the government they are fighting against – Columbia – is incredibly corrupt and has been accused of supporting drug cartels. In the end, however, both of these points are moot because of the third; which happens to be the same argument made above. If in fact Cuba is supporting these groups, and if in fact these groups are terrorist organizations our embargo against Cuba does nothing to stop them from supporting these groups and in fact may even prevent reforms that would lead to them ending any support currently given.

There are two more important reasons that we should end the embargo against Cuba. First, as I mentioned earlier in this article the United States stands alone – outside of the support of Israel and Palau – in enforcing this embargo; but more importantly we stand alone in seeing any justification for it. When we first began the embargo many nations stood with us because of the Cold War and the threat from the Soviet Union, however, since the fall of the USSR it has become a black eye for the United States. Rather than looking like a nation protecting its national interest – as is the right of any nation – the United States looks like a larger nation bullying a smaller neighbor because it doesn't like their politics and the US has in fact been condemned by the UN for doing so. While this has yet to cause us any serious issues it does detract from the United States' international image which is an important part of any diplomatic effort they undertake.

Second, is the extreme cost of continuing the embargo. According to the CATO Institute the, “U.S. International Trade Commission estimates American losses alone from the embargo [are] as much as \$1.2 billion annually.” Further, Forbes reports that “according to the Government Accountability Office, the U.S. government devotes hundreds of millions of dollars and tens of thousands of man-hours to administering the embargo each year” further increasing the cost. That's a lot of money to be throwing at a policy that isn't actually working.

No one will argue that reforms don't need to take place in Cuba, however, the method we are choosing to use is not only ineffectual but actually hurts those we are trying to help. It is high time that we recognize the embargo for what it is – failed policy – and move on.