



## Lifting embargo helps Cuban people

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We had been sitting in the dingy station for several hours, waiting to catch the bus that would take us on a nine-hour journey from our town in central Cuba to Havana. It was the spring of 2006, and Fidel Castro was still fully in charge of the island. Over the past few days we had grown used to seeing billboards and posters displaying anti-American propaganda around town and in the countryside. As much out of boredom as curiosity, a member of our American entourage snapped a picture of one of the propaganda posters in the bus station. Then all hell broke loose.

People whom I had assumed were fellow passengers waiting for the Havana bus suddenly charged at us and demanded to see our papers. They took us into a room, seized our passports and return tickets to Miami (which we were required to have in our passports at all times), and then disappeared. Although our time alone in that room lasted for maybe only 20 or 30 minutes, it felt like hours. What would happen to us? Were we about to be arrested for the “crime” of photographing a poster?

Then one of the security agents came back, handed us our papers, and told us to get on the bus. The incident was over. No apology. No explanation. We didn’t say a word to each other until we were on the bus and driving down the road. Then, shaken and breathing collective sighs of relief, we discussed what had just happened. They were toying with us, showing us Americans who was in charge. I’m sure those security agents had a good laugh after we had left.

I’ve traveled to many countries, including some that are non-democracies. But that day in Cuba, for the first (and I hope only) time, I experienced the arbitrary power of a police state. Of course it was only for a few minutes. Alan Gross, just released after spending five years in a Cuban prison for the “crime” of trying to help the centuries-old Cuban Jewish community, experienced the real police state.

Despite this one incident, my six days in Cuba were actually one of the most wonderful and inspiring experiences of my life. Representing Marian University on a trip with people from Indianapolis and national Catholic organizations, I spent most of the time with local priests and Catholic charities, engaging with ordinary Cubans. Cuba is not just rich in natural resources and

beauty, but has abundant, untapped human capital. Every Cuban I met—except for those in the bus station—was eager to speak with an American, and many told us of their relatives in the United States. Cuba is a reminder that, when it comes to non-democratic regimes that are hostile to the United States, we always need to distinguish between the governments and the people.

The 50-year-old U.S. embargo of Cuba has been a political gift to the Castro regime, at a terrible human and economic cost to ordinary Cubans. As the passionate debate begins over President Obama's groundbreaking policy shift toward Cuba, the utter failure of the American boycott cannot be overstated. As one Cuban priest put it to me in 2006, "Fidel blames everything on the embargo, even the cyclones." Economic sanctions work to the extent that they are multilateral: the more countries that buy into the policy, the more effective it is. Witness the severe economic impact of sanctions on Iran and Russia today. The Cuban embargo, however, is strictly an American deal. Other countries ignore it. I saw many Canadian and European tourists enjoying the sites of Havana.

Will Cuba make a democratic transition anytime soon? Probably not. But Cuban president Raul Castro has demonstrated that, as a leader, he is not his brother Fidel. By all accounts, the Cuba of 2014 is an improvement from what I saw in 2006.

Lifting the five-decade embargo, which has isolated the Cuban people from a free exchange of American goods and American ideas, can only be a good thing. The CATO Institute economist Johan Norberg puts it best: "free trade brings freedom."