



Cuba Shift Sets Table for 2016 Foreign Policy Debate

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The Obama administration's move to end a 54-year diplomatic standstill and reopen relations with Cuba has created one of the first significant foreign policy flashpoints of the 2016 presidential campaign.

Though foreign affairs only rarely plays a decisive role in determining the outcome of races for president, the manner in which candidates respond to unpredictable events on the world stage can have a sizable impact on the campaign.

Mitt Romney was the latest contender to suffer blowback during a general election campaign when his initial [response](#) to the Benghazi attack in September 2012 was widely [criticized](#) as politicizing a national security tragedy.

Despite the potential pitfalls of weighing in before all information has been processed, most of the likely 2016 contenders were eager to comment on the news regarding Cuba last week.

Here are four lessons that their responses taught us about the impending presidential race, which will kick off in earnest early next year.

1. If Marco Rubio Runs, He'll Be the GOP's Most Vocal Foreign Policy Hawk

Cuba has always been personal for the Florida lawmaker.

His parents emigrated from that country in the 1950s, and the first-term Republican senator has used his position on the Foreign Relations Committee to argue against any loosening of the half-century-long embargo against the communist regime.

But within an hour of the news breaking on Wednesday that Cuba had released American prisoner Alan Gross, Rubio positioned himself as the face of Republican-led opposition to the Obama administration's new policy on Cuba, seeking to amplify his hard-line stance at every turn.

Rubio appeared on almost every major news network to decry the move, held his own press conference on Capitol Hill and generally sought to raise the rhetorical ante any way he could. He used the strongest possible terms to condemn the decision, accusing Obama of "coddling dictators and tyrants" and of [letting](#) "the people of Cuba down."

Asked about [polls](#) that show a majority of Cuban-Americans now favor normalization of relations, Rubio issued perhaps his most memorable line of the media blitz.

"I don't care if 99 percent of people in polls disagree with my position," he [said](#). "This is my position and I feel passionately about it."

Indeed, few could doubt that Rubio's vehement opposition to the policy shift was born out of deep-seated conviction rather than political posturing.

But as he continues to [weigh](#) a complicated decision over whether to run for president in 2016, Rubio's unequivocal and forceful stance on the issue highlighted the hawkish foreign policy views that have helped to define his image in Washington.

In doing so, he also managed to turn heads among members of the Republican foreign policy establishment, whose advice is being solicited by the party's 2016 hopefuls.

Lanhee Chen, who was the 2012 Romney campaign's policy director, has had his advice solicited in private meetings this year with Texas Gov. Rick Perry, New Jersey Gov. Chris Christie and Kentucky Sen. Rand Paul.

But Rubio's response to the news on Cuba made a particular impression on Chen.

"I looked at Marco's press conference and his statement, and I thought it was incredibly strong -- I was really impressed," Chen said. "There was some potential for it not to go well -- to look like he was being politically opportunistic or that it was too emotional, but I thought he struck just the right balance."

2. Rand Paul Will Stand Alone on Republican Debate Stage

Rubio was far from the only GOP hopeful to denounce the move to normalize relations with Cuba. Soon after the news broke on Wednesday, Texas Sen. Ted Cruz -- a fellow Cuban-American -- [condemned](#) the decision as a "tragic mistake."

Former Pennsylvania Sen. Rick Santorum said that the policy shift "sends the wrong message at the wrong time," and former Arkansas Gov. Mike Huckabee asked, "Why is our president

negotiating with a dictator? What's next -- will he want to sit down and have tea with Kim Jung Un in North Korea?"

It wasn't until Thursday that Rand Paul finally weighed in on the matter -- not in a press release or national media appearance but in an interview with a West Virginia radio station.

In a massive departure from his fellow members of the likely GOP field, Paul said that opening up the relationship with Cuba is "probably a good idea."

"The 50-year embargo just hasn't worked," he [said](#), according to the AP. "If the goal is regime change, it sure doesn't seem to be working, and probably it punishes the people more than the regime because the regime can blame the embargo for hardship."

Rubio was quick to decry his Senate colleague, saying during an [appearance](#) on The Fox News Channel that Paul "has no idea what he's talking about."

In turn, Paul [took](#) to Facebook and Twitter to challenge Rubio over the issue.

Paul's stance on Cuba was not a surprise, as it is in keeping with his noninterventionist stance on foreign policy.

His comments, however, were a stark reminder of the vast gulf between the first-term Kentuckian's worldview and that of every other Republican candidate with whom he is likely to share debate stages next year.

Though he has modulated some of the strict libertarian positions that his father, Ron Paul, took during his own presidential runs, Paul's decision to hold the line on Cuba reflects a calculation that a new wave of voters holds foreign policy views more in keeping with his own than those of the party's other potential standard-bearers.

"There is a generational gap on this," the Cato Institute's Christopher Preble told RCP. "And for Rand Paul to make this an issue, it's already likely to be popular among younger voters and those inclined to support him, but it might also attract younger voters who hadn't previously taken a closer look at his candidacy."

3. Jeb Bush Is Still Shaking Off the Rust

The other Florida Republican who is considering a presidential run, Jeb Bush, was more [restrained](#) in his initial reaction to the changes than was Rubio.

With the news out of Cuba coming just a day after he announced that he would "actively explore" a White House bid, Bush on Wednesday morning first told a local reporter that he was "delighted" by the news of Gross's release.

He then [told](#) Miami Herald reporter Marc Caputo that he disagreed with the administration's decision to negotiate with Cuba before the Castro regime changed its internal policies.

Next, in a Facebook post later in the day, Bush characterized the move as “ill-advised” and “another dramatic overreach” of the president’s executive authority.

“Cuba is a dictatorship with a disastrous human rights record, and now President Obama has rewarded those dictators,” Bush wrote.

On Wednesday night, BuzzFeed drew attention to the fact that Barclays -- the multinational bank for which Bush had been an adviser -- agreed in 2010 to a fine of almost \$300 million for violating the embargo on Cuba.

The Financial Times reported on Thursday that Bush was planning to [leave](#) his position at Barclays at the end of the year, but Democrats gleefully [accused](#) Bush of hypocrisy on the matter.

In sum, the potential candidate appeared to be caught off guard on the Cuba decision -- particularly in comparison to the aggressive response that Rubio, his political protégé, had issued.

Bush may be the son and the brother of former presidents with decades of experience in the halls of political power, but his foreign policy experience as a former governor is relatively minimal, and he has been out of office for eight years.

4. Hillary Clinton Has Added Another Bullet Point to Her Political Resume

As she has geared up for her widely expected presidential run, one of the key questions that has followed Hillary Clinton has been how she will deal with her direct ties to President Obama and his legacy.

The former secretary of state faces potential pitfalls over a host of issues from her tenure, including the Benghazi attacks and the administration’s overtures toward Russia, which Republicans have characterized as manifestly naïve.

But on Cuba, she may have new grounds for claiming a record of success.

According to a Bloomberg [report](#), Clinton led the behind-the-scenes efforts during her tenure in Foggy Bottom that ultimately resulted in Wednesday’s announcement. It is a concrete accomplishment that the Democratic frontrunner-in-waiting could point to in rebutting Republican assertion that her long record of public service lacks substantive triumphs.

Meanwhile, Democratic strategist Bob Shrum predicted that the Republican candidates will come to regret trying to outflank one another on the right in regard to Cuba.

“I just think this is a deadweight loser for the GOP,” Shrum said. “It doesn’t get them Florida anymore where -- even among Cuban-Americans -- this is worse than a 50-50 proposition. All that these guys are doing -- Cruz, Rubio and Bush -- is appealing to the base, as they prepare for a presidential primary.”

Shrum suggested that a similar principle applies to Republican eagerness to criticize the Obama administration's moves toward reconciliation with Iran over its nuclear weapons program, predicting that the American public will have no appetite for rhetoric that might harken a new international conflict.

But then there is the senator from Kentucky, whom Shrum said might be the GOP candidate best able to execute the [strategy](#) that Jeb Bush recently laid out for his own potential 2016 bid.

"Rand Paul is the wild card," Shrum said. "He may actually be the guy who's willing to risk losing the primary to win the general."