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The Cuba sanctions: Farewell to a Cold War relic

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Obama's lifting of Cuba sanctions strikes a blow against mindless foreign policy
Cuban embargo fans like Marco Rubio can't explain why it makes sense to preserve a failed policy

There may be some elderly Cubans in Havana who long ago gave up hope that the U.S. embargo against their country would ever end. On these shores, however, the 50-year policy of isolating Cuba has seemed so useless for so long that many people assumed it would just wither away, sooner or later.

It does not serve America's interests, or the Cuban people, to try to push Cuba toward collapse. - President Obama, announcing liberalization of sanctions against Cuba

The law prevents that from happening formally. But reports from recent visitors to Cuba imply that the embargo has been sprouting loopholes for years. Friends of mine who visited recently said that almost everywhere they traveled, they ran into Cubans who had little trouble doing business with, and in, America. After the U.S. liberalized trade of agricultural products in 2001, U.S. food exports to Cuba soared, [peaking at \\$710 million](#) in 2008. They've since declined, in part because of competition from other countries.

That may be why much of the reporting on [President Obama's actions Wednesday](#) treated them even more as a symbolic milestone than a substantive change in relations -- though of course they're that, too.

Obama vastly expanded opportunities for Americans to travel to Cuba -- there's hardly anyone wishing to go who can't fit into one of the 12 authorized categories, under which formalities will be eased. Practical limits to remittances to Cubans from the U.S. will be eliminated. Permitted exports from the U.S. will be significantly broadened, including telecommunications technology for the first time. American visitors will be allowed to bring back up to \$400 in goods, including \$100 in tobacco (Cuban cigars!).

Discussions will begin with the regime of Raul Castro to upgrade diplomatic relations to the ambassadorial level.

Obama went about as far as he could without congressional action, but his orders render the residual restrictions on trade with Cuba hopelessly ludicrous. Make that *more* ludicrous.

It has long been obvious that U.S. sanctions aimed at isolating Cuba, first imposed by President Eisenhower soon after revolutionaries deposed the detested Batista regime in 1959, have done little except to isolate the United States. Europe and Canada have been trading with Cuba almost from the start.

By contrast, America's policy toward Cuba has done little but make us look silly and create conspicuous fiascos: Bay of Pigs, anybody? America's determination to isolate Cuba only pushed it deeper into the Soviet Union's embrace; the Cuban missile crisis arguably was a result. For Cuba to be an outlier among communist states and those with poor human rights records in lacking an adult relationship with the U.S. makes no sense, except as an expression of U.S. domestic politics.

The fact that Obama's policy is described as a move toward "normalization" tells the story: current policy is abnormal.

Opposition to liberalized relations with Cuba sounded petulant and anachronistic Wednesday, although that may have been the result of leaving the pro-sanctions argument in [the hands of Sen. Marco Rubio \(R-Fla.\)](#)

"[The embargo is leverage](#), these sanctions are leverage," Rubio said on CNN. "It is a lifeline for the Castro regime that will allow them to become more profitable ... and allow them to become a more permanent fixture." Rubio, a member of the Senate Foreign Relations Committee, pledged to oppose funding for a full-scale Havana embassy or other initiatives.

Well. If the sanctions couldn't dislodge the Castro brothers after 50 years, maybe it's time to try something else. Rubio also noted on CNN that liberalized relations hadn't succeeded in overthrowing communist regimes in China and Vietnam, so obviously there's no reason to reconsider. "It does not serve America's interests, or the Cuban people, to try to push Cuba toward collapse," Obama said. Especially if it isn't happening.

Rubio is carrying the standard of a shrinking and aging population of staunch anti-Castro Cubans still dominating certain corners of Florida politics. They're also pulling the strings of former Florida Gov. Jeb Bush, who moved toward the presidential nominating arena this week. "Instead of lifting the embargo, we should consider strengthening it again to put pressure on the Cuba regime," Bush told the U.S.-Cuba Democracy PAC this month, CNN reported.

Should this vocal cadre continue to dictate American foreign and economic policy? Opposition to the liberalization is bipartisan, but support for it is, too.

Some conservatives have been calling for it for years: "The embargo has been a failure by every measure," Daniel Griswold of the Cato Institute wrote in 2009. "It has not changed the course or nature of the Cuban government. It has not liberated a single Cuban citizen. In fact, the embargo has made the Cuban people a bit more impoverished, without making them one bit more free. At

the same time, it has deprived Americans of their freedom to travel and has cost U.S. farmers and other producers billions of dollars of potential exports."

That's a neat way of tying the benefits of normalization for Cuban and American citizens into one package, but Griswold saw the embargo as Obama did: as an obstruction to real change in Cuba.