



With Cuba power play, Obama puts Republicans on notice

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December 18, 2014

President Obama's unilateral move to re-establish diplomatic relations with Cuba put to rest the notion that he was entering a new conciliatory phase with Republicans, particularly on foreign affairs.

With the 2014 congressional session formally ending, Obama sent perhaps his clearest signal yet on how he plans to operate during his final two years in office, flexing his executive authority by undoing policies on the books for a half-century.

It's an approach that Obama is taking with increasing regularity on foreign matters, as he pursues a nuclear deal with Iran in the face of criticisms that his White House is making concessions to oppressive leaders purely to bolster his legacy.

Amid all the talk in Washington about a lame-duck Obama moving to the center, fueled by his stance during the government-funding fight, the Cuba announcement reminded Republicans that the president isn't much bothered by their objections.

"There's the Obama we all know," quipped a House GOP leadership aide, as the president announced the landmark Cuba deal from the White House. "It's back to the 'We're going to do this because I'm right' school of governing. Nobody should be shocked by this anymore."

Obama has long flirted with the idea of pursuing talks with the Castro regime. And with the release of American prisoner Alan Gross, White House advisers said the president finally had cleared the last hurdle to moving forward with action certain to anger Republicans — and even some Democrats.

Though the president can't lift the economic embargo on his own, he's effectively made it easier for Americans to travel to Cuba, bring Cuban goods back to the United States and conduct business transactions in the island nation.

The president has already shown a willingness to use prisoner exchanges to further his policy goals, having traded Taliban detainees for Sgt. Bowe Bergdahl, which at least moved him one step closer to closing the detention facility in Guantanamo Bay, Cuba.

Politically, Obama doesn't have to worry about a looming election or how his move might play in battleground Florida, where many Cuban-Americans are furious over the shift in policy.

Both critics and supporters alike agree that Obama's blueprint for Cuba would serve as one of the defining acts of his time in office.

And the president had little hesitance framing his action in historical terms.

"Neither the American, nor Cuban, people are well-served by a rigid policy that is rooted in events that took place before most of us were born," he argued. "I do not believe we can keep doing the same thing for over five decades and expect a different result."

Similar to their rationale for Obama's executive action on immigration, White House officials say the Cuba debate is more about the process of enacting policy than the actual reforms. Obama's aides almost dared a future president to undo his sweeping action on Cuba.

"It's hard to imagine that anyone is going to campaign for this office by saying, 'You know that policy that we had in place for more than five decades and didn't do anything?'" said White House press secretary Josh Earnest. "We should go back to doing that."

And the White House has calculated that a split in the GOP ranks on the issue bolsters Obama's case.

As certain Republicans have called for blocking the funding for an embassy in Havana and the nomination of a future U.S. ambassador there, some conservatives say those efforts are misguided.

"The president's move should be uncontroversial," said Juan Carlos Hidalgo, policy analyst on Latin America at the Cato Institute's Center for Global Liberty and Prosperity. "U.S. policy toward Cuba has been a blatant failure. It has not brought about democracy to the island and instead provided Havana with an excuse to portray itself as the victim of U.S. aggression."