

Commentary – Forbes Online

Changing Course On Cuba

William A. Reinsch and Jake Colvin 08.10.06

Days before Cuban President Fidel Castro announced that he was temporarily ceding power, U.S. policymakers presented a report to Congress that recommended providing assistance to Cuba only when requested by a democratic transition government. The message, it seems, is that the United States will continue to isolate Cuba now and for the foreseeable future.

The problem with this strategy is that withholding engagement until a genuinely democratic government emerges in Cuba is the surest way to minimize the influence of our ideas, values and access in a post-Castro Cuba. Congress and the president should not be content to adopt a wait-and-see attitude as historic changes unfold.

This moment presents an extraordinary opportunity for the United States to reconsider its policies toward Cuba and allow for increased exchanges, humanitarian aid and commerce. If the Cuban people are to believe that they have no better friend than the United States, and if we are to hold any hope of spreading our values and ideas later, then we must begin to engage now.

Sanctions hinder the ability of American citizens to promote U.S. values. Since President George W. Bush took office, the U.S. government has dramatically curtailed approved legal travel and divided families by restricting travel and remittances by Cuban Americans. Without regular contact with the Cuban people, we have little hope of promoting our values and way of life.

U.S. sanctions also disadvantage American businesses and agriculture producers in a nearby and natural market for U.S. goods and services. Since Congress legalized U.S. exports of food and medicine to Cuba in 2000, trade with Cuba has grown from virtually nothing to approximately \$380 million in 2004. However, sanctions prevent American companies from taking advantage of broader trade opportunities, while those firms that can export to Cuba face certain limitations on financing and travel.

The security implications of our policy toward Cuba are also troubling. As Cuba continues to develop its energy sector and allows nations like China and Venezuela increasingly broad access to its economy and natural resources, we should consider the implications for our own security and economic well-being.

It will take time and effort to sort through the layers of regulations and legislation that have accumulated over the more than four decades since Castro came to power. Congress, the president and the private sector should take steps immediately to revisit these restrictions and promote increased contact with Cuba.

First, and perhaps most importantly, Congress should act quickly to roll back the elements of the embargo that inhibit assistance to Cuba, beginning with the immediate repeal of the 1996 Helms-Burton law. Removing the law from the books would restore flexibility to the president and allow him to respond to changing circumstances in Cuba. Revoking the law would have the added benefit of removing an ongoing irritant in our trade relations with Canada, Mexico and Europe.

Second, the president should take steps to rescind the harsh restrictions on travel and remittances that were instituted in 2004, which further limited travel by students, private citizens and Cuban Americans. Even better, the administration ought to consider revoking the entire travel ban to allow regular contact between Americans and Cubans.

Finally, the U.S. private sector and nongovernmental organizations have an important role to play. From church groups to humanitarian organizations to private businesses and trade associations like ours, it is important to make clear to our elected officials our desire for a change in U.S. policy. We must also stand ready to engage our counterparts and constituencies in Cuba when these changes come.

Engagement would demonstrate a spirit of friendship with the Cuban people and begin to reestablish ties and influence to a society with which we have had regrettably little contact, despite its proximity to the United States.

These are also no small tasks, which is why it is necessary to start changing direction now. Until U.S. policy changes, American businesses, educators, religious groups and humanitarian organizations will remain on the sidelines as a new era dawns.

We do not have to know what is coming next in Cuba to recognize that we need to chart a new course in the United States. The time to act is now.

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