



CHANGE IN OUR INTEREST

TRAVEL, TRADE AND
IMPROVED RELATIONS
WITH **CUBA**



Dear Colleague:

As you begin the important work of the 111th Congress, we write to provide you with information about U.S.-Cuba policy and to offer our resources and our best advice as Congress debates the policy and considers legislation in the year ahead.

U.S.-Cuba relations have been at a standstill for many years, but momentum for change is developing.

President Obama has pledged to remove travel restrictions on Cuban-Americans, and Secretary of State Clinton told the Senate Foreign Relations Committee during her nomination hearing that the Obama Administration will conduct a review of Cuba policy.

Important groups that cut across the political spectrum -- including Cuban-Americans, the U.S. business community, leading religious denominations, advocates for human rights, foreign policy specialists and others -- all support significant changes in the policy.


Public opinion research conducted in 2008 has also documented a growing majority for changing U.S. policy toward Cuba in the Cuban-American community itself. According to a pre-election poll conducted by Florida International University, the majority of Cuban Americans support unrestricted travel and direct bilateral talks between the two countries.

Internationally, pressures to change our Cuba policy are growing. In this hemisphere, all of Latin America's elected leaders, most notably Brazil's president Luiz Inácio "Lula" da Silva and Mexico's president Felipe Calderon, have urged the United States to change its Cuba policy.

In Cuba itself, processes of change are underway. Fidel Castro is ailing. His successor and Cuba's current president, Raul Castro, has begun some modest economic reforms, and has called for direct negotiations with the Obama administration. These steps are small, but they are taking place in the context of a growing desire on the part of Cubans (on the island and abroad) for greater economic opportunities and political openings.

The information included in this packet shows how existing restrictions on travel and trade harm the national interests of the United States, and why reforming this policy is consistent with our values, our economic interests and efforts to improve the U.S. image abroad.

We believe that in order for the United States to play a constructive role as Cubans determine their future, we need to engage with the people of Cuba and the Cuban government, in a variety of ways. These might include bilateral talks on issues of mutual concern, action to permit closer ties between Cuban Americans and their families on the island, unfettered



agricultural trade, expanded academic exchange, greater contact between faith communities, and unrestricted travel for all Americans.

We hope the material included here will be useful to you, and we are available as a resource to you for any questions or concerns.

For efforts in the House of Representatives, please contact Eric L. Olson with the Lexington Institute, (202) 468-7234.

Sincerely,

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 - United States Conference of Catholic Bishops
 - NAFSA: Association of International Educators and additional academic/policy organizations
8. “A new era for Cuba” Philip Peters, op-ed in *Pittsburgh Post-Gazette*, January 1 2009
9. “Cuba Embargo Slips as South Florida’s top priority,” Jake Colvin, op-ed in *Washington Times*, November 3, 2008




U.S. – CUBA POLICY IN THE 111th CONGRESS

- **H.R. 874, ending the ban on travel to Cuba, has been introduced in the House by Congressmen Delahunt and Flake.**
- **S. 428, ending the ban on travel to Cuba, has been introduced in the Senate by Senators Dorgan, Dodd, Enzi and Lugar.**

The Cuba travel ban: a background

- Most U.S. citizens are legally prohibited from traveling to Cuba. Restrictions on travel by Americans to Cuba are based on legislation granting the President statutory authority to regulate spending by persons subject to U.S. jurisdiction in a foreign country during a national emergency or time of war. **Cuba is the only country in the world to which the United States government bans travel by its citizens.**
- For decades, the ban on legal travel by Americans to Cuba was imposed through Executive Orders and regulations, rather than by statute. Presidents have exercised their authority in different ways:
 - In 1977, President Carter chose to eliminate all travel restrictions for all Americans.
 - In 1982, President Reagan re-imposed the ban.
 - In the 1990s, President Clinton did not lift the travel ban, but permitted licensed people-to-people contacts with Cuba, and encouraged travel by academics, agriculture organizations, businesses, journalists, religious groups, athletes and performers, and Cuban Americans, among others.
- In 2000, when Congress passed legislation permitting the sale of agricultural goods to Cuba, embargo proponents attached legislative restrictions on U.S travel to Cuba. All tourist travel was prohibited, and the President's authority to allow certain categories of non-tourist travel was limited.
- Today, the President can loosen or tighten travel rules for twelve specific categories of travelers (such as researchers, religious workers, government officials, etc.). But it would take an Act of Congress to restore full travel rights to all Americans.
- In its first term, the Bush administration issued guidelines and regulations restricting or eliminating travel under many of the twelve categories. For example, travel by academic institutions, non-profit research institutions and national religious organizations were severely restricted. In 2004, the Administration put new, more onerous restrictions on Cuban Americans, limiting their right to travel to Cuba to once every three years and narrowing the categories of family members whom they may visit.

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- Under the current rules, there is very little travel between Cuba and the United States. Most individuals who qualify under one of the twelve categories must apply for an individual travel license, a lengthy and uncertain bureaucratic application process through the Treasury Department's Office of Foreign Assets Control.
 - Legislation to end the ban on travel to Cuba has been offered in both the House and the Senate in each of the last several Congresses. Efforts to cut off funding for enforcement of the travel ban were approved in the House in 2001, 2002, and 2003, and in the Senate in 2003, but were stripped in conference committee. In 2003, the Senate Foreign Relations Committee marked up and passed S.950, the Freedom to Travel to Cuba Act, but it did not receive consideration on the Senate floor.
 - President Obama has pledged to end restrictions on travel by Cuban-Americans, and has left the door open for further changes in the policy.

Prepared by the Center for Democracy in the Americas, www.democracyinamericas.org, the Latin America Working Group, www.lawg.org, the Lexington Institute, www.lexingtoninstitute.org, the New America Foundation, www.newamerica.net, and Washington Office on Latin America www.wola.org



WHY IT SERVES AMERICAN INTERESTS TO LIFT THE BAN ON AMERICAN TRAVEL TO CUBA

1. The travel ban unilaterally disarms the United States, casting aside one of the greatest sources of American influence – unfettered contact with American society. The American approach toward the Soviet Union and Eastern Europe, enshrined in the Helsinki accords and supported by Administrations of both parties, was to encourage unrestricted travel so that we could share our ideas, values and culture.

- Dissidents and former political prisoners in Cuba recognize this fact and have repeatedly urged the United States to lift restrictions on Americans' travel to Cuba, and especially for an end to restrictions on family travel:

"Lifting the embargo won't solve the problems of the Cuban people. Maintaining it, is no solution, either." - *Oswaldo Payá, Cuban dissident and leader of the Christian Liberation Movement, Miami Herald, August 2000.*

"In these circumstances, the mechanisms established by the U.S. authorities, aimed at isolating Cuban society from contact with its citizens, and even with Cuban-Americans, are counterproductive and incomprehensible. In fact, it is aligned with the policy always promoted by the Cuban Government, of keeping the people on the Island isolated from any outside contact. The only sensible thing that could help the Cuban people is what was done in Eastern Europe and later in China and Viet Nam, where the ties between the peoples were fostered and continue to be fostered, with unquestionable success." - *Oscar Espinosa Chepe, Cuban dissident, El País newspaper, July 2007.*

2. A majority of Americans and Cuban Americans support unrestricted travel to Cuba for all.

- Polls show that a majority of U.S. citizens support travel to Cuba. According to a Zogby/Inter-American Dialogue poll released in October of 2008, **68% of likely voters believe all U.S. citizens should be allowed to travel to Cuba.** The same poll found that 62% of likely voters believe U.S. companies should be allowed to trade with Cuba.
- A FOX News poll released in February 2009 found that 59 % of respondents think the U.S. should lift the embargo against Cuba and begin normal diplomatic and trade relations with the island.
- A 2008 Florida International University (FIU) poll reports that 67 % of Cuban Americans, including a majority of registered voters, support unrestricted travel to Cuba for all Americans.



3. An end to travel restrictions and increased U.S. travel to Cuba would expand demand for U.S. products, help the tourist travel and airline industries and create much-needed American jobs.


- U.S. economic output would increase by **between \$1.18 billion and \$1.61 billion a year and create 16,888 to 23,020 new jobs** if current restrictions on travel to Cuba were lifted, according to an independent study conducted in 2002 by the Brattle Group, a respected economic forecasting firm.
- According to the Brattle Group report, increased demand for air travel alone would generate significant economic activity due to the corresponding increase in demand for inputs to airline service and the ripple effect on consumer spending. Applying a multiplier estimate of 2.6 to capture these “indirect” and “induced” spending effects, the total impact would range from \$650 million to \$1.08 billion a year in additional U.S. output and the creation of 9,285 to 15,417 new jobs.

4. The travel ban is a waste of U.S. government resources. The U.S. faces real security challenges, but they do not come from Cuba. The disproportionate focus on enforcement of the travel ban takes resources away from real threats, and compromises the security of all Americans.

- In a 2008 report, the GAO found that the Treasury Department’s disproportional focus on enforcement of restrictions on travel and trade with Cuba “have strained C.B.P.’s [Customs and Border Protection, Department of Homeland Security] capacity to carry out its primary mission of keeping terrorists, criminals and inadmissible aliens from entering the country.”
- The GAO also found that after 2001, OFAC opened more investigations and imposed more penalties for embargo violations, such as buying Cuban cigars, than for violations of other sanctions, such as those on Iran.

5. Prominent U.S. human rights organizations have called for an end to the travel ban concluding that it does nothing to improve the human rights situation on the island.

- “It is well past time to reassess a policy that impedes the ability of American citizens to freely interact with Cubans on a large scale and thus expose them to unfettered information about the outside world. We call on the incoming administration of Barack Obama to reexamine the embargo and to immediately lift the restrictions on remittances and travel to and from the island.” – *Jennifer Windsor, Executive Director of Freedom House.*
- “Unfortunately when it comes to promoting reform in Cuba, the United States has undermined its own influence by pursuing policies condemned by the rest of the



world. In its efforts to isolate Fidel Castro, it has only isolated itself. No other country in the world bans travels to Cuba, and the rest of the world sees the travel ban as a bizarre anachronism.” –*Jose Miguel Vivanco, Executive Director, Americas Division, Human Rights Watch.*

- “We recognize that the embargo is an ineffective mechanism for promoting human rights, and the organization is gravely concerned that in some situations it has contributed to abuses,” - *Dr. William F. Schulz, Executive Director of Amnesty International USA.*

6. Travel restrictions are inconsistent with U.S. policy on citizen travel to other countries.


- U.S. citizens, barred from traveling freely to Cuba, are allowed to travel to other communist nations, including North Korea, China, and Vietnam. With the recent end to the ban on travel to Libya, Cuba is the only country to which U.S. citizens cannot travel without special government permission.

7. Whatever economic impact the travel ban has on Cuba is felt by the Cuban people, not by the Cuban government.

- The strategy of starving the Cuban government by restricting U.S. travel is ineffective since millions of tourists from Canada and Europe visit the island each year, and Cuba is steadily building beneficial economic relationships with Venezuela, Brazil, China, Russia, and other countries.
- An increased flow of American travelers would increase the numbers of Cubans who earn independent livings by renting rooms in their homes, selling art to tourists, driving private taxis, or working as guides and drivers.

8. Allowing Americans to travel to Cuba will send an important signal to Latin America as a whole. An end to the travel ban would leave major aspects of the U.S. embargo in place, but would still signal a shift in the U.S. approach.

- In recent months, the leaders of the Caribbean community and Latin American governments have called upon the United States to end the embargo. At a December 2008 summit in Rio De Janeiro, **the leaders of every Latin American country called on the U.S. to end the embargo against Cuba.** An end to the ban on travel would be a modest step that would respond to the calls of our friends in the hemisphere.



There are many avenues the U.S. could explore in changing its relationship with Cuba. These include talks on subjects of mutual interest such as: migration, drug interdiction, coast guard cooperation and the environment risks posed to the Florida coast as a result of offshore oil exploration. These would be constructive steps. Ending the ban on travel would be the simplest and most direct action that serves U.S. interests.

Prepared by the Center for Democracy in the Americas, www.democracyinamericas.org, the Latin America Working Group, www.lawg.org, the Lexington Institute, www.lexingtoninstitute.org, the New America Foundation, www.newamerica.net, and Washington Office on Latin America, www.wola.org



U.S.-CUBA TRADE: ENDING RESTRICTIONS WILL PROMOTE OUR ECONOMY AND REFLECT U.S. INTERESTS AND VALUES

1. What is the current status of U.S. agricultural sales to Cuba?

- In 2000, the U.S. Congress passed the Trade Sanctions Reform and Export Enhancement Act (TSRA), which authorized the export of U.S. agricultural commodities to Cuba. Signed by President Clinton in October 2000, the first shipment of U.S. goods arrived in Cuba in December 2001. Despite regulatory and bureaucratic impediments, the total value of purchases from Cuba reached \$536 million in 2008.
- U.S. sales to Cuba could be significantly higher. The United States – because of our location and the quality of our products – is Cuba’s natural supplier, but our regulatory and statutory restrictions cause Cuba to take much of its business to U.S. competitors such as Canada, China, Vietnam, Europe, and Brazil.
- Cuba’s need for imported agricultural goods is likely to increase in the near term, because the island’s domestic food production capabilities were ravaged by three major hurricanes in the summer of 2008 that resulted in \$9 billion worth of damage to crops, infrastructure, industry and investments.

2. Who is currently selling to Cuba and what are they selling?

- **Wheat, rice, corn, animal feed, and soybeans are the top five commodities sold to Cuba in terms of total sales.** Cuba is America’s twelfth largest market for wheat, the eighth largest market for chicken, and the **third largest market for rice.**
- 168 U.S. companies in 35 states have sold goods to Cuba. Twenty-three U.S. ports have participated in export shipments to Cuba.

3. What kinds of restrictions apply to the sale of U.S. agricultural goods to Cuba?

- **Although agricultural sales were legalized by Congress, regulations and licensing restrictions imposed by the executive branch limit current sales, and increase the transaction costs of sales to Cuba.**

What can be sold: Approximately 300 different types of products are sold to Cuba. These include wheat, corn, rice, soybeans, frozen poultry, utility poles, cookies, mayonnaise, and live cattle. *(TSRA defines agricultural commodities*



by reference to Section 102 of the Agricultural Trade Act of 1978 (7 U.S.C. §5602).

Restrictive cash sales requirements: TSRA requires that sales to Cuba be done on a cash basis. The use of credit and direct transfers between U.S. and Cuban banks is also prohibited. In February 2005, the Office of Foreign Assets Control (OFAC) of the Department of the Treasury announced tighter restrictions, requiring that cash payments be made to the U.S. seller before goods leave a U.S. port for Cuba. **The U.S. government does not impose cash in advance payment requirements on international trade deals with any other country in the world.**

- **These regulatory measures, more restrictive than what Congress envisioned, reduce U.S. sales, raise the cost of importing food to Cuba, and subject banks across the world to regulatory threats.**

Licensing requirements: American farmers and businessmen must apply for a license for each sales-related trip to Cuba to market their products, negotiate sales and sign contracts. They must request licenses for each of the products they want to sell to Cuba and apply for a license for each of the goods they want to ship to Cuba.

4. What do these restrictions mean for the future of U.S. agricultural sales to Cuba?

- Due to the cumbersome restrictions on U.S. exports, Cuba's national import agency, ALIMPORT, lacks confidence in the reliability of the U.S. as a supplier, limiting the growth potential of U.S. sales.
- Today, U.S. exporters are unlikely to increase their market share in Cuba as long as current regulations remain in effect.

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TRAVEL TO CUBA HELPS U.S. FARMERS AND SUPPORTS U.S. NATIONAL INTERESTS

1. U.S. citizens traveling to Cuba will bolster sales of U.S. agricultural goods to Cuba.

- If restrictions on trade and travel to Cuba were lifted, the annual U.S. share of Cuba's food imports would more than double, increasing to 70%, from the current 32%. This would represent an increase of up to \$300 million in U.S. agricultural exports, according to a 2007 report from the U.S. International Trade Commission (USITC).

In the same report, the USITC found that additional tourist arrivals would increase U.S. sales of agricultural goods to Cuba not only because of the increased tourist demand for food, but also because the resulting higher Cuban economic growth would boost domestic demand for high-quality U.S. food products. (*U.S. International Trade Commission, "U.S. Agricultural Sales to Cuba: Certain Economic Effects of U.S. Restrictions, Executive Summary, xi*)

- U.S. farmers and businesses are uniquely positioned to sell agricultural goods to Cuba due to comparatively low shipping costs and short transit times as compared with Cuba's 2nd and 3rd largest agricultural goods suppliers, Brazil and Europe.

If restrictions on travel and trade were removed, sales of 15 of the top 16 U.S. commodities exported to Cuba would increase, according to projections by the U.S. International Trade Commission. Sales of wheat would increase (\$17 million to \$34 million); rice (\$14 million to \$44 million); fresh potatoes, fruits, and vegetables (a rise of \$37 million to \$68 million annually); processed foods (\$26 million to \$41 million); milk powder (\$15 million to \$42 million); dry beans (\$9 million to \$22 million); and poultry, beef, and pork each increasing by about \$9 million to \$13 million). (*USITC, 4-4*)

2. U.S. business and agriculture constituencies have identified travel to Cuba for all Americans as an important priority in 2009.

- The U.S. Chamber of Commerce, the American Farm Bureau Association, the U.S. Rice Producers Association, U.S. Wheat Associates and the National Foreign Trade Council, among others, have called on President Obama to allow all Americans to travel to Cuba without restriction.



3. Travel to Cuba by U.S. citizens will improve America's standing and enhance our influence in a changing Cuba.

- People-to-people exchange between Americans and Cubans promotes understanding, transmits ideas, and generates debate. As Cuba's people and government contemplate their future, unrestricted American travel to Cuba will help position our people, our values, and our businesses, and enhance our influence.

Prepared by the Center for Democracy in the Americas, www.democracyinamericas.org, the Latin America Working Group, www.lawg.org, the Lexington Institute, www.lexingtoninstitute.org, the New America Foundation, www.newamerica.net, and Washington Office on Latin America www.wola.org



**U.S. ORGANIZATIONS THAT HAVE STATED THEIR SUPPORT FOR AN END
TO THE BAN ON TRAVEL TO CUBA FOR ALL AMERICANS**

CUBAN-AMERICAN

Cuba Study Group
Carlos Saladrigas, Co-Chairman

Cuban American Alliance Education Fund
Delvis Fernández Levy, President

Puentes Cubanos
Silvia Wilhelm, Executive Director

FORNORM
Antonio Zamora

BUSINESS

American Farm Bureau Federation

American Meat Institute

American Soybean Association

American Society of Travel Agents

Business Roundtable

Coalition for Employment through Exports

Emergency Committee for American Trade

Grocery Manufacturers Association

National Association of Wheat Growers

National Barley Growers Association

National Chicken Council

National Corn Growers Association



National Council of Farmer Cooperatives

National Foreign Trade Council

National Milk Producers Federation

National Oilseed Processors Association

National Retail Federation

National Sorghum Producers

National Turkey Federation

North American Export Grain Association

North American Millers Association

Northarvest Bean Growers Association

Organization for International Investment

U.S. Chamber of Commerce

USA Dry Pea and Lentil Council

USA Rice Federation

U.S. Dairy Export Council

U.S. Grains Council

US Rice Producers Association

U.S. Wheat Associates

U.S. Council for International Relations

USA*Engage

RELIGIOUS

Alliance of Baptists



American Baptist Churches of the USA

American Friends Service Committee

Church World Service

Christian Church (Disciples of Christ)

Conference of Major Superiors of Men (CMSM)

Church of the Brethren Witness

The Episcopal Church

Evangelical Lutheran Church in the Americas

Lutheran World Relief

Jesuit Conference

Mennonite Central Committee

National Council of Churches USA

Presbyterian Church (USA)

Progressive National Baptist Convention Inc

Reformed Church in America

Unitarian Universalist Service Committee

United Church of Christ

United Methodist Church

Progressive National Baptist Convention

U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops

ACADEMIC

American Association of State Colleges and Universities



NAFSA: Association of International Educators

Latin American Studies Association

Social Science Research Council

HUMAN RIGHTS/POLICY

ActionAid USA

American Friends Service Committee

Center for Democracy in the Americas

Center for International Policy

Freedom House

Fund for Reconciliation and Development

Institute for Policy Studies

Labor Council for Latin American Advancement

Latin America Working Group

National Alliance of Latin American & Caribbean Communities (NALACC)

New America Foundation

Operation USA

Oxfam America

TransAfrica Forum

Washington Office on Latin America

Copies of organizational statements or letters are available from the Latin America Working Group, www.lawg.org, or the Washington Office on Latin America, www.wola.org



U.S.-CUBA POLICY CONTACTS

The Center for Democracy in the Americas

www.democracyinamericas.org

The Center for Democracy in the Americas (CDA) is devoted to changing U.S. policy toward the countries of the Americas by basing our relations on mutual respect, recognizing positive models of governance in the region, and fostering dialogue particularly with those governments and movements with which U.S. policy is at odds.

Its Cuba program is called the Freedom to Travel Campaign. Started in 2001, it seeks a fundamental overhaul of U.S. policy toward Cuba and an end to the U.S. travel ban. To achieve these objectives, it leads fact-finding missions for U.S. delegations, works with U.S. policymakers on strategy, sponsors and disseminates research, hosts events, and conducts public education and outreach via the news media and the internet.

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Latin America Working Group

www.lawg.org


The Latin America Working Group is one of the nation's longest-standing coalitions dedicated to helping shape foreign policy toward Latin America and the Caribbean. LAWG carries out the coalition's mission to encourage U.S. policies towards Latin America that promote human rights, justice, peace and sustainable development. As a coalition, LAWG represents the interests of over 65 major religious, humanitarian, human rights, grassroots, and foreign policy organizations, providing reliable guidance to policymakers who want their decisions to be grounded in human rights. The LAWG regularly provides information to members of Congress, the media, and citizens interested in U.S. policy toward Latin America

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Lexington Institute

www.lexingtoninstitute.org

The Lexington Institute is a nonprofit, nonpartisan public policy research organization that supports a strong national security posture, American engagement abroad, openness toward trade and immigration, and use of markets and economic freedom in addressing



public policy challenges. Since 1999, its Cuba project has supported a shift toward a policy of engagement with Cuba, based on the idea that citizen contact and active diplomacy will be conducive to an opening in Cuba, will produce humanitarian benefits for Cubans, and will create a more productive government-to-government relationship. Lexington produces original field research on economic and political conditions in Cuba and critical analysis of U.S. policy; engages actively in the public debate through the press, publications, and our blog, The Cuban Triangle; and collaborates with Members of Congress who seek to change Cuba policy.

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New America Foundation

www.newamerica.net

The New America Foundation is a nonprofit, nonpartisan public policy institute that invests in new thinkers and new ideas to address the next generation of challenges facing the United States. The objective of New America's U.S. Cuba Policy Initiative is to take advantage of recent developments in Cuba and the United States to redirect U.S.-Cuba policy and relations towards a more sensible, mutually beneficial direction built on a new consensus of national stakeholders around an engagement strategy with Cuba—rather than the decades-old, tried-and-failed strategy of isolating Cuba and its citizens. The overall strategy of the U.S.-Cuba Policy Initiative is to build the intellectual capital, the policy prescriptions, and a mobilized and ideologically diverse network of policy stakeholders to push past a “tipping point” in U.S.-Cuba policy

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Washington Office on Latin America

www.wola.org

Since 1974, the Washington Office on Latin America has promoted human rights, democracy and social and economic justice in Latin America and the Caribbean. WOLA works closely with civil society organizations and government officials throughout the Americas; it has programs on citizen security (including police reform, organized crime, and youth gang violence), on US drug policy, and on trade and development issues, as well as country focused human rights programs on Mexico, Guatemala, Colombia, Venezuela, and Cuba. WOLA's Cuba program, founded in 1995, encourages U.S. policy-makers to move towards normalized relations with Cuba on the grounds that engagement with Cuba is a more sensible, more effective, and more humane strategy for promoting human rights and social justice.

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Charting a New Course on U.S.-Cuba Policy: Seizing a Historic Opportunity

An Open Letter to President-elect Barack Obama: Mr. Obama, Tear Down This Wall

The next President of the United States, Barack Obama, will have the unprecedented opportunity to change a policy that for nearly half a century has been ineffective in improving the lives of the Cuban people and advancing the interests of the United States.

The laws and regulations Washington has implemented over the past five decades with the intent of isolating Cuba and changing its government have served only to preserve the status quo and isolate the United States from its neighbors and the international community as a whole.

A clear manifestation of this is the fact that, for the last 17 years, the United Nations General Assembly has repeatedly and virtually unanimously repudiated the U.S. embargo of the island nation. This year's vote, on October 29, 2008, was more lopsided than ever. Out of 192 states, 185 voted *against* the United States. Only two countries supported the U.S. position (Israel and Palau), while the remaining four either abstained (Micronesia, the Marshall Islands) or declined to vote (El Salvador and Iraq).

With the alleged purpose of improving the economic and political lives of the Cuban people, ten U.S. Presidents, from Dwight Eisenhower to George W. Bush, have tried and failed to bring about change in Cuba by limiting diplomatic, commercial, and personal contacts with the island and by attempting to strangle the Cuban economy. It is not surprising that a policy based on the perverse logic that lack of contact will induce change has been a total failure.

U.S. policy toward Cuba has not only been a failure in attaining its stated objectives of inducing democratic changes on the island. It also has placed the most powerful nation on the planet in the embarrassing position of acting as if threatened by a nation the size of Pennsylvania with a shrunken military capability and a sputtering economy. What other explanation than an absurd perception of threat is there for the United States to forbid its own citizens—including and most egregiously its citizens of Cuban origin—to travel to Cuba? The limit on family visits to once every three years regardless of emergencies and

other humanitarian concerns is an especially cruel policy not applied to U.S. citizens from any other national origin.

In reality, of course, the U.S. is hardly threatened by Cuba, and a great nation's policy should not be based on pique. U.S. policy toward the island is maintained neither by sound foreign policy considerations nor by any credible threat to U.S. national security. As everyone recognizes, in the post-Soviet era, the embargo is sustained principally by domestic political concerns. The result of pandering to a shrinking but still powerful minority within the Cuban American population is a failed policy harmful to the interests of Cubans, Cuban Americans, and the United States.

Outdated assumptions about Cuban American voting behavior and Florida electoral politics and the exaggerated influence of some members of the Cuban American community have kept such a senseless policy in place. As members of that community, ENCASA calls upon the new President of the United States to take the historic step of changing course away from an ineffective, counterproductive, unjust, and harmful path toward one more consistent with the interests of the United States and the Cuban people on both sides of the Florida Straits.

The present moment is unprecedented in providing the opportunity for the new President of the United States to depart from a policy that has kept ten of his predecessors from achieving a positive impact on U.S.-Cuba relations:

Such a policy should be based on the realities of 2009 and not those of 1959:

1. *The Cuban American community is no longer monolithic (if it ever was) in supporting the continuing isolation of Cuba.* Opinion polls and local electoral challenges in Miami indicate that among Cuban Americans the younger generation and more recent arrivals have more nuanced attitudes toward U.S. policy than those of the dwindling members of the old guard. The extreme measures adopted in 2004 by the U.S. government severely limiting visits by Cuban Americans to their loved ones on the island, narrowing the definition of family and restricting remittances, only served to turn more Cuban Americans against a policy that harms the Cuban family. Many of them have for the first time found the courage to oppose the continuing imposition of the political will of an entrenched minority within the community.
2. *Changes in Cuba since the replacement of Fidel Castro as president point to an evolution of the Cuban political system in the direction of a greater willingness to consider alternatives that were previously not possible.* The tendency towards a greater pragmatism and away from ideologically-based policies is likely to make the government in Havana more amenable to engaging in meaningful actions that will improve the economic and political life of the Cuban people and change the nature of U.S.-Cuba relations.

We therefore call upon the next President of the United States, Barack Obama, to take advantage of these opportunities and initiate a historic course of action:

1. Immediately rescind the 2004 restrictions on Cuban American travel and remittances to the island.
2. Permit unrestricted travel by U.S. citizens to Cuba.
3. Signal to the Cuban government a willingness to enter into conversations with the purpose of exploring ways to normalize relations between the two countries for their mutual benefit and to improve the lives of the Cuban people.

These steps would be loudly applauded by Americans, Cuban Americans, Cubans and Latin Americans—indeed, by the international community as a whole. To adopt the course of action we envision would send a very clear message to the entire world that a new U.S. administration is embarking on a new foreign policy based on communication and engagement.

ENCASA/US-CUBA is a national network of more than 400 scholars, artists, writers, academics and professionals affiliated with universities in more than 150 cities in 37 states, the District of Columbia and Puerto Rico. For more information, see <http://www.encasa-us-cuba.org/>

January 21, 2009

The Honorable Barack Obama
President
The White House
1600 Pennsylvania Avenue, NW
Washington, DC 20500

Dear President Obama:

Congratulations on being elected President of the United States. We wish you every success and look forward to working with you and your administration. In particular, we express our willingness to work with you to bring immediate and full change with regard to U.S. policy toward trade and economic relations with Cuba. Open two-way trade and travel with Cuba not only allows Cuba to generate the foreign exchange it requires to buy more products from the U.S., but it also significantly improves our relationships with our other trading partners in the region.

Trade with Cuba is important to the United States for economic, diplomatic, and geopolitical reasons. We respectfully urge you to use your executive authority to open up U.S. – Cuba trade and travel by eliminating regulatory restrictions on personal and commercial travel to Cuba and allowing normal commercial transactions and direct payment terms. It is our understanding that such direct payment terms are currently allowed for payment of services provided by travel companies and telecommunications companies. U.S. payment and travel restrictions have been the two principal impediments to normalized trade flows with Cuba. Removing these unjustified obstacles at once after you have taken office will effect meaningful, meritorious change that is long overdue.

Furthermore, devastating hurricanes last year damaged homes, infrastructure, and crops across the island. Opening up unrestricted trade with Cuba would allow our nation to also focus on Cuba's humanitarian needs in an unimpeded manner.

Letters from 104 U.S. Representatives and 24 U.S. Senators, sent last year, demonstrate strong bipartisan Congressional support for improving U.S. – Cuba relations. In 2000, Congress reinforced the importance and value of agricultural and medical trade with Cuba with passage of the Trade Sanctions Reform and Export Enhancement Act (TSRA). Since then, Congress has demonstrated repeatedly its desire to open trade with Cuba by adopting legislative language in appropriations bills that would overturn anti-business regulatory impediments to U.S. – Cuba trade that interfered with the 2000 TSRA statute.

Page 2
January 2009

Our organizations' members represent a wide cross section of U.S. agricultural producers, food processors, and exporters who have strongly supported unobstructed trade with Cuba for many years. Unimpeded U.S. – Cuba trade and travel will immediately benefit U.S. agricultural, humanitarian, commercial/industrial, financial, and transportation, sectors.

Now is the time to change U.S. relations with Cuba to an unrestricted, unobstructed status that facilitates normal trade flows and open travel. We express our strong interest and willingness to work with you to bring about this timely and positive change. Thank you for your consideration of this key issue for our industries.

Respectfully,

American Farm Bureau Federation
American Meat Institute
American Soybean Association
National Association of Wheat Growers
National Barley Growers Association
National Chicken Council
National Corn Growers Association
National Council of Farmer Cooperatives
National Milk Producers Federation
National Oilseed Processors Association
National Sorghum Producers
National Turkey Federation
North American Export Grain Association
North American Millers Association
Northharvest Bean Growers Association
USA Dry Pea and Lentil Council
USA Rice Federation
U.S. Dairy Export Council
U.S. Grains Council
US Rice Producers Association
U.S. Wheat Associates

American Farm Bureau Federation
American Society of Travel Agents
Business Roundtable
Coalition for Employment through Exports
Emergency Committee for American Trade
Grocery Manufacturers Association
National Foreign Trade Council
National Retail Federation
Organization for International Investment in the United States
U.S. Chamber of Commerce
U.S. Council for International Business
USA*Engage

December 4, 2008

President-elect Barack Obama
P.O. Box 8102
Chicago, IL, 60680

Re: Reexamining U.S. Cuba Policy

Dear President-elect Obama:

We would like to extend to you our sincere congratulations on your historic election to the presidency of the United States.

We are pleased that your promises of change include U.S. policy toward Cuba. It is time for the United States to rethink its approach to the Cuban government and the Cuban people.

You have already indicated that you support suspending restrictions on family remittances, visits, and humanitarian care packages from Cuban Americans. These are excellent first steps but we urge you to also commit to a more comprehensive examination of U.S. policy, one that will have the power to transform Cuban society without costing U.S. taxpayers and one that will greatly benefit U.S. businesses.

When Presidents Dwight Eisenhower and John F. Kennedy initiated restrictions against Cuba, they did so in the face of clear national security challenges and with the support of much of the international community. Today, the United States maintains the embargo despite the absence of an obvious national security threat and against nearly unanimous international opposition. Moreover, as countries like Venezuela and China invest increasing amounts of money in the Cuban economy, it is clear that the embargo is not having – and will not have – the type of economic impact that might influence the behavior of the Cuban government. It is time to consider new approaches that would benefit U.S. national security and economic interests, as well as the Cuban people.

Current policies are ineffective and costly

Current policies towards Cuba have clearly not achieved their objectives. Without the support of our allies and the larger international community, U.S. sanctions serve only to remove the positive influences that American businesses, workers, religious groups, students and tourists have in promoting U.S. values and human rights. Sanctions are also blunt instruments that generally harm the poorest people of the target country rather than that country's leaders.

There is no better example of the ineffectiveness of unilateral sanctions than the case of Cuba. During the Cold War, Soviet assistance helped bolster the Cuban economy in spite of U.S. sanctions. The Cuban economy struggled – but did not collapse – during the “special period” in Cuba following the end of Soviet aid, while Fidel Castro was able to blame shortages at the time on the U.S. embargo. Today, tourism from Europe and Canada, investment from China, Latin America, Canada and Europe, and a more diversified economy have helped to stabilize the Cuban economy and marginalize the impact of U.S. sanctions. Venezuelan financial assistance in the form of petroleum sold at below market prices has also helped prop up the regime.

While the current isolation of Cuba has far outlasted its original purpose, U.S. policies impose real costs on America. For American businesses, the U.S. International Trade Commission estimated in 2001 that the Cuba embargo costs American exporters up to \$1.2 billion annually in lost sales. The U.S. government focuses attention and resources on the Cuba embargo at the expense of more urgent pursuits such as halting flows of money to al Qaeda and keeping terrorists and criminals out of the United States. Using scarce resources to investigate and prosecute minor violations of Cuba sanctions ignores the infinitely greater challenge of securing the homeland from more serious national security threats.

The real cost, however, is the influence that the United States has lost by voluntarily isolating itself from Cuba during an important moment of transition. Far from providing leverage, U.S. policies threaten to make the United States virtually irrelevant to the future of Cuba.

A moment of opportunity

Your administration has a unique opportunity to take steps to end nearly 50 years of isolation from Cuba and the Cuban people. We support the complete removal of all trade and travel restrictions on Cuba. We recognize that change may not come all at once, but it must start somewhere, and it must begin soon.

The United States could engage in bilateral discussions with the Cuban government. Beginning a dialogue on issues of mutual interest could begin the process of repairing the complicated relationship between the United States and Cuba, but that process will take time.

The United States should immediately remove travel restrictions and allow Americans to act as ambassadors of freedom and American values to Cuba. From farmers and manufacturers to human rights and religious groups, as well as a large and growing number of Cuban Americans, the American people increasingly recognize the unfairness and incongruity of restricting travel to Cuba. It is simply wrong that American citizens cannot travel freely to Havana but are not restricted by the United States from traveling to Pyongyang and Tehran.

Your administration should also consider removing certain restrictions on trade to allow American companies to help Cuba to respond more effectively and meaningfully to the devastating humanitarian crisis in the wake of Hurricanes Gustav and Ike. For example, the United States could exempt agricultural machinery, heavy equipment and other exports from the embargo which would provide the goods and technology needed to rebuild from recent storms. The United States could also license direct banking services in order to facilitate these sales.

American businesses stand ready to help Cuba rebuild and hope to play a constructive role in reaching out to the people of Cuba.

We urge you to support the immediate reconsideration of U.S. Cuba policy, and to convene a bipartisan commission tasked with looking at U.S. policies in their entirety. Continuation of the status quo could leave the United States isolated from the Cuban people for another generation. As you have said, the time for change is now.

Sincerely,

American Farm Bureau Federation
American Society of Travel Agents
Business Roundtable
Coalition for Employment through Exports
Emergency Committee for American Trade
Grocery Manufacturers Association
National Foreign Trade Council
National Retail Federation
Organization for International Investment in the United States
U.S. Chamber of Commerce
U.S. Council for International Business
USA*Engage

RELIGIOUS LEADERS CALL FOR CHANGE IN CUBA TRAVEL POLICY

December 18, 2008

President-Elect Barack Obama
451 6th Street N.W.
Washington, D.C. 20001

Dear President-Elect Obama:

As leaders of Christian denominations, their agencies, and ecumenical organizations in the United States, we write to express appreciation for your statements indicating a new willingness to review and revise long-standing U.S. policy toward Cuba. We have a long collective history of missionary and humanitarian activity in the nation of Cuba. Our partnership with churches, denominations, and ecumenical organizations there goes back many years, and transcends political ideologies.

We urgently request you to change the Cuba policy of the United States in ways that will assist the churches in their work and benefit all Americans.

Since 2005 U.S. church denominations, mission agencies and ecumenical organizations at the national and regional levels have suffered from severe restrictions on religious travel. We write to ask you to lift these restrictions. Our institutions are currently eligible only for very limited licenses. Some of our institutions have been unable to secure even these limited licenses.

These impractical restrictions have reduced our ability to send religious delegations to Cuba, limited our opportunities to accompany and support our Cuban church partners, and have the effect of severely limiting participation in Cuba missions by many U.S. churches and congregants. *In addition to lifting the restrictions on religious travel, we urge you to end the travel ban for all Americans.*

We are also concerned that many Christian pastors and leaders in Cuba are unable to get visas for travel to the United States for church meetings and theological conferences. There appear to be a variety of factors at play in the denials, but one reason is the unduly negative view of the U.S. State Department toward leaders of the Cuban Council of Churches, which is the recognized ecumenical body of the traditional Cuban Protestant denominations.

We are convinced that it is time to change the ineffective and counter-productive U.S. policy toward Cuba and urge your Administration to take the following actions:

- ***Freely allow religious travel to Cuba.***
- ***Liberally grant visas for U.S. travel to Cuban pastors and other religious leaders, and no longer bar officials of the Cuban Council of Churches.***
- ***Lift the travel ban for all Americans.***

Beyond these immediate steps, we urge you to move to end the embargo on Cuba. We believe that the time has arrived to restore normal diplomatic relations with Cuba and to allow full engagement between the people of the United States and the people of Cuba.

For decades the U.S. policy toward Cuba has had unfortunate consequences for the Cuban people, while denying important freedoms to Americans. It has failed significantly in its stated

objective to precipitate change in the Cuban government. The hostility between the two governments has also limited relationships between Christians in the United States and those in Cuba, disrupting the close historical bonds between our churches. Cuban churches are growing rapidly, presenting new opportunities for U.S. churches and ecumenical institutions in the United States to relate to and support their Cuban brothers and sisters in Christ.

Thank you for recognizing and considering our concerns. We commit ourselves to pray for you, your family and your Administration. And we wish you every success in your efforts toward a more just, compassionate and peaceful world for all people.

Sincerely,

The Reverend John L. McCullough
Executive Director and CEO
Church World Service

The Reverend Dr. Michael Kinnamon
General Secretary
National Council of Churches

The Reverend Dr. Stan Hastey
Minister for Mission & Ecumenism
Alliance of Baptists

The Reverend Dr. A. Roy Medley
General Secretary
American Baptist Churches of the USA

The Reverend Dr. José Norat-Rodríguez
Area Director for Iberoamerica & the
Caribbean
American Baptist Churches of the USA

The Reverend Dr. Sharon E. Watkins
General Minister and President
Christian Church (Disciples of Christ)
in the United States and Canada

Stanley Noffsiner
General Secretary
Church of the Brethren

The Reverend Phil Jones, Director
Brethren Witness/Washington Office
Church of the Brethren

The Most Reverend Katharine Jefferts Schori
Presiding Bishop and Primate
The Episcopal Church

The Reverend Mark S. Hanson
Presiding Bishop
Evangelical Lutheran Church in America

Rolando Santiago
Executive Director
Mennonite Central Committee U.S.

The Reverend Gradye Parsons
Stated Clerk of the General Assembly
Presbyterian Church, (USA)

The Reverend Dr. Tyrone S. Pitts
General Secretary
Progressive National Baptist Convention

The Reverend Brenda Girton-Mitchell
Ecumenical Officer
Progressive National Baptist Convention

The Reverend Wesley Granberg-Michaelson
General Secretary
Reformed Church in America

The Reverend Dr. John H. Thomas
General Minister and President
United Church of Christ

The Reverend Edward W. Paup
General Secretary
General Board of Global Ministries
United Methodist Church

James E. Winkler
General Secretary
General Board of Church and Society
United Methodist Church

cc: Senator/Secretary of State-Designate Hillary Rodham Clinton



Committee on International Justice and Peace

3211 FOURTH STREET NE • WASHINGTON DC 20017-1194 • FAX 202-541-3339 • WWW.USCCB.ORG/JPHD

February 9, 2009

Rep. William Delahunt
Chairman, Sub-Committee on
International Organizations, Human
Rights and Oversight
Committee on Foreign Affairs
U.S. House of Representatives

Rep. Jeff Flake
Member, Sub-Committee on
International Organizations, Human
Rights and Oversight
Committee on Foreign Affairs
U.S. House of Representatives

Dear Representatives Delahunt and Flake:

I write as chairman of the Committee on International Justice and Peace of the United States Conference of Catholic Bishops (USCCB) to express support for your initiative, supported by several colleagues from both sides of the aisle, in sponsoring H.R. 874, a bill to allow travel between the United States and Cuba.

The USCCB has for many years consistently called for relaxing the sanctions against Cuba. These policies have largely failed to promote greater freedom, democracy and respect for human rights in Cuba. At the same time, our nation's counterproductive policies have unnecessarily alienated many other countries in the hemisphere. Improving the lives of the Cuban people and encouraging democracy and human rights in Cuba will best be advanced through more, rather than less, contact between the Cuban and American people.

Existing restrictions on the ability of Cubans residing in this country to travel to Cuba are particularly objectionable. No one should be prevented from visiting a dying relative or attending a loved one's funeral simply because he or she has traveled to Cuba once in the previous three years. Like you, we support changes to this inhumane policy from the new Administration of President Obama who made commitments during the campaign to adjust administrative rules to facilitate travel to Cuba. Such changes, however welcome, cannot replace the need for the Congressional action contained in H.R. 874 that would lift all restrictions on travel by U.S. citizens to Cuba.

Our Conference of Bishops is pleased to note that other members of Congress have joined you in co-sponsoring this legislation and will encourage other members to co-sponsor and support final passage of this important piece of legislation.

With thanks and best wishes, I remain

Sincerely yours,

Most Reverend Howard J. Hubbard
Bishop of Albany
Chairman, Committee on International
Justice and Peace

American Association of State Colleges and Universities

Latin America Working Group

Social Science Research Council

American Friends Service Committee

Latin American Studies Association

Unitarian Universalist Service Committee

Church World Service

NAFSA: Association of International Educators

USA*Engage

Fund for Reconciliation and Development

National Foreign Trade Council

Washington Office on Latin America

Operation USA

December 8, 2008

President-elect Barack Obama
233 N. Michigan Avenue, #1720
Chicago, IL 60601

Dear President-elect Obama:

We congratulate you on your historic election victory and look forward to working with you and your administration next year.

We are writing on an issue of great concern to members of our various communities – U.S. policy towards Cuba. We believe that changes made by the Bush administration in 2003 and 2004 have not had their intended effect and have been counterproductive in terms of helping the Cuban people.

In particular we ask you to address at an early date certain executive branch amendments to the Cuban Assets Control Regulations (CACR) and strongly urge you to consider their early repeal. The amendments were published in the Federal Register on March 24, 2003 (FR Doc. 03–6808), and June 16, 2004 (FR Doc. 04-13630). The provisions of concern imposed new restrictions on academic and family travel, and on remittances, to Cuba. Repeal of these regulations would restore travel and remittances to the island and reverse policies that isolate American students and other citizens from the Cuban people.

Specifically, academic and people-to-people exchange with Cuba has been decimated by the prohibition of the following activities. We recommend restoring the availability of licenses for:

- short-term study and teaching in Cuba;
- study in Cuba under third-party programs—i.e., programs other than those of degree-granting higher education institutions;
- study in Cuba under programs other than those of the institution in which the student is enrolled;
- academic travel to Cuba by any bona fide professor or researcher, including adjunct faculty;
- people-to-people, cultural and sports exchanges unrelated to academic coursework; and
- programs of secondary schools for study in Cuba.

As well, we ask that you rescind the 2004 restrictions on family visits to Cuba, on the amount of money that family visitors can spend while in Cuba, on cash remittances to Cuba, and on the personal baggage of travelers to Cuba.

An important parallel move is to again make visas available for Cuban scholars, religious leaders, cultural and sports figures, and others to participate in academic conferences and events, religious and cultural activities, and other forms of people-to-people exchange, and to conduct research in the United States.

In making the above changes, we hope you consider minor amendments to the CACR to permit travel to Cuba by all eligible persons via a general license rather than requiring specific license applications. This would allow the Treasury Department to focus on keeping the United States safe rather than on administering routine licenses to Cuban Americans, academic institutions, church groups, athletes, and members of the press who wish to travel there legally.

Finally, we urge you and your administration to work with Congress to reexamine U.S. policy more broadly. Complete repeal of travel restrictions would allow all U.S. citizens to engage with the Cuban people. Repeal would also take a burden off of the Departments of the Treasury and Homeland Security, which could put the resources that are now used to administer and enforce prohibitions on travel by U.S. citizens toward investigating transactions that actually endanger U.S. security.

By immediately taking steps to rescind the 2003-2004 regulations, you will send a clear and welcome signal of change and reverse actions that have proven counterproductive to our shared goal of assisting the Cuban people. Thank you for your consideration of these comments.

Sincerely,

American Association of State Colleges and Universities
American Friends Service Committee
Church World Service
Fund for Reconciliation and Development
Latin America Working Group
Latin American Studies Association
NAFSA: Association of International Educators
National Foreign Trade Council
Operation USA
Social Science Research Council
Unitarian Universalist Service Committee
USA*Engage
Washington Office on Latin America

A new era for Cuba

Only normal ties would give the U.S. influence over the island's future

Thursday, January 01, 2009

By Philip Peters

Cuba marks the 50th anniversary of its socialist revolution today. What's to celebrate?

First and foremost, the revolutionary faithful will surely toast their own survival. Fidel Castro and company have withstood American challenges spanning 10 presidencies: the failed Bay of Pigs invasion, covert actions and five decades of economic sanctions. Against all odds, they also survived the collapse of the Soviet bloc, which plunged Cuba into a near-starvation economy in the early 1990s, when output shrunk by one third.

They will celebrate Cuba's outsized role in the world, marked by deployment of troops in Africa and the Americas during the Cold War, and by deployment of more than 50,000 doctors, nurses and teachers in 96 countries today. They may raise a glass to Cuban diplomacy, which has built new economic partnerships with Venezuela, China, Russia and Brazil, and has prompted all the countries of our hemisphere to call for an end to the U.S. embargo.

At home, they will celebrate social achievements such as the public health-care and education systems. But even Cuban officials admit that while those services are free and universal, they are also frayed due to underinvestment.

Especially since Raul Castro became president last February, officials and the state-controlled media are admitting other shortcomings. Raul Castro complains that production is too low and salaries provide insufficient incentive for work. He describes a looming demographic crisis of low birth rates, a shrinking workforce and a growing elderly population.

In October 2006, the communist youth newspaper documented how state retail outlets routinely cheat consumers. The next month, it reported that official unemployment figures, "never a reflection of reality," dramatically understate actual joblessness. A columnist cited the fable "The Emperor's New Clothes" to criticize dull, unanimous debates in Cuba's legislature.

On the street, many Cubans like their free social services but wonder why they come at the expense of basic political and economic freedoms. They wonder when a new generation will move into top leadership jobs, and when a big reform agenda will be put in place to tackle the big economic problems that the government itself has identified.

Cuba, in other words, is at a turning point in its history. By any reading, it's ripe for American influence -- but influence is exactly the opposite of what America has in Cuba today.

President George W. Bush thought he could bring Cuba's government down through tightened sanctions, tough talk and support for dissidents living in Cuba. It hasn't worked -- and with every new economic partnership Cuba builds, U.S. sanctions become more and more a nuisance rather than a strategic weapon.

President-elect Barack Obama -- the 11th American president to deal with a socialist government in Havana -- promises to steer a different course. He will "immediately allow unlimited family travel and remittances to the island" for Cuban Americans, and he promises to "pursue direct diplomacy" with Cuba, but without making specific the timing, conditions or agenda.

These are positive steps that can sustain Cuban families, generate cooperation between our governments and provide a forum to press human rights concerns.

But if President Obama stops there, he would be sticking with President Bush's fallacy that America can somehow have influence in Cuba while blocking broad contact between our societies. That is the opposite of American policy toward both China and the Soviet bloc during the Cold War. It makes no sense in the information age, especially not in a country like Cuba where Americans are welcomed and cultural and historical ties are deep.

The most consequential step the Obama administration could take would be to allow all Americans to travel freely to Cuba. Unrestricted travel would bring a surge in contacts, ideas and debate between American citizens and private institutions and their Cuban counterparts. The flow of information would increase, as would understanding, in both directions. A more prosperous Cuban economy would buy more U.S. farm exports. Latin America would welcome a sign of a new American diplomacy. And America would gain what it lacks now in Cuba: real influence.

Philip Peters is the vice president of the Lexington Institute in Arlington, Va., and he writes the blog "The Cuban Triangle" (peters@lexingtoninstitute.org).

First published on January 1, 2009 at 12:00 am

Monday, November 3, 2008

Cuba embargo slips as South Florida's top priority

Jake Colvin SPECIAL TO THE WASHINGTON TIMES

There will be many conclusions to draw from the 2008 election, but voters in South Florida have made one thing clear - the political appeal of the Cuba embargo is nearing its end.

The next time a candidate for national office campaigns in South Florida, he or she will have to discard the well-worn hard line on Cuba policy and adopt a platform that addresses the concerns of an increasingly diverse community.

Cuban-Americans, like most Americans, would seem to care more about a candidate's position on the economic-recovery plan these days than on the transition in Cuba. Recent polling suggests that large majorities of Cuban-Americans favor candidates who will prioritize housing and health care over transition in Cuba.

Hitting an anti-Castro note sounds off-key in a state that has the third-highest number of foreclosures in the country.

Beyond mere fatigue with the embargo, many Cuban-Americans also are having second thoughts about U.S. policy toward Cuba. Over the past eight years, the Bush administration has driven a wedge through the community by imposing new restrictions on the ability of U.S. residents to travel and send remittances to Cuba.

These policies have forced many Cuban-Americans who had reflexively supported the embargo to reconsider the impact that sanctions were having on their community and friends and family.

In Miami last month, I met a Cuban-American who changed his views on the embargo after traveling to the island with his father. He told me, "The Bush restrictions forced many in our community who blindly supported the hard line to stop and think, 'Wait a minute. I'm anti-Castro. But are we doing the right thing?'"

Another said to me, "Cuba for my generation is not Fidel Castro. It's the grandmother, the sister that you left behind."

Those politicians who would cling to policies of extreme isolation hold an outdated view of their constituents.

Today, majorities of Cuban-Americans favor not only the rollback of Bush administration restrictions on travel and remittances, but also allowing unrestricted travel to Cuba by all Americans.

Large majorities of Cuban-Americans also favor diplomatic negotiations with Cuba and a dialogue that would include Cuban dissidents and representatives of the Cuban government. Even support for the embargo, an article of faith in South Florida for years, is rapidly eroding.

Fewer than 60 percent of Cuban-Americans support the embargo, according to a 2007 poll by Florida International University, compared with 66 percent in 2000 and 78 percent in 1997.

While the Cuban-American electorate - which trends older and more Republican than the broader community - historically has been among the most loyal supporters of the embargo, there is a growing center of voters and would-be voters emerging who care more about jobs, health care and visiting their family and friends in Cuba than Fidel Castro.

Excitement over Barack Obama's candidacy, combined with concern about President Bush's sanctions against Cuba and the state of the economy, are driving political participation among exactly the type of voters who are least likely to support current policy.

Tens of thousands of new Democrats made their voices heard in Miami-Dade County in this election, providing a tremendous boost to Democratic congressional candidates against incumbent Cuban-American Republicans that would have been unthinkable just a few years ago.

Statewide, Florida is becoming younger, more progressive and more Hispanic. The new voters that have been engaged in the political process are more likely to add to the voices challenging the conventional wisdom in South Florida and help to marginalize supporters of a policy of extreme isolation for years to come.

"There is a generational and economic shift," Joe Garcia told me last month.

<http://www.washingtontimes.com/admin/news/stories/335212/#>

Mr. Garcia, who has mounted a strong Democratic challenge to Republican Rep. Mario Diaz-Balart in Florida's 25th Congressional District, pointed to the U.S. economic crisis and anger over the restrictions on travel and remittances by Cuban-Americans as factors influencing voters in South Florida.

These changing demographics present a political opportunity for the next president, members of Congress and the candidates who seek to replace them to appeal to a community that is more diverse politically than it has been given credit for.

Responding to the frustration and, in some cases, resentment of the embargo as a political issue that has set in to much of the Cuban-American community would be a popular move.

In this age of permanent campaigns, there is no doubt that some political strategists are already looking at their 2010 calendars. They should take note: Relying on tough rhetoric and hard-line Cuba policies as an electoral strategy in Florida is over.

Jake Colvin is vice president with the National Foreign Trade Council and a fellow with the New Ideas Fund, where he is working on a project on U.S.-Cuba policy.