



Testimony of Geoff Thale  
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and International Organizations

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My name is Geoff Thale, and I am the Program Director at the Washington Office on Latin America, WOLA. Thank you for this invitation to testify. I know my views are somewhat different than the other witnesses, though I have the utmost respect for them, and I appreciate the opportunity to present a different viewpoint to this subcommittee.

WOLA is a U.S. non-profit, non-governmental organization that does research and advocacy to promote human rights and social justice in the Americas. Since 1974, WOLA has monitored issues of human rights and democracy in Latin America and has provided information and analysis to congressional offices, the administration, and the general public about conditions in the region and the impact of U.S. policy on human rights.

In 1995, I founded WOLA's Cuba program and have directed it ever since. I travel to Cuba every year, and have done so since the mid-1990s. I meet with a wide range of Cubans when I visit including academics, Catholic and Protestant church leaders, government officials and critics. I have met, in Havana and in Washington, with figures such as the late Oswaldo Paya and with well-known human rights activist Elisardo Sanchez, with Manuel Cuesta Morua, and with Yoani Sanchez. On recent trips, I have met with small business owners, like a young restaurant owner in Matanzas who is representative of an emerging sector with their own interests and priorities. I have worked professionally on issues of U.S. foreign policy, human rights, and democracy in Latin America for more than 30 years.

I do not differ with my colleagues on this panel about the existence of human rights abuses in Cuba, although I do not paint as grim a picture of the problems as they do.

The real difference has more to do with what the United States can do to promote human rights and political opening in Cuba. For well over fifty years, the United States pursued a policy of isolation and hostility, in the expectation that it would lead to regime change and then human rights improvements in Cuba. That policy clearly failed, and in my view, the policy we are now pursuing -- normalizing diplomatic relations and seeking active engagement with Cuban society is far more likely to help create the conditions for progress on human rights in Cuba.

The United States's new posture toward Cuba doesn't guarantee human rights improvements in Cuba but it certainly opens new paths which could improve the rights situation and the living conditions of Cubans. The new policy provides opportunities to forward U.S. values and interests. Opening new avenues of engagement through travel and trade for United States individual citizens, churches, academic and cultural institutions and businesses will enhance the prospects for freedom of expression and reform on the island.

## Human Rights in Cuba: Different Approaches

My colleagues on this panel have talked about their own situations and about the human rights challenges on the island. They have lived there and can describe their experiences far better than I or other foreign observers can. My expertise is focused on human rights and U.S. policy, and how U.S. policy can most effectively foster human rights improvements.

There's no doubt that Cuba has serious human rights problems. It has only one legal political party. Cuba falls short on international human rights standards on freedom of speech, freedom of the press, and freedom of association.

Perhaps as important to its citizens as the conditions listed above is Cuba's dismal economy. Although the private sector has grown substantially alongside surging tourism, Cuba's economy is overall stagnant, and many people, especially young Cubans, are yearning for more opportunity. While economic reforms have led to modest economic growth, they have led to increases in inequality, and Afro-Cuban families and youth have benefited the least from the changes underway.

To be clear, the picture in Cuba is not uniformly a grim one. Life expectancy is high, reflecting relatively good public health and medical care; literacy levels are high, reflecting universal public education. The country has made some progress on legislation to prevent discrimination based on sexual orientation. Racial inequality, which was severe in the 1950s, declined dramatically up through the 1990s. Women's participation in the workforce, particularly the professions, has improved significantly.

Yet Cuba's economic and political problems are real. However, we have started to see some shifts in recent years, and these moves in the right direction should not be ignored.

Some of the economic changes are well known -- an emerging small business and cooperative sector, private sales of homes and cars, greater openness to foreign investment.

What's less visible to outsiders are the changes in political openness.

Information is being moved around the island in ways that were unimaginable before. Although internet access is extremely limited, it is increasing, and Cubans are using it to publish blogs and articles that explore issues such as race, inequality, and lack of political options -- things that would be unimaginable to have broached publicly just 10 years ago.

The *paquete*, or packet, a weekly download from a pen drive with news, apps and other media, is increasingly being sold on the island, and though technically illegal, the government tacitly allows it to be sold. While the government does still block blogs like that of Yoani Sanchez, unlike a few years ago, she and many other critical voices are not

being arrested and held for long periods. There is also a small, but growing civil society that's increasingly found a voice in recent years.

The new relationship with the United States has made a positive contribution to the climate in which these changes are taking place. The reduction in hostility between the two governments has made it easier and more acceptable for people to openly debate and criticize the government.

One saw this around President Obama's visit earlier this year. For the first time, President Castro participated in a press conference with unscripted questions. President Obama gave a nationally televised speech that included explicit criticisms of the government. Before and after the visit analysis and opinion pieces circulated, including in official newspapers across the country, with levels of open debate that the country has not seen previously.

This is all not to say that there are not serious and continuing problems. Cuba should end its restrictions on political parties, freedom of speech, and freedom of assembly. While there has been more open debate than we've seen, there remains a line that cannot be crossed and certain viewpoints that are not tolerated.

One shouldn't discount the impact of new social dynamics in Cuba and how they are intersecting with the opening in US/Cuba policy. As Cubans travel abroad more freely, and Cuban Americans travel back to the island to be with family, as Cuba gradually expands internet access, as cell phone technology and pen drives proliferate, the space for debate, and the desire for information and debate, grows. There is now greater political space in Cuba and potential to grow that space. And if the past year has been any indication, the best way to encourage and facilitate this is to increase exchange and opportunities for Cubans. Continuing open exchange between the United States and Cuba, including allowing for more travel and technology, will only serve to advance and expedite this process.

### The Policy of Isolation

The United States should certainly press Cuba to respect and foster human rights (though we should maintain some humility, given the troubling events that have gone on in the United States in recent weeks.) The question that I will examine today, in my capacity as an analyst of U.S. foreign policy and its effect on human rights, is how best to do so.

The truth is that the last 55 years of embargo have clearly shown that our attempts to isolate Cuba completely failed to improve human rights on the island. The embargo created—and continues to create—hardships for normal Cubans, but it has not forced the Cuban government to reform. In fact, the tensions between the United States and Cuba have long provided hardliners in the Cuban government with a pretext to crack down on

dissent. Considering that isolation demonstrated no positive results, let's consider how change in Cuba is actually taking place and how engagement might encourage those changes.

The Cuban government has begun a transition. Economic changes are shifting the foundations of Cuban society, as well as the fundamentals of the relationship between Cubans and their government for the first time since the 1959 revolution. There has been a shift of large numbers of workers to the newly emerging private sector and some market mechanisms have been incorporated. Thousands of Cubans are now renting out their homes on Air BnB and as of December 2015 over 500,000 Cubans were self-employed. Given the increase in tourism that number is now significantly higher and due to increase, as small and medium-sized private businesses become legal.

So as Cuba begins a slow and halting evolution, where is the United States? Under our old policy, the United States—both its government and its citizens—was largely relegated to the sidelines.

### The case for engagement

Critics of the new policy have called it a bad deal, saying that no changes have taken place in Cuba in the aftermath of the diplomatic opening. That misreads much of what has happened over the last year in the official relationship between the two governments, and it ignores the changes that are underway in Cuba itself.

More importantly however is that the previous U.S. policy achieved no results at all in this regard and in fact gave Cuban authorities cause for continuing repressive tactics. In fact, the new policy of conducting direct, high-level talks about a broad range of issues will present greater opportunity to effectively raise human rights concerns.

Engagement has proven useful in the past. President Carter dialed down the tension with Cuba and the Cuban government responded by engaging in a dialogue on political prisoners. Hundreds of political prisoners were released. Pope John Paul II visited Cuba and over the following weeks, 300 prisoners were freed. After decades of acrimony, the Archbishop of Havana, Cardinal Jaime Ortega, and Raúl Castro engaged in a series of constructive discussions. Ultimately, the dialogue resulted in the release of 110 prisoners.

Last year, we learned that 53 prisoners whose cases the United States raised with the Cuban government had been released. We understand some of the 53 released prisoners have since been detained. However, our new policy will allow the State Department to address these and other human rights challenges directly with the Cuban government.

### Opening up new space for broad range of reformers

Beyond dialogue, the shift in U.S. policy has benefitted, and will continue to benefit, reformers inside the Cuban official system—in the universities and the churches, among students and the younger generation, in the new private sector—that favor greater openness. It contributes to a climate in which the emergence of debate, constructive disagreement and new ideas is more likely to happen and harder to stifle.

People-to-people exchanges and Cuban-American family travel have helped Cuban families stay connected with their relatives in the United States and receive much-needed economic support. People-to-people travelers also engage a broad range of Cubans in dialogue about politics, the economy, press freedom, health care, and a range of other issues.

Allowing U.S. telecommunications companies to operate in Cuba is helping expand internet access on the island, break down barriers to communication, and expand citizens' ability to get information and engage in debate. The reforms the United States has made will allow greater flows of non-familial remittances. They will allow U.S. churches to deepen their ties to Cuban churches.

Family visits and remittances, assisting a growing private sector, expanding cultural and religious contacts, helping Cubans connect to the outside world—if the United States is interested in helping ordinary Cubans and promoting democratic values, these are concrete ways that we can encourage change.

### **Economic Change in Cuba**

Furthermore, even before the openings set in place by President Obama Cuba was on a trajectory toward economic change. There has been a shift of large numbers of workers to the newly emerging private sector and some market mechanisms have been incorporated. Thousands of Cubans are now renting out their homes on Air BnB and as of December 2015 over 500,000 Cubans were self-employed. Given the increase in tourism that number is now significantly higher and due to increase as small and medium-sized private businesses become legal. The fundamentals of the relationship between Cubans and their government are changing for the first time since the 1959 revolution.

Engagement, even as it intersects with the economic changes underway in Cuba, will not magically transform the nation. What it will do is open contact and dialogue with the whole spectrum of Cuban society – businesses, church, students, medical workers and scientific professionals. What they will seek in terms of reform and opening in Cuba will be up to them; we can't and shouldn't dictate the character or the pace of change in Cuba. But there is little doubt that contact and dialogue will encourage and stimulate reformers.

We shouldn't be naïve in our expectations about the political leadership in Cuba. My colleagues on this panel and others will continue to face difficulties and challenges. Cuba will reform on its own terms and in its own time. But the more quickly we move to normalize relations, the more we help create the conditions in which Cuba will update and revise its model in ways that are good for political opening and democracy.

The forms of engagement that President Obama has put into place are constructive. Moving to end the entire embargo would be another positive step for the Cuban people, as well as for the United States. That's a view shared by 72 percent of the American people, according to recent polls, including 53 percentage of Cuban Americans, and over 60 percent of Cuban Americans under 30.

We are at the beginning of a new progress of engagement - a long-term process to build bridges between the American and Cuban people. Over time, engagement will help empower Cuban citizens and open political space in Cuba.