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Wanted: A Logical Cuba Policy

By *Wayne S. Smith*

Perhaps the most striking thing about U.S. policy toward Cuba is the near-total disjuncture between stated objectives and the means chosen to achieve them. Not only do the means not serve the ends, they seem designed to work against them.

For example, the United States has made it clear that it does not want any more floods of refugees from Cuba. Yet the policy is designed to increase economic distress on the island, thus exacerbating the very conditions which cause Cubans to take to the rafts. As one observer put it, "If U.S. economic sanctions worked as well as their architects intended, the result might be a million Cuban refugees on Florida's beaches, exactly what we do not want."

And this is but an example. On a point-by-point basis, the policy is embarrassingly counterproductive. Significantly, not a single other government supports our policy toward Cuba. Indeed, it has caused serious

problems with many of our most important allies and trading partners and has placed at some risk the viability of the World Trade Organization, a body which has served U.S. interests well. Thus, while with the end of



Cuban rafters set sail for Florida in 1994.

Steven Fish, Impact Visuals

the Cold War Cuba is of little importance to the United States, in an effort to punish it, the United States has placed in jeopardy relationships and initiatives which are of vital importance. Some would call that irrational. Surely the time has come to work for a policy that serves U.S. interests—or at least that does not undermine them.

Definition of Interests

One nation's interests with respect to another are usually defined as those conditions or acts which contribute to the well-being and/or security of the first. They range from securing favorable terms of trade to making certain the other does not have weapons of mass destruction—or at least the opportunity and intention to use them. U.S. policy toward other countries should be based on the advancement of those interests, whatever they happen to be.

In the case of Cuba, it clearly is not. Rather, advocates of present policy argue that the United States must maintain its embargo and otherwise continue a hard line toward Cuba because Castro has not held free elections and has violated human rights. But this is an utterly specious argument.

Advancing the cause of a more open system and greater respect for human rights is indeed a legitimate U.S. interest, as discussed below, but it would almost certainly be better served by engagement than by continued efforts to pressure and isolate Cuba. If we can engage with China, Indonesia, Vietnam, Saudi Arabia and a whole series of other states that are no more democratic than Cuba and that have even worse human rights records, why can we not engage with Cuba? The argument that engagement works with them but would not with Cuba is utterly lacking in substance.

True, we have other compelling interests in those countries. Undersecretary of Commerce Stuart Eizenstat's response to the question of why we trade with China but not with Cuba is illustrative: "I could give you a billion reasons."

China does indeed offer a huge, nearly irresistible, market. Saudi Arabia and Indonesia have oil. If Cuba had a population of over a hundred million people,

there doubtless would be no embargo. It would have been abandoned years ago. But it is an island with a population of only eleven million. And it exports no oil.

U.S. Interests in Cuba

Still, the United States does have interests there which should not be ignored. In approximate order of priority they are:



Carolina Kroon, Impact Visuals

Danger to world trade.

- *No Massive Flow of Refugees.* During most of the Cold War, and especially after the 1962 missile crisis, U.S. interests with respect to Cuba were principally of a security nature, the first and foremost being to make certain the Soviet Union did not reintroduce offensive weapons systems. With the collapse of the Soviet Union and the end of the Cold War, however, Cuba has ceased to pose any threat to U.S. security. Security interests have been replaced by the same concern the United States has with respect to most other Caribbean nations: that the populations remain in place. The United States does not want floods of illegal aliens or refugees, whether from Haiti, Cuba or any other state.

Cuba represents the most pressing problem, however, because it is the largest island and (with the exception of the Bahamas) the closest. The United States had to make major efforts to close off the Camarioca exodus from Cuba in 1965, the Mariel sealift in 1980, and the flood of rafters in the summer of 1994.

That it wants no more refugees is reflected clearly by the 1995 refugee agreement with Cuba, under which, if Cubans try to escape to the United States by raft or small boat, they will be picked up at sea by the U.S. Coast Guard and returned to Cuba. This is manageable so long as the Cuban government does its part to curb the flow. If it did not, if it simply lifted the gates, then we would face another refugee flood, as we certainly would if there were a major outbreak of violence or an economic disaster in Cuba.

But it is as if we forget from one of these periodic outflows to the other just how costly and disruptive they are. And we seem to have forgotten again, for if preventing another outflow is a major U.S. interest, one must ask how that interest is served by a policy which aims at sharply increasing economic distress on the island—indeed, at choking it to its knees. Does that not fuel the very conditions which cause Cubans to wish to take to the boats? And can anyone imagine that Castro would allow economic deterioration to reach critical mass *without* again lifting the floodgates? Of course not. Long before economic collapse, he would react by allowing a million Cubans or more to take to the boats.

Senator Jesse Helms's response to this dilemma is to say that if Castro allowed such an exodus, the United States would consider it an act of war. Brilliant! And how would the United States respond to that exodus? By blowing the refugees out of the water? By bombing the beaches where they were gathering? By bombing other targets or perhaps by invading Cuba? Hundreds if not thousands of people would die in the process. Some solution.

Fortunately, neither the original embargo nor the Helms-Burton Act are likely to have a devastating effect in Cuba. They have done some damage and will continue to do, perhaps enough to reduce the growth rate by a percentage point or two. But by no means enough to make or break. This is a case in which the policy does minimal damage to U.S. interests only because it doesn't work very well.

- *Interdiction of Drugs.* President Bush called the war on drugs the nation's top priority. Cuba lies directly athwart one of the main drug routes from South America. Effective cooperation between the United States and Cuba could do much to stem the flow. Yet, the United States has no interdiction agreement with

Cuba; nor even any systematic means of cooperating with Cuban forces involved in the effort. The Cubans have on a number of occasions indicated their readiness to cooperate and there have even been one or two instances in which the two sides have worked together. But the United States seems to place the need to maintain an adversarial relationship with Cuba above any need to reduce the flow of drugs. It has therefore made no effort to systematize a cooperative anti-drug campaign with Cuba. At best, this is woefully shortsighted.

- *Advancing Human Rights.* Encouraging a more open political system and greater respect for human rights are perfectly legitimate U.S. interests and objectives in Cuba, as they are throughout the world. The idea that human rights are strictly an internal affair has long since been abandoned, by the United States and by the rest of the international community. The question is how best to advance human rights in Cuba, not whether we should make the effort.

Here, it must be said, the logic of trying to advance the cause by isolating the island and choking it economically is difficult to understand. As Elizardo Sanchez, Cuba's leading human rights activist, has put it, "If you want to let some light into the island, then don't keep trying to keep all the windows shut." He has also said, "The more American citizens on the streets of Cuban cities, the better for the cause of a more open system." The logic of both statements would appear to be unassailable. Yet the United States continues to prohibit the vast majority of American citizens from traveling to Cuba and continues all its other efforts, however futile, to isolate the island.

Given the history between the two countries, Cuba will always react to new U.S. pressures and efforts at intimidation by adopting a defensive mode and calling for internal discipline and ideological unity. In other words, heightened tensions and pressures produce conditions that are the opposite of those that might lead to greater openness and respect for the rights of the individual. Only when tensions between the United States and Cuba are relaxed can progress be made. It is in part with that in mind that all Cuba's religious leaders and many of its human rights activists call for an end to the U.S. embargo and a reduction of tensions between the two countries. When the very people the

United States says it wishes to help tell it that its policy is wrong, surely it should listen. But so far, it has not.

- *Economic Benefits.* It was estimated some years ago that the United States and Cuba could do upwards of \$3 billion a year in trade as soon as the embargo was lifted, with the overall figure increasing very quickly to some \$7 billion. So much European and Canadian investment has gone in since that estimate was done, and so many trade agreements have been signed, that the figure would probably now have to be revised downward. Even so, two-way trade would not be insignificant. Cuba does not offer the huge and irresistible market that China does. But for some companies and regions, it would be important. Louisiana and Arkansas rice growers, for example, would like to sell to Cuba again, as they did before 1959. The United States could also sell machinery of all kinds and consumer goods at competitive prices. And with the dollars it would earn from U.S. tourists and from the sale of shellfish and nickel to the United States, Cuba would have the money to buy U.S. products. Again, it would not be a huge market, but the United States nonetheless has an economic interest in trading with Cuba, an interest which we ignore in order to maintain our embargo. U.S. hotel chains can only stand on the sidelines as they see their competitors building profitable hotels on the best sites on the island. U.S. oil companies can only watch as their foreign competitors drill on leases they once held.

The United States also has a small but clear interest in being compensated for the some \$2 billion in properties nationalized by the Cuban government in the early 1960s. There is only one way that compensation will be obtained: through negotiation with the Cuban government. Cuba has indicated its willingness to work out a compensation agreement—and indeed has reached them with every other country that had claims against Cuba. For its part, the United States sidesteps the issue. The fact is that it does not want to sit down to negotiate such an agreement with Cuba. To do so, it fears, would be seen as a long step toward normalization and it is unwilling to take that step. And so it sacrifices compensation on the altar of an unbending embargo.

- *No Complications With Third Countries.* As noted above, in terms of concrete U.S. interests, Cuba is of

little importance to the United States—except in the negative context of avoiding more floods of refugees. It follows, therefore, that the United States should not allow its policy or attitudes toward Cuba to perturb or threaten its important relationships elsewhere.

And yet, with the Helms-Burton Act, it has done exactly that. Helms-Burton has been condemned by virtually every other government in the world, has resulted in a rash of retaliatory legislation and in a protest filed by the European Union in the World Trade Organization. If the United States ever implemented Title III of Helms-Burton (which allows U.S. citizens to sue foreign companies in U.S. courts over properties they lost in Cuba), it would cause chaos in international commerce and perhaps even jeopardize the future of the WTO. This, then, clearly is a matter of placing at risk what is important over what is not.

- *A Peaceful Transitional Process.* The U.S. government frequently says that it is working for a peaceful transitional process in Cuba. But given the objectives set forth in the Helms-Burton Act, it cannot be, for the principal aim is to bring about a transitional government *without* Fidel Castro. In other words, the United States now openly states that its objective is to get rid of Castro.

But how does one accomplish that peacefully? Can anyone imagine that Castro will retire quietly and give up without a fight? That is not in the nature of the man. He would fight—and a good percentage of the Cuban population and armed forces would fight with him. The result would be massive bloodshed, perhaps even civil war—with tens if not hundreds of thousands of refugees on our shores and intense pressures on the United States to intervene to stop the fighting. Intervention, however, could result in thousands of U.S. casualties. In short, a bloody conflagration in Cuba would have costly and painful consequences for the United States as well as Cuba. Yet our goal of ousting Castro carries us in precisely that direction.

The objective should be a peaceful transitional process *with* or *without* Castro. The key thing is to find ways to encourage movement toward a more open society. That is likely to be a lengthy and difficult process and Cuba may well not become a true democracy until after Castro passes from the scene by natural causes. But so long as movement is in the right

direction, and so long as the process is peaceful, the interests of all sides would be better served by this kind of gradual transformation than by a bloody end game.

Conclusions

U.S. policy seems to result more from passionate rhetoric and political posturing than from hard calculations as to what would best serve U.S. interests. It is time to try a more logical approach—before more

damage is done. That, however, is easier to say than do, for the Helms-Burton Act stands in the way of any significant improvement in relations with Cuba or even any meaningful change in policy. Perhaps the best tactic over the next few years will be to find ways to chip away at Helms-Burton and begin piece by piece to dismantle it. Legislation to lift the embargo on the sale of foods and medicines is a good beginning.

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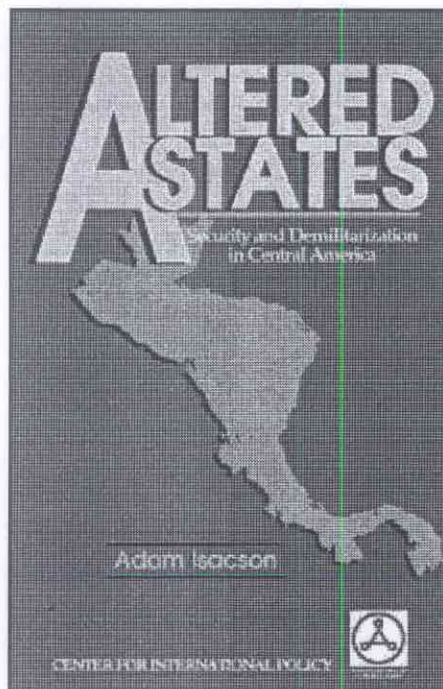
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