

U.S. CUBA POLICY: WILL WE GET IT RIGHT THIS TIME?

Alberto Luzárraga

U.S. policy toward Cuba is a classical example of a traditional United States foreign policy conundrum: its interests as a world power and the American people's desire for fairness. In Cuba's case it is complicated by the U.S. lack of continuous high level interest, underestimation of the challenge, and the neglect to formulate a long-range policy.

Most Americans are not aware of critical inflection points in the relationship. It began with Admiral de Grasse, who prior to sailing for Yorktown stopped in Havana in order to obtain funds with which to pay his troops. He had been previously rebuffed in Haiti, then a French colony, but succeeded in Havana, whose citizens had memories of centuries of conflict with England. Later, during the American Revolution, Spanish troops and Cuban militia attacked through the south, took Pensacola and Mobile and created a much needed diversion. Many other critical inflection points followed. The paths of Cuba and the United States seem to be intertwined at critical points in their history starting from their inception as new nations simply because Cuba is a strategic outpost and this fact emerges at critical moments.

The first inflection point that followed the U.S. birth as a nation was the Monroe doctrine. It established that Cuba's geographic position was vitally important to U.S. interests and stemmed from the desire to possess the island (originally a Jeffersonian objective) or at least prevent a foreign power domination of Cuba. The doctrine marked the debut of the United States as a power that saw fit to define its regional area of interest. The Monroe doctrine is the only long-range U.S. policy ever formulated towards Cu-

ba. It was a classic national interest policy that evolved into a watch and wait policy wherein Spain was seen as a weak power that would be preferable to a strong one. Thus, throughout the Cuban wars of independence, the U.S. declined to grant the Cuban patriots belligerent power recognition. Essentially the United States was afraid that a weak Cuban state would emerge and that a European power would covet it.

The Congressional Joint Resolution authorizing U.S. intervention and setting off the war with Spain was the second inflection point. It marked the emergence of the United States as a world power that dispatched an old European power in a matter of weeks. The final text of the resolution was resisted by the then administration in that it expressly established the need for Cuba's independence. Fairness triumphed, and it passed anyway. Finally decades of conflicting and vacillating policy on the subject were swept aside.

The Platt Amendment, attached to the Cuban Constitution at the U.S. request, was the third inflection point. It was an expression of national interests motivated by strategic concerns. The United States was embarking on "The Panama Canal" endeavor and it wanted a stable and peaceful Cuba, receptive to U.S. investment and securely linked to it. Consequent with the thinking of the time, Cuba could not be allowed to fall prey to another power that could block the maritime routes to the canal. The Cuban naval bases were part of this defensive position. The provisions of the amendment that limited Cuba's foreign indebtedness were part of the same thought as many European "gunboat" interventions started in order to

collect debts. The clause that gave the U.S. the right to intervene in order to quell internal unrest affirmed the protectorate. It was the third inflection point, the debut of the United States as a nation with protectorates.

The history of the amendment is too long to detail. Suffice to say that it created political problems for both countries, and retarded Cuba's political development although it probably stimulated economic development. Eventually the abrogation of the amendment took place in 1934. The United States was never comfortable in its role of self-appointed guardian, and after having emerged as a world power following World War I, its regional area of influence was unchallenged. The Platt amendment was unnecessary dead weight.

Following the abrogation, mutual relations were conducted on a more traditional fashion, wherein commercial considerations and guarantees for investors were the main issue. Throughout this period Cuba's attitude presented a duality: at the personal and nation-to-nation level, a genuine friendship and identification with many American values; from the political class a mixture of admiration and residual resentment for the amendment.

Into this situation the Castro phenomenon erupted. In an audacious move, Castro chose sides in the cold war and created a proximate threat to the United States. The foreign power incursion feared by the U.S. finally came to fruition.

The fourth inflection point was unexpected and different. It came through "internationalist" socialism coupled to Castro's continental aspirations. This was a totally new formulation never before experienced by American policy in this hemisphere particularly when the instrument was a small, former client state. A "solution," inspired by the Guatemala template, was devised showing that not much was understood and that underestimation was alive and well.

The Bay of Pigs failure marked the fifth inflection point. It was the first widely publicized defeat of American policy in Latin America and it produced two offspring: the "Alliance for Progress" and the October missile crisis. The Alliance never produced

much progress nor did it stop Castro. It was another example of a policy of "reacting" to the circumstances without trying to understand the issue at hand. Or worse yet, misdiagnosing the causes of Castro's ascent to power, mistaking it for a social revolution of the masses and not a political revolution that was then redirected to suit the ambitions of a new class.

The October 1962 missile crisis was the sixth and most dangerous inflection point. For the first time in U.S. history a very grave proximate threat to national security took place. It was "unthinkable" that Castro would encourage Khrushchev and that the Russians would take up the offer. The unwinding of the crisis resulted in U.S. guarantees to the Soviet Union that Castro would be left alone, and the Monroe doctrine was placed in suspended animation. It was the seventh inflection point. Several decades of Castro military intrusion in the hemisphere and around the world followed, with the bill footed by the Soviet Union. Finally, the cold war ended and the thought was that Castro, no longer supported by the Soviet Union, would regress to a "nuisance" category. And then the psychological trip-wire that appears to exist at the policy level of the United States, took over: "Cuba is an errant ex ward come to age and given its small size not a serious threat."

The realities of asymmetrical warfare should have rendered these conclusions obsolete but nonetheless they persist. Castro has played this vulnerability of American thought to the hilt, playing the "victim" role, while winning and dining more U.S. legislators (and one former president) than anyone in recorded history. In the meantime, he pursued another dangerous hemispheric agenda. This time it was purely homegrown. Its two more obvious products are Chávez and Evo Morales, both leaders of energy-rich countries. Throughout this period, Castro managed to infiltrate the higher levels of U.S. intelligence—witness the Ana Belén Montes case—and to influence U.S. policy by masking his intentions through the use of the "enemy's" intelligence assets. Military assessments of Cuba's capabilities and intentions were heavily influenced by Ms. Montes, who was the resident "expert" on Cuban matters. Not a bad result for a "nuisance."

PRESENT SITUATION

Embarrassing facts tend to be set aside. This truism, coupled with the downsizing of historical memory, serves well the effort of some business interests that demand a purely commercial approach in U.S. policy towards Cuba. Their argument in essence is: Cuba is not capable of harming the United States so why don't we conduct business as usual? Presumably this would also include public credit. This idea has been persistently pushed in Congress through business lobbyists. So far the executive branch, with information in good part furnished by the Cuban American community and the Cuban American legislators, has held to a policy that basically preserves the *status quo* in spite of substantial pressure to change.

For most of Castro's 46 years in power, U.S. policy toward Cuba has been reactive, and at times sleepy or electoral. (Keep the Cuban Americans happy and kick it forward to the next administration.) The American public has no appreciation of the events in the hemisphere and tends to become aware only when crisis impends. Whatever debate exists is mainly confined to commercial and political interests vs. the Cuban American community. Academia is also involved and mostly on the accommodation with Castro side.

A concept of where Cuba, Cubans, Americans and Cuban Americans fit in the U.S. body politic and Latin American policy is as absent as it is needed. Enough has happened in the last four decades: Bay of Pigs, October Missile Crisis, Cuba's Latin America intervention and guerrilla operations in among others Bolivia, Venezuela, Argentina, Grenada, and Central America. Add to this an expeditionary force sent to Angola, guerrillas sent to other African countries, intervention the Middle East conflict, support of terrorism and drug traffic, shooting down of American civilian aircraft. The list is interminable. And now back to square one with Chávez et al.

This is not the work of a single man, it is the work of a team dedicated to stir up trouble and push an agenda. A team that will attempt to cling to power and influence after Castro exits. The issue will not go away and needs to be answered because Castro's days are numbered (he is not a healthy man).

In this void, there are in the United States two main currents of thinking that vie for dominance:

1. Produce permanent and true democratic change in Cuba.
2. Make an accommodation with the *status quo*.

The motivations of accommodation advocates come in four brands:

1. The American socialists (albeit operating under other labels): They want accommodation because they like the Cuban system, including the total control of the education process. The fact that Castro's Cuba is drifting towards fascism is irrelevant for this group.
2. The "make a buck today crowd": This group cares little about anything else and lacks strategic thought. Usually they will argue that trade and business will inevitably bring political change. True, but the problem is that the thinking stops there. What kind of change, under what circumstances, and with what consequences is the point. Cubans do not need to jump from the frying pan of Stalinist socialism to the fire of post-socialist quasi fascism run by an enriched new class of ex-bureaucrats. Further, consequences in the hemisphere are totally absent from their thinking.
3. The immigration worriers: The fear is that an impoverished Cuban population will take to the Florida straits without a strong regime that will restrain them. This is a rather narrow and cynical argument that has some short-term validity but is a very poor long term "solution." Tyrannical regimes produce poverty. The strong-regime "solution" would perpetuate the problem, not solve it. A prosperous Cuba will not seek emigration. It did not happen before Castro.
4. The Chinese model advocates: This is really a more sophisticated version of the "make a buck today" concept. It is the same idea with some "intellectual" trimmings. The Cuban American community assumes the role of the overseas Chinese in investing in a post Castro Cuba that continues to be ruled by the same group of top castroites, who supposedly will "evolve" towards democracy. Not much effort is required to un-

derstand that this Darwinian model will produce a new version of a Caribbean dictatorship parceling out a country to its friends and partners. It presupposes benign and beneficial “evolution” without providing a single cogent argument of why people accustomed to do what they want with no moral or rule of law habits will radically change for the better and not enrich themselves. Further, comparing Cuba and the Cuban American community to China ignores several obvious facts. A millenary culture in China that sustains the belief of many Chinese that the Middle Kingdom is the Mecca of civilization and should again rule the world. A nationalism that harks back to that idea. 1,200 million people that must be fed. A continuous history of absolute rulers. Vicious internal strife when anything other than absolute power was tried. A distance of 11,000 kilometers between Washington and Beijing. No history of a close relationship with the United States. Not a part of the American continent and its libertarian aspirations. And finally, this model is still an unfinished book politically. Nobody knows for sure whether Chinese nationalism will turn virulent or not. It would seem that to the proponents of this “solution,” Cubans are not capable of restoring their western traditions and culture. They must adopt a model that is alien and distant, work for small wages, have limited liberties, and be resigned to their lot. And to boot, meekly accept their sad fate 90 miles from the greatest economy and democracy in the world. This moronic and fatalistic idea requires a moronic and fatalistic people to accept it. Cuba and the Cubans are not that, and neither is the United States.

The advocates of permanent and true democratic change (led by vast majority of the Cuban American community) reject an accommodation with the Cuban status quo for two essentials reasons:

1. **Common sense:** The architects of disaster cannot produce a viable democracy or indeed a safe and prosperous country that will be a good neighbor.

2. **Justice:** After so many missteps, the Cuban people deserve freedom and not a “utilitarian” solution that is neither “utilitarian” nor a solution.

In the heated climate of political discourse, logic makes an exit. The adversaries of the libertarian approach try to paint most Cuban Americans as rabid advocates of “revanche” or alternatively as an out of touch remnant of a community wherein the younger generation has a different point of view. The fact is that there exists a remarkable continuity of sentiment that spans across generations, nurtured by the fact that the exile community is consistently replenished by new arrivals.

These are not the white Russians living in Paris that eventually died out. It is a veritable living political body wherein the new arrivals, having in many cases suffered more, are more anti-Castro in their convictions. Many are young and they are heard by the Cuban American youth.

Another undeniable fact is that the exile community, generously accepted in the U.S. under exceptional terms, has responded in kind creating wealth and prosperity for themselves and their adopted country. It has attained very high levels of education and achievement in business and academia as well as politics, having adapted in record time to the system and sent four congressmen, one senator, and two cabinet secretaries to Washington, in addition to having contributed a very large number of representatives to local government (another radical difference with China). That Cuban Americans are industrious, educated, and adept at political activity is obvious. They need not reclaim properties in Cuba nor engage in dirty business with an immoral new class to advance their fortunes. They need not rely on so called experts to tell them what they are supposed to think. They can and do think quite well by themselves. It is a prosperous community that realizes full well how difficult it will be to turn Cuba around and that *practical ideas and not more ideology is the solution*. Hard facts belie the “revanche” smear of a vindictive exile community with fixated ideas that those with non-libertarian or semi socialist agendas seek unsuccessfully to disseminate. Cubans have thought things through and they know what they do not want: more

decades of socialism or a Caribbean version of fascism. The American left does not like this train of thought and the American “make a buck today crowd” does not care. Well, we care and have refused for 46 years to sing in the choir of prefabricated thought for a very simple reason: We have seen the results.

NEED TO IMPROVE THE PRESENT POLICY AND PLAN FOR THE FUTURE

The present policy includes a very good component. It clearly states that Castro is a tyrant, must go, and that Cubans deserve full liberty and not a “proforma” democracy. It fits with the President’s belief that true democracies do not create wars but prosperity, and that the best neighbors are those with solid democratic institutions.

However, it lacks focus and follow up. Congressmen and Senators from both parties continue to visit Cuba and upon return continue to lobby for their political or commercial interests. From time to time they propose disastrous legislation that passes both chambers and eventually gets shot down in conference or through parliamentary devices following veto threats. Recently, there was a change, and a number of proposals were voted down in the House thanks to the hard work of Cuban American legislators and to the success in disseminating information by dedicated persons in the Cuban American community. But the fact that this must be done shows the level of misinformation that is allowed to take place without official rebuttal, or for that matter rebuttal by a group with impeccable credentials and professional depth.

In a democracy, legislators have the right to push forward their views, but it is stunning that matters such as the Ana Belén Montes case and Castro’s involvement in strategically important countries such as Bolivia and Venezuela (with huge energy reserves) and in money laundering are totally out of the public political discourse. Recently we have the money laundering scheme of many billions in which Cuba was the main culprit that resulted in a \$100 million dollar fine by the Federal Reserve on a Swiss Bank. The issue reinforced the copious evidence of drug trafficking at Cuba’s highest echelons. Indeed, when one sees important Senators with intimate knowledge of

intelligence matters vote affirmatively on bills that would be a boon for Castro, without a whiff of an explanation as to why they do so, it is fair to conclude that they do not care, that they are posturing politically, or that they are not sufficiently apprised by the administration of the importance of the issue.

It is about time that the Cuban issue is addressed in a consistent manner by people that have a continuing interest in the matter. At the executive level, there is too much turnover. As a result, Castro knows much more about the U.S. system than vice versa. Superficial opinions by self-appointed experts abound. In the meantime, basic facts hardly reach the U.S. public level. Indeed, for the American public, Castro and his latest Latin American “exploits” are not only not news, Castro’s Cuba could well exist in another planet.

Events have shown that the policy of “benign neglect” begets acute infection. Lack of a focused policy can see the island’s future government vest in a group of false reformers. Worse yet, a “pragmatic approach” of embracing a “reformed” status quo, as proposed by some business and political interests, can give respectability to a system that can easily degenerate into a “high tech” rogue state, dedicated to a slew of criminal activities 90 miles away. Past history shows that the talent to do the latter is there. They have been preparing for a long time. Underestimation again? Will it lead to another inflection point?

ACTION

Premise

No one knows exactly how the end of the Castro regime will come or how it will play out. In the immediate aftermath, many scenarios are possible and the governing U.S. administration will have to play the hand it is dealt. Whether there is internal strife with much violence, or with little violence, or some other result is unknown. *What we know for sure is that after a period of time economic and political realities in Cuba will take the front stage and the process of creating a viable country and economy will commence anew.*

To help Cuba become a prosperous country and a good neighbor will be a challenge. Absent war, for a foreign policy to be effective a democracy needs to

persuade and influence. Traditionally, that is the sphere of diplomats, but reconstruction of a destroyed society is a different matter. No diplomat is blessed with the gift of ubiquity. No person in today's world has encyclopedic knowledge. Lack of an intelligent and executable post-Castro policy can have a disastrous result. A different approach is needed to produce a good result.

A good result is a post Castro Cuba that is a trusted ally of the United States and a great place for investment. In a very confused Latin American continent Cuba has produced, by force of circumstance, an important segment of population (exiled and in the island) vaccinated against the evils of absurd nationalism and socialism. A new and enlightened Cuban political class can be a force for good in the hemisphere to the same extent that a radicalized class has been a force for destabilization.

Cuban Americans understand and want to cooperate in creating freedom and prosperity. Immense numbers of capable people in the island want the same. There is a very substantial body of business experience and sound professional competence in many specialties in the Cuban American community. Many would gladly help for no remuneration. Moreover, many would be happy to donate money.

In order to obtain a good result the availability of this asset must mark present and future policy. But it must be mobilized efficiently, and not in a haphazard fashion. A systematic effort to channel and utilize these talents is lacking. Isolated studies, grants to institutions, etc., are fine and can be useful, but often lack the professional focus of people that have hands-on experience. Further they do not encompass all the areas that must be dealt with. Writing about privatization and buying a state company and making it succeed are not the same. The same can be said about many important issues such as debt renegotiation, health policy, education, housing, legal and judicial matters, etc.

The recent document prepared by the U.S. government on help for a free Cuba is a good effort that raises essential issues. But it is a list of things to do and good practice recommendations that are well

known to competent professionals. Although useful, it does not deal with the "how to adapt to a particular situation," nor does it offer continuity and automatic update. It was completed and filed away. But life goes on in Cuba. Every day things change. In any good study there is a core of principles that have permanence and validity that transcend time. But when dealing with a society in motion, guided by a totalitarian mafia, static studies miss much because the mafia also reads and adapts to circumstance.

The document explains the U.S. willingness to help in the areas that it details. But to expect that a new and free government in Cuba will know exactly what to do, and moreover have the political force to do it, is more than optimistic: it is unrealistic.

A liaison component that can communicate in the same language, understand the psychology, and have the professional competence is needed.

It can be created rather easily. As we said, there is a very unusual reservoir of untapped talent close to the island, apprised of the circumstances, fluent in both languages, and interested in the topic. Further it can mobilize substantial capital resources.

Recommendation

1. Create a permanent body to study the Cuban post Castro reconstruction. Semantics aside, from a practical viewpoint, it is a reconstruction and not a transition simply because institutions are lacking and because in Cuba there are very few organizations that can be trusted to function fairly and efficiently.
2. This should be a private sector body mainly composed of Cuban or Cuban American professionals residing in free countries, with hands-on experience in different fields, that would be invited or accepted as volunteers to contribute their time for no remuneration. Volunteers that are not Cuban and have specific skills would also be accepted. Members would be reimbursed only for out of pocket expenses.
3. The entity would be apolitical and not connected to any particular institution, in order to eliminate suspicions of a particular point of view or agenda. A need such as potable water is a need—

period. The object is not to debate political philosophy but viable solutions. Divergent opinions, even on more debatable issues such as how to organize a free country subject to the rule of law, can be taken care of in specific recommendations. Such is their proper place.

4. The basis of membership would be professional competence, supported by proven past experience and not political preference. A formal written commitment to dedicate time would be required. Suggested name: Professionals for Cuban Reconstruction.
5. Seed money in the form of expenses, exclusively for an administrative staff, would be provided through a grant by USAID or a similar federal body. To sustain the body, contributions by the Cuban American community would be encouraged and matched on a dollar to dollar basis by the grantor.
6. The entity would be charged with a *continuing revision* of the Cuban situation. It should create a basic document for each substantial reconstruction issue that details the present state and possible solutions. Topics would cover all essential issues from the creation of political and governing institutions to the bread and butter ones of infrastructure, monetary and fiscal policy, etc. A comprehensive treatment of topics would be a long list that nonetheless can be systematized and linked as appropriate in order to produce useful results. State of the art thinking and creativity would be encouraged.
7. Said documents would include an estimate of costs and possible ways of financing.
8. This entity would operate with full transparency and also be charged with presenting the Cuban reality in a professional and factual way to the American public and to Congress.

9. More importantly, its work product and staff would be available to a free Cuban government. It may ask the entity, if it so wishes, to work with Cuban local experts that have the intimate knowledge of where action is more urgent as well as of the nature of the problems.

The predictable result in the United States would be to eliminate useless rhetoric and nonsense from would-be-sellers of all things to a bankrupt country with no debt capacity, and to present in stark terms the fact that only through new capital investments can Cuba come around. Obviously this would not happen unless an honest government, subject to the rule of law, was incorporated into the equation. It would also show how absurd it is to try to base a Cuban reconstruction on broken and inoperative models. Something good cannot come out of nothing, or from people that have only produced poverty and despair. Cubans need to be spared additional doses of ruinous ideology and dishonesty.

For Cuba, a body as described would jump start the reconstruction process and provide a sounding board for a future Cuban government. It could react with much more agility to provide advice and study on pressing issues, than the classic international institutions that certainly will be involved but have many other priorities and must follow their established procedures.

After so many missteps it is time to do something different and base it on people that are volunteers with no agenda. Cynics will say that this is too idealistic. Perhaps, but cynics never created anything worthwhile. Politicians will point to the obvious difficulties in getting this started. Perhaps, but dealing with a neighbor rogue state is even more difficult. Creative action is required.