

# COMMENTS ON “THE CASE AGAINST UNLIMITED TRAVEL TO CUBA AS AN AGENT FOR DEMOCRATIZATION”

## BY JAMES CASON

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In his paper, “The Case against Unlimited Travel to Cuba as an Agent for Democratization,” James Cason presents the case against the liberalization of U.S. travel restrictions on travel to Cuba. Cason believes that tourism is not likely to increase the yearnings of Cubans for democracy, and will not improve the average Cuban’s living standards. He also argues that while family visits are desirable for humanitarian reasons, they do nothing to destabilize the current regime.

Cason’s arguments represent the orthodoxy of the Department of State and most Foreign Service officers that have served in the U.S. Interests Section in Havana. As Counselor for Economic and Political Affairs in Havana from 1997-99, I used most of these same arguments. Nevertheless, I believe Cason overstates his case while ignoring related concerns.

Cason is most convincing when he describes the Cuban government’s effective efforts to limit tourist contact with ordinary Cubans and the behavior of the tourists themselves, which he describes as a search for “rum, sun, cigars, song and sex.” Unfortunately, my own experience in Cuba, although ten years earlier, led me to the same conclusion.

I do not agree, however, with his contention that ordinary Cubans do not benefit from tourism. Cason’s own observation—that there are hundreds of applicants for every job in the tourism industry—provides convincing evidence to the contrary. Illegal or not, Cubans do accept tips at Cuban resorts and many also receive payroll bonuses that go directly to the employees rather than through the government’s 5% wage scheme. Some of that money goes to purchase items in

dollar stores where the government has monopoly power, but some of it also has a multiplier effect as it passes through the hands of other Cubans who provide private services or goods, thus benefiting far more than just those employed in the tourism sector.

It is easy to overestimate the amount taken in by the government. Balance of payments figures for tourism do not reflect the imported component of the industry. Because Cuban agriculture is not able to provide high quality fruits, vegetables, or meat that foreigners expect, much of it is imported. Foreign management contracts also take a piece of the action, as also does repayment of the foreign capital invested in many of the hotels. During this reviewer’s tenure in Cuba, much of the capital came from the same companies that provided the management contracts.

Of the money the Cuban government receives from tourism, some is likely to go to its internal security forces. Nevertheless, the structure of the Cuban system also requires it to provide food, education and health care to its citizens. These responsibilities also require some of the funds the government receives from tourism.

Cason somewhat grudgingly accepts that émigré travel “may have been a key factor in spreading the desire for freedom and democracy on the island” but then observes, “nothing has come of this.” I disagree. Cason misses the essential impact of the Cuban-American visits, which revealed to the Cuban population the extent of their own poverty, an issue that has caused widespread discontent on the island. That discontent has not caused the regime to fall, but the changed per-

ceptions have weakened the legitimacy of the Government's policies—policies also shown to be inadequate by the Special Period. The discontent has spread to the Communist Party itself, where differences over policy have become evident, if muted. As long as Fidel and Raúl remain the nation's undisputed leaders, surrounded by the old guard oligopoly, we may not see much change. Once they are gone, however, change is likely to come more quickly.

My fundamental disagreement with Cason is his conclusion that ordinary Cubans do not benefit from tourism and that even émigré travel has done nothing to increase freedom on the island. Our differences may be due in part, to how we define freedom. Yes, it is true that there has been no progress in developing democracy. Political control remains in the hands of the Communist Party and the Castro brothers, but freedom has broader dimensions than the ability to choose one's leaders.

Cuba is not a dictatorship. It is a totalitarian society where the Communist Party requires every citizen to support the state. The government, the Party and the mass organizations largely determine where people work and how much they are paid. They control access to higher education. They control what the people can buy, both by controlling distribution and by direct control. Many household goods or consumables are not even available in the stores, but are distributed to "model workers" at the workplace. Buying a car, a motorcycle, or a musical instrument requires permission by the government. That permission requires, in turn, the approval of the Committee for the Defense of the Revolution (CDR), which must certify the buyer's good conduct, and support of the revolution. Any sudden increase in wealth draws immediate attention from the CDR. The same CDRs can and do deny a student access to the University, if he or she refuses to join in mass rallies, fails to vote, or is otherwise deemed antisocial. Being deemed antisocial becomes a blot on an individual's record that will affect their place in society for the rest of their lives. This totalitarian society cripples initiative, denies hope, and makes passivity a virtue. It allows the government to remain in power while only jailing a relatively few high-profile dissidents.

Like Cason, I doubt that civil society will overthrow the regime. My belief is that change will come—at

least initially—from change at the top, as power transfers to a new generation, with different life experiences, new perceptions and hopefully more open minds. That is where tourism, émigré travel, some foreign investment, and remittances become important. To the extent these activities provide income apart from that provided by the state, they give individuals more personal freedom from the state. To the extent they show Cubans the freedom of action and thought that visitors enjoy, they generate a desire for the same freedom. To the extent they change generational views, they speed the evolution of Cuban society.

This is not a promise of quick change, but neither is it idealistic daydreaming. It happened during the period following the withdrawal of Soviet assistance, and the economic reforms of the "Special Period" that followed. The Cuban government allowed the establishment of small family-owned businesses, *paladares*, and small bed and breakfasts in private residences. Many Cubans learned that they could improve their own economic situation through their own efforts. They learned how markets work. Allowed to make money outside the government sector, ordinary Cubans were no longer tightly controlled by their CDRs. They felt freer to criticize government policies and even the government itself—although criticism of Fidel remained muted. The subsequent government efforts to pull back some of these reforms does not negate the argument. I suspect that, to the contrary, it was fear of newly-exercised freedoms that caused the government to tighten its controls.

Although Jim Cason and I disagree in our analysis of the impact of tourism, it appears that our policy conclusions are similar. I strongly support the free travel of Cuban-Americans, researchers, and affinity groups, but I find the case for ordinary tourist travel much less persuasive. Ordinary tourism, as observed on the island today, will not present a significant danger to the regime, but would give it a psychological victory.

I would prefer a policy of engagement with Cuba. If the regime makes changes that give greater freedom to its people, we should respond proportionately by allowing greater commerce with Cuba. Allowing ordinary tourism could then be one of the first rewards we give for better behavior.