

Ending the embargo

Why America needs to revise its Cuba policy

By Jeff Fowler

“Castro is no angel, but to single him and his people out for a punishment so far out of balance with his alleged threat is ridiculous.”

Few things are as useful to the gifted politician in mobilizing opinion and support as fear. Demonizing one's opponents, while in all but a few extreme cases a tactic of questionable morality, is effective. And effect is what matters to the politician, especially in the Machiavellian world of international politics. Thus, various politicians have found it convenient for various reasons to demonize the person and rule of Fidel Castro, dictator of the island of Cuba, just 90 miles off of Florida's south coast. As demonization goes, it was particularly effective and led in 1960 to the placing of an embargo on Cuba, support for which has won many politicians the patronage of the *very* vocal community of Floridian Cuban refugees. And it has been these refugees, because of disinterest on the part of most Americans and the refugees' own perceived position as election-makers, who have been allowed to shape America's policy towards Cuba almost since Castro's rise. Of late however, there has been a growing sentiment in the United States that the stance towards the isle has become outdated and unnecessary. Calls have arisen not only from the liberal establishment (which has been taking shots at U.S. policy towards Cuba for years) but from moderate Americans, who in general lean a little right of center and tend to be substantially more important to the electoral hopes of many politicians than an enclave of dissatisfied Cubans. In addition to these first two groups, a third group, conservative Americans, should lend its voice to those of the first two in calling for an end to the embargo and more open relations with Cuba.

Countries are naturally interested in their own survival and, regardless of the humanitarian interests of their citizens, they could not withstand the defining of their own nation's foreign policy objectives in the terms of a foreign people's interest. While the Cuban people under the reign of Castro have suffered, their chance at political expression been curtailed and many of what the Western world has defined as their "natural" rights been ignored, the status of their happiness, speech and rights has not reached the outrageous lows seen in much of the Third and former Second Worlds. In the category of quality of life, Cuba is a middle-of-the-pack nation and undeserving of such harsh treatment by the U.S. government. This humanitarian argument alone is not enough to justify an about-face in American policy.

Fidel Castro is old and only aging. The time will come when he will pass from the world political scene. It is the duty of the United States to ensure that, as he passes, socialism passes from Cuba. A more lenient policy now could help foster and cement support for America and its system of government within Cuba. Perhaps it might even pressure Castro to adopt certain economic reforms while he is still in power, which in turn could lead to political liberalization. Or perhaps a more lenient policy might just result in a more prosperous, though just as stridently socialist, Cuba. Either way, American business (which must be the ultimate concern of such deliberations) would benefit from increased

trade and a more open flow of people and ideas. This is the very core of fiscal conservatism and one of the principles that American capitalism is founded on.

In light of the fact that the embargo is *costing* America money, the question of what the embargo is intended to do is a natural one. The embargo, of course, is meant to weaken Castro. However, the embargo has perhaps instead strengthened Castro's hand (if one keeps in mind the political good that could come from closer economic ties to Cuba). A second question is why does the U.S. want to weaken Castro? The standard answers are because he ignores his own citizen's human rights; because he aids our enemies; or because we simply cannot tolerate in our own "neighborhood" the existence of the political system that we spent much of the twentieth century fighting. These answers, or something like them, have been the refrain of past American leaders, who often sought economic means (such as an embargo) to political or military ends. As the downfall of the Soviet Union and its satellite states illustrated, this approach is often the opposite of what is needed: increased economic involvement. Additionally, Castro poses a military threat to the United States in the same way that the Vatican City poses a military threat to the United States. Which is to say, he does not. In comparison to the real threat posed by such communist nations as China and North Korea (and the many *noncommunist* nations who constitute real security risks to the United States), Castro's communist state is a benign tumor that time and economic improvement will excise from the world political scene.

The strain that the embargo puts on the government of the United States (as time and money expended) cannot be justified through any real gains. It has instead become a liability to the U.S. government both politically, in that it creates opposition to the government which could possibly spill over into opposition to legitimate efforts, and economically, in that it is depriving U.S. businesses of a market and labor pool. The idea of military benefit is laughable. Castro does not have the power to threaten America, and the fall of the Soviet Union deprived him of friends who did. Never again will there come from Cuba anything approaching the threat of the Cuban Missile Crisis. Castro's personal worthiness as a target of the embargo is also questionable, especially after the attacks of September 11, 2001 when he voiced his solidarity with America and stood by without protest as soldiers of al-Qaeda and the Taliban were sent to the American Guantanamo military base on Cuba. His only criticism of the U.S. during this time came when he denounced (reasonably) the American war on Afghanistan because of the civilian casualties that would undoubtedly result. For some time Castro has appeared to be signaling his willingness to cozy up to the U.S. Are the American people ready to miss such an opportunity in the name of fears that most of them no longer hold? They have clearly answered that they are not. Castro is no angel, but to single him and his people out for a punishment so far out of balance with his alleged threat is ridiculous. For the American people as much as for the Cubans, the time has come for conservatives to look again at the United States' policy towards Cuba, and to seriously consider a change therein.