

The U.S. and Cuba: changes ahead?

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Victory in the Cold War, instead of producing changes in United States policy toward Cuba—which was the case with Vietnam, for example—has hardened the U.S. attitude toward the island. In contrast with the position expressed over the previous twenty years, the condition for normalizing political relations is once again a change of regime in Havana.¹

The Bush and Clinton administrations have started from the premise that this change is not only possible but imminent, although they have not specified how nor exactly when it would come about.² It must be recognized that, nuances aside,

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¹ While it is true that the U.S. never abandoned this goal, it was presented as a realizable objective only in the '60s. In the '70s, in view of the consolidation of the island's political and economic model, the priority became undermining Cuba's alliance with the USSR and reducing its influence in Africa and Central America. Under Carter the suggestion was even made that diplomatic relations be reestablished if Cuba abided by these requirements. See, for example, the description of U.S. policy toward Cuba made by the State Department in its "Fact Sheet," published in the *U.S. Department of State Dispatch*, February 22, 1993.

² The most complete exposition I have seen regarding the logic of the objectives and means of U.S. Cuba policy under Bush appeared in the article by Robert Gelbard, Principal Deputy Assistant Secretary for Interamerican Affairs, "U.S. Policy Toward Cuba," in *U.S. Department of State Dispatch*, April 20, 1992. For the Clinton administration see, for example, Alexandre F. Watson,

this objective is widely shared among the various political tendencies in Washington.

A change which should nevertheless be noted, in comparison with the '60s, is that today the U.S. declares that it does not seek a violent transformation in Cuba and that the United States no longer presents a threat to the island.³

There is a marked continuity in the means for achieving the objectives Washington proclaims. The argument for continuing these policies is that they have produced results, and that they are the reason the Cuban model has been isolated.⁴ The claim is made that this is precisely the most important time to maintain these measures, since the policy is allegedly about to bear fruit. To do otherwise, according to Michael Skol,

Assistant Secretary for Interamerican Affairs, "The Cuban Democracy Act: One Year Later," in *U.S. Department of State Dispatch*, December 6, 1993.

³ However, in military terms there has been no reduction in the enormous deployment of forces surrounding the island, and numerous war-games continue to be held. The purpose would seem to be to use these mobilizations as a form of political pressure, preventing the Cuban government from withdrawing resources from defense in order to use them for other, economic purposes. Yet it should not be ruled out that these exercises are aimed more directly at preparedness for eventual contingencies that might present themselves on the island and call for U.S. intervention.

⁴ See Gelbard, *op. cit.*

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Undersecretary of State responsible for Cuba policy, would be to give an inappropriate gift to Fidel Castro.⁵

In late 1992 the U.S. Congress, after intense lobbying by the right wing of the Cuban-American community, passed the Torricelli Bill tightening the anti-Cuba blockade. Among other measures, this law seeks to prevent trade with Cuba by foreign-based subsidiaries of U.S. companies, impede ships which have stopped at Cuban ports from having access to U.S. ports, and suspend aid to foreign governments which provide assistance to Cuba.⁶

Financing for Radio Martí and TV Martí has been maintained (albeit with growing difficulty), as part of the effort to influence the Cuban people ideologically. In fact a recent nuance in U.S. policy is the current attempt, by any and all means, to increase communication with the island's "civil society" in order to speed a change in regime from within. Paragraph 1705 of the Torricelli Bill calls for increasing the flow of information and envisages the possibility of humanitarian donations as well as arrangements for improving telecommunications, among other measures aimed at accomplishing these objectives.⁷

Another post-Cold War novelty has been the line of promoting as much as possible the activity of

⁵ Cited by Jim Cason and David Brooks in *La Jornada*, March 18, 1994.

⁶ See Watson, *op. cit.*

⁷ *Ibid.*

internal human-rights groups as agents of change and, given these groups' low level of visibility, seeking to contact and influence members of the armed forces, the party apparatus, intellectuals and the youth. This might be called something like the "East Europe formula."

All this is combined with the international campaign to have the United Nations condemn Cuba for human-rights violations. In the diplomatic sphere pressure is put on states maintaining relations with Cuba in order to continue the policy of isolation. First and foremost, advantage has been taken of the "revolution" in the values of Russian diplomacy, but new life has been breathed into efforts to prevent Cuban links with Europe and Latin America. Support has been given to those governments which seek to make internal changes in Cuba the precondition for bilateral relations.

The Clinton administration

Many observers thought this picture might change when the Clinton administration entered the White House. There were a number of reasons for such speculations:

Clinton is the first Democratic president since Jimmy Carter, who sought to face the issue of Cuba. Carter was remembered as the initiator of an opening in relations between the two countries. For some time, moreover, Democratic advisory groups had been posing the need for a new look at policy toward Havana.⁸ Unlike Bush, Clinton had no personal connections with Cuban issues and owed no political favors to the Miami

⁸ In 1992 Inter-American Dialogue, the Democrats' main think-tank on Latin America, issued a report calling for changes in U.S. Cuba policy. Several Dialogue members are currently in Clinton's cabinet. Richard Feinberg, then president of Dialogue, is now in charge of Latin America in the National Security Council.

Cuban community, which overwhelmingly voted against him.⁹

After an uncertain and confused first half of 1993,¹⁰ however, the Clinton White House dispelled whatever doubts that might have arisen. Key spokesmen confirmed that both the objectives and the means of U.S. policy toward Cuba would follow the line of traditional Washington policy.



“The U.S. blockades its own businesses from competing in Cuba”

The new administration has responded to the reforms that have been occurring in Cuba, particularly in the economic field, by stressing that the changes are cosmetic and insufficient. When it has recognized reform measures, this has been adduced as an argument for continuing the existing U.S. strategy in line with the claim that these changes have been possible only because of the maintenance of the U.S. embargo, the only form of pressure — according to this logic — that Washington has for promoting change in Cuba.

⁹ It is important to recall that through his son Jeb (a key Republican figure in Florida), President Bush maintained close relations with Cuban organizations in Miami. It was no surprise that, in the 1992 elections, a high percentage of Cubans in Dade County — who are, moreover, traditionally Republicans — voted for Bush.

¹⁰ Various factors played a role in this initial uncertainty. One was the standard policy review carried out by every new administration; another was the fact that Cuba was not (nor is it now) a central priority for the White House. The delay in naming an Undersecretary for Latin America also played a role; the Cuban-American National Foundation (the Cuba lobby's main component) vetoed the nomination of Mario Baeza, who had been the Democrats' first choice for the post.

Despite the fact that the guiding line of current policy is continuity with the past, several nuances have shown up in the Democrats' approach.

There has been a reduction in the hostile language and political-psychological tension used by the Bush administration. "Improving communications with the Cuban people" is a concept which now

appears more frequently and is given greater emphasis, and the statement is even made that U.S. strategy consists not only of pressure on the Havana government but is a two-track policy which also aims to build bridges to Cuban society.¹¹

In practice more licenses have been granted for humanitarian shipments to the island, and the possibility has been mooted of reaching some kind of accord on telecommunications. It is important to note that this logic also includes the significant increase in the activities of the National Endowment for Democracy (NED), which in 1993 alone provided half a million dollars in aid to groups seeking to "promote democracy" in Cuba.

Yet what is most significant about Clinton's period in office to date may not be the measures taken (or not taken) by his administration, but rather the debate that has broken out within U.S. society, in Congress, the press and the business community, regarding policy toward Cuba.

The debate

Increasingly forceful arguments are heard, from a range of viewpoints, in favor of overhauling U.S. policy in

¹¹ *Ibid.*

light of the island's having ceased to be a source of worry in terms of national security.

In reality, the discussion does not question the validity of U.S. policy objectives, centering instead on the means for achieving the same ends. According to the new logic, the economic embargo serves to reinforce the Cuban government's nationalist posture, which blames the U.S.—and not failures of the system—for the island's problems. It is further argued that since Washington's final objectives have not been achieved over the past 33 years, it is necessary to change strategies and try out new formulas. Harvard University's Professor Domínguez, for example, argues that the model of free trade and stepped-up relations implemented with China and Mexico should be applied to Cuba as well.¹²

Proponents of this view hold that the partial or total dismantling of the embargo (in exchange for Cuban concessions) could accelerate the changes occurring in Cuba, eventually eroding the foundations of the regime.

On another level, in light of the economic opening currently being undertaken on the island, many U.S. entrepreneurs have noticed how their European, Japanese and Latin American competitors are taking advantage of new business opportunities in Cuba—and this in an economy whose trade with the U.S. could reach between four and six billion dollars a year, according to the Office of the Comptroller General.

In a congressional session devoted to a legislative proposal to lift the embargo, Representative Charles Rangel noted: "While we continue to blockade our own businesses from competing in Cuba, investors from Canada, Mexico and Latin America are taking their place."¹³

¹² See the above-cited *La Jornada* report by Jim Cason and David Brooks.

¹³ *Ibid.* (Quotation retranslated here from Spanish.)

There is a growing awareness, at the practical level, of how the interests and geo-economic logic of the U.S. are coming into contradiction with the geo-political perceptions and narrow interests of pressure groups within American society.¹⁴

Converging with these arguments for a new look at Cuba policy are the demands from sectors of U.S. society for the elimination of the blockade, on the basis of humanitarian concerns and the view that the embargo's limitations on travel to Cuba violate American citizens' rights.

Perspectives

In analyzing the outlook for U.S. Cuba policy, we should not exaggerate the impact of such opinions. In terms of *Realpolitik*, what counts is not the acuity of an analysis but the chances contending positions have for gaining support from political forces and groups.

And this is what remains to be seen in the debate inside the U.S. It is only recently that some business interests, sectors of the Cuban community,¹⁵ the press and social movements have begun to organize in favor of overhauling Washington's policy toward Cuba.

It must be kept in mind that powerful Establishment groups (and not only the right wing of the Cuban community) stand opposed to a change in policy. These groups argue that there is no hurry; the U.S. can adopt a comfortable wait-and-see attitude toward the evolution of events on the island.

¹⁴ See John Saxe Fernández, "Las relaciones cubano-estadounidenses: su impacto hemisférico" in *Girón '92*. Instituto Politécnico Nacional, Mexico City, 1994.

¹⁵ An example of the rise of groups opposed to the community's right wing (represented by the Cuban-American National Foundation) was the attendance by several representatives of moderate sectors at April's Havana meeting with the Cuban government. See Josetxo Zaldúa's account in *La Jornada*, April 24, 1994.

While few in the Clinton administration believe in the rationality of the traditional U.S. course,¹⁶ for the time being the upper hand is held by those who maintain that, between the possible advantages of a change in policy and the geo-strategic and political costs of such a change,¹⁷ the balance is weighted in favor of maintaining the present strategy.

The question nonetheless remains as to the significance of the timid changes undertaken by the Clinton team. Are these minor shifts in a policy which continues along the same fundamental course, or are they instead the beginnings of changes to come in the American line?

We are in the midst of an era of important transformations on the world scene and changes in the approach which up until recently determined Washington's policies. Thus, despite the low priority given it by the White House, the question of Cuba policy is far from being a closed case.

Close attention will have to be paid, not so much to traditional rhetoric, but to the changes which may occur within the contending forces, political conditions in the U.S., the debate inside the administration, the correlation of interests in the state of Florida—and above all to events in Cuba itself. ❧

¹⁶ This conclusion was corroborated by the author's prior interviews with figures who are presently in the administration.

¹⁷ Among the costs they mention is the possibility that the Cuban government might gain a breathing space in the crisis it faces, as well as the resistance to a change that would be put up by the Republican right and the Cuban community in the U.S. While it remains unstated, I believe that decision-makers are influenced by the idea that U.S. recognition of the Cuban government would create a bad precedent in Latin America, since it would be seen as legitimizing a nationalist and socialist government in the U.S.' backyard. It would also go against the grain of "single-superpower prestige." How will the U.S. resolve other world conflicts if it cannot deal with a problem 90 miles off its shores which has continued for more than thirty years?