

Constructive Engagement: When it's an Option and Why it's Not

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Toward the end of the last century, at a White House press conference, a popular American president put forth the following statement to the assembled press corps:

Our influence over [Cuban] society is limited, but we do have some influence, and the question is how to use it. Many people of good will in this country have differing views. In my view, we must work for peaceful evolution and reform. Our aim cannot be to punish [Cuba] with economic sanctions that would injure the very people we're trying to help. I believe we must help all those who peacefully oppose [a repressive regime], and we must recognize that the opponents of that regime, using terrorism and violence, will bring not freedom and salvation, but greater suffering and more opportunities for expanded Soviet influence within [Cuba]... It is our active engagement, our willingness to try that gives us influence. Yes, we in America, because of what we are and what we stand for, have influence to do good. We also have immense potential to make things worse. Before taking fateful steps, we must ponder the key question: Are we helping to change the system? Or are we punishing the people, whom we seek to help?¹

No, this was not a press conference during the Carter administration, or an explanation by Bill Clinton for why he thought an exhibition game between Havana and Baltimore might be a way of promoting US interests in Cuba. It was, in fact, Ronald Reagan speaking on September 9th, 1985. It is not, however, an exact quotation. The subject of his comments

¹ Ronald Reagan, Whitehouse press conference, September 9, 1985.

was not Cuba and the Castro regime, but South Africa. It seems that if one can rationalize the use of constructive engagement to attempt to influence a regime as repressive as that of South Africa during the era of Apartheid, surely the potential for success of a similarly constructed policy toward Cuba is not that hard to imagine.

Rafael Hernandez (Ritter et al., 1995, p. 177) used a similar strategy to introduce his essay, “‘Conflict Resolution’ between the United States and Cuba: Clarifications, Premises and Precautions.” In his introduction, he quoted the first Bush Administration’s secretary of state, James Baker, and replaced China or Beijing with Cuba or Havana. It was just as appropriate and effective an illustration of the paradoxical and dichotomous approach to US foreign policy with respect to Cuba.

Why has the government of the United States so consistently pursued a policy of belligerence and confrontation with our island neighbor while, at the same time, we have constructively engaged so many other governments around the world whose human rights records are no better—and far more often, much worse— than that of Castro’s Cuba? When asked why the United States’ approach differs so dramatically between Cuba and China, a prominent government official once replied, “I could give you a billion reasons.” If there are “a billion reasons” to differentiate China from Cuba, how many reasons apply to Vietnam, Cambodia, Saudi Arabia, or Syria, to name a few? Is the level of US moral indignation dependant upon market potential? Can a logical argument be made for such inconsistency? Is there any potential for a mutually acceptable resolution to the current impasse? And is there anything short of Castro’s death or his removal from power that might bring about a change in US policy?

There were some who were cautiously optimistic about the “regime change” in Cuba on New Year’s Day in 1959. General Batista, although a loyal partner of the United States and its corporations, was a brutal and corrupt dictator. Seven years earlier, he had seized power by way of a military coup, after it became apparent he would lose the upcoming election. He immediately cancelled future elections and suspended the constitution. Even after this blatant rejection of democracy, only a few days passed before the Truman administration recognized his government and began sending military and economic aid. As the aid flowed, Batista strengthened his grip on power through the brutal suppression of his opposition. In 1958, in reaction to Batista’s brutality, the Eisenhower administration imposed an arms embargo. By 1959, the brutality and corruption was becoming intolerable and the United States attempted to persuade the dictator— to no avail— to leave office.

So when Fidel Castro and his July 26th movement marched victoriously across the island and into Havana within the first few weeks of the New Year, some in the administration were not displeased. But optimism gradually gave way to pessimism as the new government in Cuba moved toward a socialist agenda, first by nationalizing the Cuban Telephone Company—owned by ITT— and then by implementing the first Agrarian Reform Law. Compensation was offered to the former landowners, but based on an assessment that was thirty years old. Within six months, Cuba expropriated 70,000 acres of land owned by US sugar and fruit companies. In the meantime, the Cuban government was expanding trade relations with the Soviet Union and after purchasing crude oil from Russia, they found that the US and British refineries on Cuban soil would not process it. Cuba responded by nationalizing the refineries on June 28, 1960. Weeks

later, Cuba nationalized other US businesses on the island, the US cancelled the Cuban sugar quota, Cuba nationalized more US interests, and on October 19, the US imposed a unilateral embargo. Days later, Cuba nationalized remaining US property (*Cuba Reader*, 2002).

And so the embargo has remained in effect and the level of US hostility has ebbed and flowed for 40 years from the overt aggression of the Bay of Pigs invasion, to covert acts of sabotage and harassment, to heated propaganda wars, and unsuccessful attempts at coercive public diplomacy. Over the years, observers in the US State Department have declared that the Castro regime would fall within a matter of weeks or months, yet 40 years later he is still in power. Rafael Hernandez (1995) suggests, “The United States has never understood Cuban nationalism. In particular, it has not realized that this nationalism constitutes a force for unifying people that is superior to any ideological or philosophical creed” (p. 179). A Cuban philosophy teacher named William (personal communication, May 2, 2003) stated that after having been dominated for many years by the Spaniards first, and then the Americans, the people of his island are proud of their independence and, although they may not agree with everything that their president does, they respect his strength and authority. He went on to muse that “Latin Americans traditionally respect strong men,” and he suggested, “That is why there have been so many Latin American dictators.”

Reinforced with this extreme nationalism, Castro has successfully capitalized on the imminent threat of US invasion— real or manufactured—as a unifying force not unlike how the current Bush administration has benefited from the events of September 11th, which arguably have resulted in a less vocal opposition and a more compliant

media. In fact, the state of siege that the Cuban people perceive is reinforced almost daily in the national newspaper, *Granma*. On April 13, 2003, the headline read, “US Directed Terrorism and Subversion.” The article blames the Cuban Adjustment Act for encouraging violent hijackings and other subversive activities. On April 20, 2003, the headline read, “Terrorist Plan to Destabilize Cuba.” The accompanying article charged “that James Cason, head of the US Interests Section in Havana, has intensified his activities with dissident elements in the hope of creating a fifth column on the island to undertake counterrevolutionary activities in line with the Helms-Burton Act, which promotes subversion on the island” (p. 6). In the Report of the Thirty-Ninth Strategy for Peace Conference entitled, *Emerging from Conflict: Improving US Relations With Current and Recent Adversaries* (O’Brien, 1998), panel members observed, “Because of US and Cuban rhetoric, some Cubans perceive the cost of division in the Cuban Communist Party to be a possible US invasion, and this strengthens the unified front of the Cuban leadership” (p. 8). Although this statement considers what Cubans may see as ramifications of a division within the Cuban Communist Party, others have observed that the majority of the Cuban people consider the implications of the end of the Revolution and consequent US influence to be unacceptable. The report cited above goes on to say, “A central Cuban fear is that the United States will work to undo the social benefits brought by the revolution, such as universal access to free education and healthcare” (p. 8). In addition, Andrew Zimbalist (Ritter et al., 1995), states in an essay entitled, *Cuba, Castro, Clinton and Canosa*,

More than half of Cuba’s population consists of blacks and mulattos who have made significant social and economic gains since the revolution.

They are not about to accept a vision of their country's future from white, right-wing Cuban exiles in Miami (p. 33).

These points of view would suggest that perhaps not all of Cuba is clamoring for relief from the Castro regime. It also suggests that there is another player in addition to the US government that threatens Cuban sovereignty.

Who are these “white, right-wing Cuban exiles in Miami” and how can they possibly threaten the significant social and economic gains since the revolution? As the 1959 Revolution began to take hold, and its character took on the trappings of Marxism, many upper- and upper-middle class Cubans withdrew their cash reserves and fled their homeland to Miami and points north. Many of these exiles never gave up their Cuban heritage, nor did they give up hope that, one day, they would regain their lives and property and restore the government to one more amenable to their social and economic aspirations. Early on, and at the height of the Cold War, US administrations found this exile community to be a useful tool in advancing their foreign policy toward Cuba. From Kennedy's Bay of Pigs invasion, to Ronald Reagan's cultivation of the Cuban American National Federation (CANF), the Cuban exiles have fulfilled roles of commandos, counterrevolutionaries, propagandists, and lobbyists.

Initially, these exiled Cuban nationals— with support of the CIA—engaged in overt violence against the Cuban government. In *Killing Hope: US Military and CIA Interventions Since WWII*, William Blum (1995) reveals that even after the Bay of Pigs disaster,

Throughout the 1960s, the Caribbean island was subjected to countless sea and air commando raids by exiles, at times accompanied by their CIA

supervisors, inflicting damage upon oil refineries, chemical plants and railroad bridges...anything to damage the Cuban economy, promote disaffection, or make the revolution look bad...taking the lives of Cuban militia members and others in the process... (p. 190).

After the Cold War, the character of the high-profile Cuban exile community became, at least on the surface, less militant. Applying political pressure has become their stock in trade and, through alliances with Florida statesmen and women, including Jeb Bush, and Senator Ros-Lehtinen, among others, they have been instrumental in maintaining an atmosphere of US aggression and in strengthening the blockade.

In a hearing before the Subcommittee on the Western Hemisphere of the Committee on International Relations of the House of Representatives, One Hundred Sixth Congress on March 24, 1999, in which the Subcommittee examined whether or not the Clinton administration was enforcing the trade embargo and other acts against the Castro Regime, a few prominent representatives of the exile community were invited to speak. One, speaker, Jorge Mas, Vice Chairman of CANF, cited an article in the local Miami paper:

Lest anyone not appreciate the seriousness of the moment, last week the *Miami Herald* quoted a taxi driver in Havana as saying that when this is all over, "Blood is going to run in the streets." Our understanding of that comment is clear. Unless something is done about the Castro dictatorship now, we are only inviting, inviting and awaiting, the type of social explosion that we almost definitely do not want to see (p. 18).

Four years later, Havana streets are still free of blood, but the CANF continues to warn of imminent mayhem and destruction. Ironically, many in the exile movement advocate mayhem and destruction as a means of creating US-style democracy and restoring a free market economy to the island.

In a press conference in Havana on April 13, 2003, Cuban Foreign Minister Felipe Perez Roque cited a US newspaper to support his assertion concerning one group of Cuban exiles:

The *Sun Sentinel* calls the terrorist organization paramilitary and prints statements by the head of [Commandos F-4] that openly declares their intention of eliminating the Cuban President by military force and terrorist methods. They train, they have camps over there, located in south Florida and they feel inspired in this new time in relation[s] to increase their violent activities against Cuba (p. 13).

By the United States' own definition, elements of these groups have openly engaged in terrorist activities.

The most violent act occurred in 1976, when a Cubana airliner was bombed shortly after take off, killing all 73 on board. According to William Blum (1995), "a CIA officer abroad had cabled a report to Agency headquarters that he had learned from a source that a Cuban exile group planned to bomb a Cubana airliner flying between Panama and Havana" (p. 190). In fact, a group of exiles headed by Orlando Bosch claimed responsibility. It is difficult to fathom, that while the United States has declared war on terrorism, such organizations are allowed to operate within US borders. As I write this sentence, a story is unfolding on the CNN Web site posted Friday, June 27, 2003 at

8:25 PM EDT by Kelli Arena regarding “eleven men charged with conspiracy to train for and participate in a violent jihad overseas.” Apparently, the key word is “jihad.” Training and participating in a counterrevolution against the Castro regime does not seem to warrant the same reaction by US authorities.

The definition of terrorism has been adjusted to fit the situation by both governments. According to Wayne Smith (2002), Senior Fellow at the Center for International Policy,

President Ford labeled Castro an “international outlaw” and described the sending of Cuban troops to Angola as a ‘flagrant act of aggression.’ But if backing one of the contending factions in the Angolan civil war was a matter of supporting ‘terrorism,’ then the United States was guilty as well (p. 3).

In the 1980s, Cuba supported leftist guerilla groups in El Salvador, as well as the Sandinista government of Nicaragua, while the United States supported the right-wing government in El Salvador and right-wing guerilla groups in Nicaragua. The US reacted to Cuba’s contrary position by declaring them a state sponsor of terror (as opposed to the Reagan administration who, in direct violation of congressional decree, was supporting Nicaraguan “freedom fighters”). Left or right, guerilla or freedom fighter, innocent people were often caught in the crossfire and civilian targets were attacked, which fits the accepted definition of terrorist activities.

Even after Castro worked to influence leftist guerilla groups to adopt diplomatic, rather than military strategies to advance their causes, the first Bush administration continued to classify Cuba as a state sponsor of terror, justifying the decision on the basis that Castro was associating with these leftists. Following such logic, the US envoy to

Lebanon in the 1980s would be guilty of supporting terrorism since he associated with Islamic militant groups in an attempt to find a peaceful solution to the turmoil in that war-torn region. In fact, any diplomat who has engaged with the “enemy” in an effort to negotiate a settlement would be at risk of being labeled a terrorist by association.

Kevin Whitaker, the State Department’s coordinator of Cuban Affairs, (personal communication, June 13, 2003) was asked what differentiates the more militant wing of the Miami exiles from groups the US designates as terrorists. He responded by deferring to the FBI. He said that he had faith that if laws were being broken, he was certain our law enforcement organizations would take action. He also discounted the Cubans’ characterization of Miami exiles as terrorists on the grounds that they freely apply the term “terrorist” to peaceful dissidents, hijackers and militants alike. He maintains that Cuban credibility is in question.

Many have questioned US credibility on the issue of terrorism. In the Center for International Policy’s November 2002 report, *Cuba on the Terrorist List*, Wayne Smith cites the July 20, 1990 *New York Times*, which editorialized,

The release from jail of Orlando Bosch is a startling example of political justice.

The Justice Department, under no legal compulsion but conspicuous political pressure, has let him out, winning cheers from the local politicians— and squandering American credibility on issues of terrorism (p. 9).

Since then, Afghan fighters, once on the CIA payroll, and rebels in Chechnya, considered “freedom fighters” against the Soviet Union no longer benefit from US support.

Apparently, the US definition for terrorist is contingent upon the individual’s politics, rather than their strategy.

Aside from the issue of terrorism, the United States government and the Miami exiles have cited the Castro regime's human rights violations as the main reason for maintaining and even increasing sanctions. Rhetoric is rich with anecdotes of oppression. Jorge Mas, Vice Chairman of the CANF (1999) itemized what is commonly considered Castro's "to do list" in the human rights department before the Congressional Subcommittee on the Western Hemisphere: "free all political prisoners, legalize independent political parties; allow independent trade unions and conduct internationally monitored and freely contested elections" (p. 19). While from a North American point of view, these notions seem fundamental, Cuba has categorically rejected each and every item. Political prisoners and dissidents are labeled subversives and counterrevolutionaries under Cuba's own version of the Patriot Act, based on 40 years of siege mentality. As witnessed in the United States since September 11th, even a comparatively free society is willing to consider the restriction of certain freedoms in an effort of self-preservation.

Cuba's restrictions on what the US consider basic freedoms can be attributed to this perceived state of siege. The Cuban government accuses US policy makers of intentionally "turning up the heat" in an effort to illicit Castro's "cracking down" on civil liberties, which can then be cited as reason to increase aggression in an effort to bring about the demise of a legitimate government. Cuba's Foreign Minister Perez (2003) addressed this premise in his press conference in April,

We have much experience in the defense of our sovereignty... we know that subversion is fabricated from abroad, that they are attempting to create a Trojan horse here. Thus, we are exercising our sovereign right to legally confront it, abiding by the law and ethics, never resorting to such

things like kidnapping and assassination, never creating death squads, never violating anyone's physical and moral integrity (p. 35).

At the same congressional hearing where Mr. Mas testified, William F. Murphy, Vicar General and Moderator of the Curia of the Arch Diocese of Boston (1999) observed,

The paradox of our situation, in our judgment here, is the fact that the U.S. policy at present gives Mr. Castro an excuse for continuing a kind of repression on people that, we believe, could be changed if there was a greater engagement on the part of the U.S. government with the Castro government and a greater insistence for a greater space for freedom for the Church, other religious institutions, and, in fact, all institutions and persons in the society (p. 8).

Many in Washington contend that even when the US has taken a less aggressive tack as during the Carter administration and, to a lesser degree, during Clinton's tenure, civil rights have not improved to any great degree. There seems, however, to be a much tighter timetable with respect to Cuba than those placed on other regimes around the world. Constructive engagement has been an ongoing policy for decades with many other totalitarian regimes throughout the world, and when, after a few short years, these governments have not peacefully transitioned to democracy, few of these same voices are calling for sanctions or embargos.

What will it take for the United States to "lighten up?" Kevin Whitaker (2003) maintains that it is simply contingent upon Cuba's "peaceful transition to democracy." He defers to the Inter-American Democratic Charter signed on September 11, 2001 by the members of the Organization of American States, which provides a definition of

democracy accepted by many governments in the Western Hemisphere. Perez (2003) also cites the OAS in defense of his government's right to self-determination:

The Charter of the Organization of American States (OAS), to which the United States does belong and in which it exercises its full might, reads: 'All states have the right to choose, without external interference, their political, economic and social system, and to organize it in the form that is most convenient for them, and have the duty not to interfere in the affairs of other states' (p. 3).

Whether or not the United States is justified in intervening in a sovereign nation's internal affairs is still an ongoing, international debate. If recent history is any indication, however, it seems unlikely the US will abide by any judgment rendered in disagreement with what the US considers its national interests.

Whitaker (2003) also claims that there is nothing personal involved in US policy. Although he cannot picture an improved situation under the Castro regime, he maintains that Castro's retirement is not a requirement. Congress, apparently has a different opinion, since Title II, Subsection a, item 7 of the Helms-Burton Act specifically states that, "For the requirements of this act, a transition government in Cuba is a government that...does not include Fidel Castro or Raul Castro" (cited in Jatar-Hausmann, 1999, p. 135). Assuming Whitaker and the State Department speak for the US— an assumption that, in the case of Cuban policy, which is dictated to a greater degree by the Legislative rather than the Executive branch may not be valid—one must look to traditional conflict resolution theory for a "roadmap to rapprochement." In an essay by Hal P. Klepak (Ritter et al., 1995) entitled, "Confidence-building Measures and a Cuba-United States

Rapprochement,” he describes a process with which NATO worked to normalize relations with Eastern bloc nations during the Cold War. Confidence Building Measures, or CBMs, are small overtures, to which each party can agree and with which both can progress to a higher level of trust and coexistence. “Cooperation on trade, health, the environment, foreign policy, scientific research and a myriad of other fields can work to improve confidence between potential adversaries” (p. 227). Of course, progress on any of these fronts would be difficult due to the obstructionist nature of the current embargo.

The Carter administration began the process of implementing Confidence Building Measures in the late 1970s with the opening of US and Cuban Interest Sections, which are “mini embassies” within the Swiss embassies in Havana and Washington, DC. These Interest Sections provide a higher level of communication and interaction, which according to Klepak is an essential step in the process. Carter also worked with the Cubans to alleviate some of the stress created by illegal Cuban immigration. In response to the US agreeing to provide an expedited process for a definitive number of Cubans to obtain travel visas to the United States on an annual basis, Cuba promised to relax restrictions on foreign travel and to better monitor illegal migration. With the election of the Reagan administration, however, progress was abandoned and the US resumed a more aggressive, hard-line approach. “While there can be no doubt that Cuba’s security analysts would be mad not to take the possibility of invasion or subversion seriously, especially given the increase in US capabilities of late, real threat is made up of both potential and intention and the latter seems notably lacking in Washington at the moment” (Ritter et al., 1995, p. 230). Klepak made this observation during the Clinton administration, which was certainly less belligerent toward Castro than Reagan and either

Bush, however, the fact that American foreign policy can change with the swinging pendulum of administrations is reason enough for Cuba to remain vigilant.

Klepak concedes that the US has been virtually immobile with respect to constructive interaction and so suggests that even though Cuba's potential overtures would be minimal (assuming "peaceful transition" to US-style democracy is unlikely), they could still make the effort. In the four years since Klepak's essay, has Castro's behavior indicated any movement toward conciliation? Has the Cuban government put forth any CBMs on which the US might find encouragement? Wayne Smith (2002) points out that,

In the spring of 2002, Cuba arrested a suspected Colombian drug-trafficker wanted by the United States and asked the United States to sign bilateral agreements to fight narco-trafficking and terrorism. The State Department declined the offer but at the same time accused Cuba of being "uncooperative" in the war against terror (p. 6).

Cuba has been instrumental in negotiating a peaceful settlement between the Colombian government and the ELM, these talks, according to Smith (2002), were cited by the US State Department in their 1999 report on terrorism not as peace talks, but as yet another example of Cuba's association with terrorist groups. Cuba also expressed condolences and offered assistance to the US after the September 11th attacks, but the US has "consistently declined Cuba's offers of cooperation" (p. 1). It would seem that in the War on Terrorism, if the United States can accept the cooperation of Pakistan, a totalitarian state, whose government came to power by military coup, or by Syria— not exactly a

model for human rights compliance— cooperation with Cuba would be no more controversial.

In another example of a typical CBM, Cuba was uncharacteristically quiet while the US detained “enemy combatants” at the US naval base at Guantanamo Bay. In addition, Cuba invited journalists to tour the military zone just outside the US naval base on Cuban soil. Klepak (Ritter et al., 1995) cites “the provision of opportunities to observe specified military activities” (p. 228) as another CBM. Each and every one of these overtures has gone without reciprocation by the US. Consequently, it seems that the strategy that worked so well to alleviate stress between NATO and the Eastern bloc is virtually ineffective with respect to the matter at hand.

Many on the right express great encouragement regarding the progress made in China after decades of constructive engagement. In an article in the *National Review*, Bert Wagner (2000) observed, “Even George W. Bush, a harsh critic of the Clinton administration’s China policy, declared that ‘if we trade with China...you’ll be surprised by how soon democracy will come.’” If we had been trading with Cuba for the past 40 years, how quickly would we have been surprised? Two years later, *National Review* columnist Joe Mowbray (2002) also weighed in on the China issue and observes that, “China is a much freer and more open nation than before foreign trade and investment.” He observes that China is no longer an authentic communist nation, but rather a “market-socialist economy run by the Communist party.” He goes on to justify US trade with China and explain why the situation in Cuba is different. In China, salaries— however minimal they may be— from American corporations go directly to the employees rather than to the government as they do in Cuba. He proclaims that, “Many of these employees

of American corporations make enough money to send their kids to private schools, a freedom that would never be allowed in Castro's brutal society." Perhaps if too many of these new Chinese middle class employees send their children to private schools, the quality of public education will fall— an outcome that would also be disallowed by the Castro government. Mowbray goes on to speculate that, "Normal trading with Castro, in fact, would be an exception from our policy toward thugs in Latin America." The policy to which he is referring must have been established after Manuel Noriega's fall from grace and Augusto Pinochet's retirement. Finally, Mowbray closes by taking a decidedly "personal" stance against Castro:

Nesting 90 miles off the coast of Florida with a seething hatred for America, Castro is not just another tyrant. He's the only living dictator who tried to get the Soviets to Nuke the United States. Now Castro's developing at least the capability for biological weapons, and he's got the right connections with rogue states to cause us migraine headaches.

Maybe for Whitaker and the State Department there's nothing personal involved with Cuban policy, but assuming that the *National Review* reflects the opinion of at least some in congress, and certainly of many vocal Miami exiles who apply great influence on the former, there is little hope that there will be any movement toward the normalization of relations while Castro and/or his revolution lives.

Constructive engagement is an option only when the US sees its implementation as preserving current, or advancing future US interests. Although a multitude of thinking people can see how such engagement with Cuba could benefit the US on a variety of levels— including the wars on terrorism and drugs, tourism, and trade— for hard-line

factions in the government and the influential exiled lobbyists, these benefits are insignificant compared to the injury caused by being the first to “blink” in this stalemate. South Africa may have brutally oppressed the majority of their population, but they did not fail to pay significant homage to the United States in the form of lucrative trade deals and strategic security against Soviet expansion. China may have the audacity to insist on self-determination and sovereignty even at the expense of human rights, but there are “one billion reasons” to turn the other cheek. Castro stands defiant in the face of the US and contrary to what Whitaker said, it *is* “personal.” Whether the removal of Castro is enough for the US to get over it, or whether it will take a total dismantling of everything that the revolution has been able to achieve before the US will be willing to move toward rapprochement has yet to be seen. Unless the US changes its current policy of intervention and flagrant disregard for the sovereignty of states that do not possess the political, economic, or military leverage to discourage such aggression, there will be no peace for the Cuban people, or for other peoples in similar situations throughout the world.

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