



# AMERICAN UNIVERSITY

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## **U.S.-CUBA: MUST “DEMOCRACY PROMOTION” OBSTRUCT NORMALIZATION?** *Fulton Armstrong\**

“Democracy promotion” has been one of the most contentious aspects of U.S. policy toward Cuba—and one of the most counterproductive—but it doesn’t have to be either. With a little effort and flexibility, Presidents Obama and Castro can take the edge off this irritant and even make it mutually beneficial.

Like American “exceptionalism,” the concept of democracy promotion is ingrained in U.S. policy culture—and is unlikely to fade as a stated objective. Although consensus on the criteria for “democracy” has never existed, the desire to promote it reflects a widely held perception that democracy is better for countries’ internal governance, regional stability, and U.S. interests. U.S. policymakers and scholars cite the post-World War II transformation of West Germany and Japan into flourishing democracies as evidence. Many argue that U.S. programs, such as secret assistance to Poland’s Solidarity movement, were critical to the collapse of the authoritarian governments that made up the “Soviet Bloc.” The U.S. Congress created the National Endowment for Democracy (NED) and its four constituent units in 1983 and gave them generous budgets with which to promote democracy. These organizations and their programs have become as bullet-proof as any in Washington. NED says it is “on the leading edge of democratic struggles everywhere,” and it receives little scrutiny by Congress or the news media. Democracy promotion—albeit in different forms—has been a main element of U.S. policy toward Cuba for decades.

- In the 1980s and early 1990s, the U.S. Interests Section conducted an array of outreach programs, engaging with Cuban academics, journalists, and officials – people tolerant if not deeply supportive of the Cuban government—as well as human rights activists and

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others “outside the system.” U.S. diplomats distributed each year thousands of books on a broad array of topics, including political affairs, economics, finance, management, marketing, history, biography, and literature. The Interests Section also openly circulated uncensored and often critical clippings from major U.S. newspapers, reaching hundreds of Cubans in universities, think tanks, and media. The Interests Section supported U.S. academics meeting with Cuban counterparts and hosted receptions and informal discussions attended by dozens of Cubans on the periphery of power. These activities informed and nurtured the aspirations of Cubans in and outside the system who were eager to find *Cuban* solutions to their country’s mounting problems.

- The “Libertad” or Helms-Burton Act, signed by President Clinton in 1996, tried to move democracy promotion into a more aggressive mode. Section 109 of the act authorized the President “to furnish assistance and provide other support for individuals and independent nongovernmental organizations to support democracy-building efforts for Cuba.” Clinton spent token amounts on initiatives related to Cuba’s future transition, but the Bush Administration dramatically upped the ante. Referring to them as “regime change” programs, officials launched an expansion that has since cost U.S. taxpayers more than \$250 million. They turned off the flow of information to individuals with ties to the Cuban government and concentrated on declared regime opponents or people deemed potential opponents—certain religious groups, young and disgruntled music fans, LGBT activists, bloggers, and even children.
- The State Department and U.S. Agency for International Development (USAID) have consistently refused to discuss the operations they have sponsored—rejecting requests for information even from Congressional oversight committees.<sup>†</sup> Most of the programs have been clandestine (using secret methods) and covert (concealing the U.S. funding and policy objectives). The arrest, conviction, and five-year imprisonment of USAID sub-contractor Alan Gross shed light on one such operation. Operating under cover of a U.S. Jewish nongovernmental organization, Gross smuggled sophisticated communication equipment onto the island to set up secret networks. Associated Press investigative reporter Desmond Butler uncovered other programs involving communications and

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<sup>†</sup> Oversight committees and journalists have never asked for the most sensitive information—the identity of on-island collaborators and specific operations—but the Bush and Obama Administrations both have maintained a near-total blackout on information.

political operations against the Cuban government. Cuba is obviously not the only country in which USAID and the Department of State resort to clandestine and covert operations, but a comparative analysis shows it is unique in the range, audacity, and price tag of operations conducted to drive political events there.

The investment has yielded some operational successes—a twitter-like social media network lasted for two years—but the contribution toward the stated goal of promoting democracy has been negligible and, in some important ways, counterproductive.

- The program has delivered food, medicines, and other support to the families of imprisoned dissidents (many of whom have been released since Presidents Obama and Castro announced reestablishment of relations last December). But more provocative operations, such as disbursing cash to people to hold street protests, did nothing to promote human rights—and arguably led only to arrests. The U.S. Government paid for the dissemination of artfully edited videos of some of those arrests, apparently to dramatize government repression, but the impact in and outside Cuba was undetectable. Indeed, as word spread that the operations were funded by the United States under Helms-Burton Section 109 authorities, the activists’ legitimacy came increasingly into question. The amateurish clandestine tradecraft of the contractors and program activists, moreover, made it easy for Cuban counterintelligence to penetrate and manipulate their ranks. Some of the funds were even used to attack Catholic Cardinal Jaime Ortega because he supported evolutionary change rather than regime overthrow.
- As a result, U.S. taxpayers have received precious little for their \$250 million. They have paid for “private libraries” that do not exist. Communications systems involving expensive satellite gear and satellite access fees have been compromised. Authentic people-to-people exchanges—legal interaction between Americans and Cubans without government subsidies—have also been tainted as Cubans in the government and on the street are wary that any contact could be part of Washington’s regime-change efforts. The credibility of democracy promotion itself suffered as programs intended to teach people to demand transparency and accountability in Cuba lacked accountability, transparency, and oversight in Washington.

- Despite these failings, the democracy promotion ideology and bureaucracy seem unstoppable. In Washington, well-funded programs are harder to change than policy because the people receiving the funds are—not surprisingly—vociferous advocates for keeping the programs going, whether or not they show results. In Obama’s name, the State Department and USAID have pledged to continue the democracy promotion programs targeting Cuba and are asking Congress for \$20 million for them again this year, without yet thinking through how to align them with the new policy aimed at normalization.

The effort, however, need not be so ineffective and counterproductive. In reestablishing diplomatic relations, President Obama has acknowledged that five decades of regime-change policies have failed and “it is time for us to try something new” in Cuba policy, presumably including how to promote democracy. There’s a lot his Administration can do:

- **Change the packaging.** No self-respecting government would welcome programs explicitly intended to overthrow it. For political reasons, the George W. Bush Administration cited Helms-Burton Section 109 as statutory authority for funding its aggressive programs. The law’s explicit focus on undermining the Cuban government mocks Obama’s shift in policy. But the U.S. runs programs to support democracy and good governance in many countries, even allies like Mexico and Colombia, under the authority of other laws and with a more collegial tone. A key criterion for operations in Cuba should be whether they would be done the same way in other countries with which the U.S. has diplomatic relations and is trying to improve ties.
- **Restore and expand what worked in the past.** The distribution of books and clippings; support for exchange visits; promotion of academic and cultural events; and other non-political activities that include people with government affiliation should resume. They are inexpensive and, by welcoming people to better understand us rather than trying to drive political change, they are more likely to succeed. In no successfully transitioned country has force-feeding worked. The very successful U.S. Information Agency model for overseas libraries may be outdated in the digital age, but the U.S. Embassy in Havana could sponsor vehicles offering non-political, non-coercive access to online information.

- **Decontaminate democracy programs.** The organizations that have already spent the \$200 million dollars trying unsuccessfully to drive regime change should be bypassed to let a new generation—based on real people-to-people interests—try something different with the funds. Legitimate U.S. civil society organizations forging ties with Cuban counterparts know better than government and corporate program managers what Cubans need to build a better future for themselves. For example, American librarians can ask their Cuban counterparts for lists of needed books and, with a U.S. grant, buy them so that Cuban youths get the information they need. Doctors eager to provide pro bono medical care should have access to funds to purchase and ship medications and equipment based on appraisals developed with on-the-ground contacts. U.S. and Cuban universities could use money to sponsor two-way exchanges of students whom they choose, instead of those of particular political perspectives whom program managers select.
- **Acknowledge that Cuba is changing.** U.S. Government lawyers for a time have argued that the programs can deal only with declared anti-regime activists or vulnerable groups on the fence, shunning anyone affiliated with the Cuban government. That narrow interpretation of the law was unjustified and makes even less sense now. New voices in, but not necessarily of, the system are emerging. To refuse collaboration with a university or group because it is not entirely independent of the Cuban government is unwise. The Cuban system is not free by U.S. or European standards, but the government’s shift toward decentralization and self-sufficiency is creating greater space for collaboration. Waiting for the perfect civil society partners to emerge works against the purpose of democracy promotion.
- **Increase Washington accountability.** The Intelligence Authorization Act of 1991 amended the National Security Act to require that the President sign a Finding—a classified approval process—for any “activity or activities of the United States Government to influence political, economic, or military conditions abroad, where it is intended that the role of the United States Government will not be apparent or acknowledged publicly,” not just by intelligence agencies but all “departments, agencies, or entities of the U.S. Government.” If the Administration chooses to keep democracy promotion operations clandestine and covert, it should respect that law requiring

President Obama to sign off on them. At a minimum, the National Security Council should coordinate an interagency process to approve the operations and make sure they do not conflict with the work of other departments and agencies dealing with Cuba. If the State Department is going to encourage small entrepreneurs to undertake a political action, for example, the Department of Commerce officials trying to help American businessmen trade with those entrepreneurs should be informed and asked whether or not they concur. These forms of internal coordination would reduce blunders and bring democracy promotion in line with the President's priorities.

- **Reduce the hypocrisy.** If there's any policy area in which Washington should practice what it preaches, it's in democracy promotion. The stated purpose of the programs is to encourage Cubans to demand transparency and accountability of their government, and State Department, USAID, and their grantees and contractors should embrace those values at home. In addition, while programs cannot credibly be designed to comply with all laws in target countries—where laws often violate basic rights—it doesn't seem beyond the pale to require that funded operations be consistent with a U.S. legal test and sanity check. Foreigners crisscrossing the United States running secret operations, distributing satellite gear, handing out political action cash, and training people in political organizing would not be acceptable here and are not in Cuba either.

Ultimately, the key to successful democracy promotion in Cuba will be for the U.S. government to let the successes of people-to-people relations—as a legitimate manifestation of the two countries' interests—guide the relationship. By all accounts, experience since President Clinton first authorized people-to-people exchanges in 1998 has been that the interaction has been pragmatic, constructive, respectful, open—and mutually beneficial. President Obama's steps to increase the flow of people and goods across the Florida Strait have created important opportunities. He and President Castro should trust their citizens to develop the historic roadmap that will define the relationship into the future, and American leaders should have particular trust that democracy promotion is encoded in the American people's DNA and will manifest itself through the normal course of people-to-people exchanges. Both the United States and Cuba stand to benefit.