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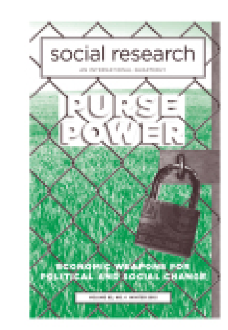

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A Policy Long Past Its Expiration Date: US Economic Sanctions Against Cuba

"In Cuba, we are ending a policy that was long past its expiration date," President Barack Obama declared in his 2015 State of the Union address. "When what you're doing doesn't work for fifty years, it's time to try something new." Obama was referring to his dramatic announcement on December 17, 2014, that he intended to normalize relations with Cuba and seek an end to the US economic embargo.

The embargo against Cuba—or, as the Cubans call it, *el bloqueo* (the blockade)—is the oldest and most comprehensive US economic sanctions regime against any country in the world. It comprises a complex patchwork of laws and presidential determinations imposed over half a century that Fidel Castro once called "a tangled ball of yarn" (LeoGrande and Kornbluh 2014, 203). Presidents have tightened or relaxed it to suit their own strategies—some seeking to overthrow or punish the Cuban regime with economic pressure, others seeking to improve relations by resorting to soft power rather than hard. The impact of US sanctions has also varied, at times inflicting serious harm on the Cuban economy and at other times being merely an expensive annoyance. But the embargo has never been effective at achieving its principal purpose: forcing Cuba's revolutionary regime out of power or bending it to Washington's will. The embargo's lack of success and its rising diplomatic cost to the United States convinced President

Obama that it, and the policy of unremitting hostility of which it formed the backbone had outlived their usefulness (Obama 2014).

Origins of the Embargo

The embargo began during President Dwight D. Eisenhower's administration as US-Cuban relations deteriorated during the first two years after the Cuban revolution. Fidel Castro's anti-American rhetoric and his nationalization of US property convinced US officials that the Castro regime was incompatible with US interests ("Current Basic US Policy" 1959). In the fall of 1959, the CIA began supporting Castro's opponents, and the following March, Eisenhower approved planning for the Bay of Pigs invasion ("A Program of Covert Action Against the Castro Regime" 1960).

Concerned that hostility toward Cuba would damage US relations with the rest of Latin America, Washington kept its efforts to oust Castro covert at first, precluding the use of economic sanctions ("Memorandum of a Conference with the President, March 17, 1960"). However, as relations became ever more acrimonious, some US officials advocated using Cuba's economic dependence on the United States as a weapon against Castro. Vice President Richard M. Nixon and Assistant Secretary of State for Economic Affairs Thomas C. Mann argued that Washington should cut Cuba's sugar quota. By law, Cuba was allowed to sell a set amount of sugar to the United States at two cents per pound above the world market price. Sixty percent of Cuban sugar was exported to the United States, accounting for 20 percent of Cuba's gross national product (LeoGrande 1979). To threaten Cuba's sugar quota was to threaten economic war.

State Department officials working on Cuba opposed cutting the quota, which they called "the ultimate weapon" ("Cuban Economic Prospects, 1959 and Proposed US Action" 1959). Such a move would be ineffective and counterproductive, they argued; it might cripple the Cuban economy but it would not dislodge Castro's government. On the contrary, it would "rally Cuban nationalist sentiment around Castro," allowing him to "shift the blame for their economic and other troubles to the United States." Cutting the quota would only harm Cuban moderates by placing them "in the difficult position of seeming to side with the United States in measures taken against the interests of all Cubans," and enabling Castro to justify suppressing opposition "in the name of national sovereignty and dignity." Based on this analysis, a State Department working group convened in late 1959 to explore options for economic sanctions against Cuba recommended against them all ("Estimate of Economic Outlook for Cuba" 1959; Mallory 1960).

These arguments carried the day so long as Washington's hostility toward Castro was masked behind a facade of diplomatic propriety. But as relations deteriorated, the arguments for restraint sounded increasingly hollow. Once the Eisenhower administration had settled on a strategy to remove Castro from power, economic sanctions seemed a logical complement to the CIA's covert aid for the domestic opposition and paramilitary operations. "It was silly," Eisenhower wrote later, "to continue to give Cuba favored treatment" (Eisenhower 1965, 535).

The *casus belli* that ignited the economic war between Cuba and the United States proved to be Soviet oil rather than Cuban sugar. As part of a trade agreement signed in February 1960, the Soviets sold Cuba oil in exchange for sugar. The first tanker of Soviet crude arrived on April 19, 1960, and was sent to refineries owned by Standard Oil, Texaco, and British Shell. When, on the advice of Treasury Secretary Robert B. Anderson, the companies refused to refine the Soviet oil, Castro nationalized them (Phillips 1960).

The seizure of the refineries provided the perfect excuse for canceling the sugar quota, which Eisenhower did on July 6, 1960 (Eisenhower 1960). Denouncing US "economic aggression," Castro retaliated by nationalizing most major US-owned businesses on the island. Two months later, Washington escalated the economic war. Under the authority of the Export Control Act, Eisenhower prohibited all exports to Cuba except for food and medicine, thereby laying the foundation of the economic embargo. Less than a week later, Castro expropriated most remaining US properties (Kenworthy 1960; "Text of US Announcement of Embargo" 1960; "Castro Takes Over 167 Additional US Firms" 1960). Within days of Eisenhower's decision to cut the sugar quota, Nikita Khrushchev wrote to Castro pledging to buy the sugar that the United States had refused. Privately, the Soviet prime minister was confident that US hostility would drive Cuba into the Soviet camp "like an iron filing to a magnet" ("Editorial Note" 1960; Shevchenko 1985, 137).

Sanctions Under Nine Presidents

In the aftermath of the Bay of Pigs fiasco, President John F. Kennedy imposed a full economic embargo on Cuba as part of a broader plan to overthrow Castro through a combination of economic and covert paramilitary pressure. "Operation Mongoose" included assassination plots against Cuban leaders, sabotage, psychological operations, and guerrilla warfare in the Sierra Escambray mountains. On February 3, 1962, Kennedy extended the embargo on exports to include imports from Cuba, under the authority of the Foreign Assistance Act of 1961. The following year, under the authority of the Trading with the Enemy Act of 1917 and a 1950 national emergency declared by President Harry S. Truman at the outset of the Korean War, Kennedy imposed a comprehensive embargo on all transactions with Cuba except as explicitly licensed by the president (LeoGrande 2014).

President Lyndon B. Johnson attempted to multilateralize the embargo by enlisting Latin America and Western Europe to cut off economic ties with Cuba (Morley 1987, 178–239). In 1964, at US instigation, the Organization of American States (OAS) imposed mandatory sanctions against Cuba, calling on all member states to sever economic and diplomatic relations. Only Mexico refused to comply. Cuba responded to its pariah status by stepping up the export of revolution to its neighbors, with Mexico being the notable exception.

Nevertheless, by the mid-1960s the prospects for ousting Castro had dimmed. As national security adviser McGeorge Bundy told

Johnson in 1964, “The chances are very good that we will still be living with Castro some time from now. We might just as well get used to the idea” (“Cuba Meeting” 1964). In this context, the avowed purpose of the embargo evolved from regime change to punishment. Undersecretary of State George Ball described the policy of “economic denial” in detail on April 23, 1964:

> We have never contended that a program of economic denial . . . is likely by itself to bring down the present Cuban regime. The objectives which this program can accomplish are more limited. They are four in number: First, to reduce the will and ability of the present Cuban regime to export subversion and violence to the other American states; Second, to make plain to the people of Cuba and to elements of the power structure of the regime that the present regime cannot serve their interests; Third, to demonstrate to the peoples of the American Republics that communism has no future in the Western Hemisphere; and Fourth, to increase the cost to the Soviet Union of maintaining a Communist outpost in the Western Hemisphere (Ball 1964).

One element of the embargo prompted intense debate inside the Johnson administration. Attorney General Robert F. Kennedy argued that it had been a mistake to include a ban on travel. Restoring the freedom of US citizens to visit Cuba “is more consistent with our views of a free society and would contrast with such things as the Berlin Wall and Communist controls on such travel,” he wrote in December 1963. “I believe that it would be wise to remove restrictions on travel to Cuba” (Kennedy 1963). In office only a few weeks, President Johnson would not risk looking soft on Castro to a domestic political audience or to Latin American and European allies, who were under pressure from Washington to join the US sanctions regime. The travel ban stayed in place.

By the mid-1970s, however, US officials had begun to reassess. Economic sanctions had failed to depose Castro; if anything, they had made him more dependent on the Soviet Union. The advent of detente—arms control negotiations with the Soviet Union and President Richard M. Nixon's 1972 opening to China—made Cuba seem less malevolent and its ostracism less rational. If Washington could have normal relations with the Communist giants, why not with Cuba? One by one, Latin American states began to abandon the OAS sanctions, and Cuba responded by moderating its revolutionary zeal in favor of normal state-to-state relations. Within the OAS, pressure built to lift the 1964 sanctions.

In 1974 and 1975, President Gerald Ford, encouraged by Secretary of State Henry Kissinger, authorized secret meetings between US and Cuban diplomats to discuss normalizing relations. Ford eased the embargo by exempting subsidiaries of US corporations in third countries, and in 1975, the United States voted to relax OAS sanctions against Cuba (Gelb 1975; Novitski 1975). The movement toward normalization ended, however, when Cuba deployed some 36,000 combat troops in Angola to turn back an invasion by South Africa (LeoGrande and Kornbluh 2014, 145–48).

By 1977, Cuban troops had begun withdrawing from Angola, so President Jimmy Carter did not regard them as an insurmountable obstacle. Within weeks of his inauguration, Carter directed the government to open negotiations aimed at normalizing relations. In short order, the new administration ended the ban on travel and on Cuban American remittances to family members. Washington also negotiated agreements with Havana on fishing and maritime boundaries, Coast Guard cooperation, and opening diplomatic Interests Sections—a move one step short of restoring full diplomatic recognition. Havana released more than 3,000 political prisoners and agreed to allow exiles to visit the island.

However, Carter stopped short of lifting the embargo on food and medicine, which Castro had suggested as a first step toward dismantling US sanctions. Because Cuba's main export was sugar, allowing Cuba to sell food to the United States would effectively nullify the embargo, and Carter was unwilling to give up this bargaining chip without some quid pro quo. In the end, Carter's plans to normalize relations, like Ford's, collapsed, this time as a result of Cuba's Africa policy when, in 1978, Cuba sent some 20,000 combat troops to Ethiopia to defend its new socialist government from an invasion by neighboring Somalia (LeoGrande and Kornbluh 2014, 164–75).

President Ronald Reagan took a hard line on Cuba because of Havana's support for revolutionaries in Central America. In early 1982, Washington imposed new economic sanctions, most important among them reinstating the travel ban Carter had lifted. "Cuba will not be allowed to earn hard currency from American tourists at a time when Cuba is actively sponsoring armed violence against our friends and allies," said John M. Walker, assistant secretary of the treasury for enforcement and operations (Crossette 1982). Only journalists, research scholars, and Cuban Americans visiting family were exempt from the ban.

In 1986, to further reduce the flow of hard currency, the administration cut the remittances Cuban Americans could send to family on the island from $2,000 to $1,200 annually (Kempster 1986). Reagan also added Cuba to the State Department's list of state sponsors of international terrorism (US Department of State 1983). Although inclusion on the terrorism list entailed another layer of financial sanctions, most were already in place under the existing embargo, so Cuba's designation had little material effect.

Reagan sought to extend the extraterritorial reach of the embargo by banning the importation of products containing Cuban nickel. US allies complied by certifying that their exports were free of Cuban nickel, and in 1983 a ban was also imposed on nickel products from the Soviet Union, which bought nearly half of Cuba's nickel production. The Treasury Department also stepped up enforcement of the embargo against US firms doing business, wittingly or unwittingly, with Cuban-controlled front companies in Latin America, especially Panama (Lachica 1983; Kempster 1986).

With the collapse of the Soviet Union in 1991, Cuba lost some $3 billion in annual economic assistance, throwing its economy into a deep depression known as the "Special Period." From 1989 to 1993, GDP fell by 35 percent, capacity to import fell by 74 percent, and real income fell by an estimated 75 percent (CEPAL 2000, 200–02; Ritter 2004, 12). In Washington, Cuba's crisis revived dreams that Castro could be overthrown by tightening economic sanctions. The Cuban Democracy Act of 1992 (CDA) explicitly declared as its aim "to seek a peaceful transition to democracy . . . in Cuba through the careful application of sanctions." It reimposed the ban on trade with Cuba by third-country subsidiaries of US corporations, which President Ford had lifted in 1975 and that amounted to $718 million in 1991—89 percent of which was food and medicine (Torricelli 1993; America Association on World Health 1997, 122). It also prohibited vessels entering Cuban ports from entering US ports for 180 days, thereby complicating Cuban trade and raising its shipping costs.

In addition, the CDA instructed the president to urge other countries to halt all aid to Cuba on pain of losing their aid from the United States (a provision aimed specifically at Russia and other former Soviet states). The CDA's sanctions were to remain in force until the president certified that Cuba had become a democracy by holding free and fair multiparty elections and "establishing a free market economic system." The reaction of US allies was decidedly hostile. Criticism in Latin America and the European Union (EU) was widespread, and Canada and Mexico went so far as to pass laws prohibiting US companies in their jurisdiction from complying with the CDA (Early 2015, 184).

Unlike President George H. W. Bush, who pressured Mikhail Gorbachev to end Soviet aid to Cuba as the price of ending the Cold War, President Bill Clinton did not follow the CDA's admonition to lobby other states to adopt sanctions against Cuba. Instead, he relaxed restrictions on travel to allow for "people-to-people" interaction, which he believed would "promote democracy and the free flow of ideas more actively" (Clinton 1995). In June 1993, the Treasury

Department unveiled new regulations licensing travel to Cuba for humanitarian, religious, and educational purposes, vastly expanding the number of people eligible to visit (31 C.F.R. 515–560(b) 1993). To handle the flow, the administration approved additional daily flights between Miami and Havana.

During the *balsero* (rafters) migration crisis of 1994, Clinton imposed new sanctions on Havana as punishment for unleashing the wave of immigrants. He halted family remittances, which amounted to about $500 million annually, and cut off direct air links, making it more difficult for Cuban Americans to visit. The attempt to end remittances was apparently not very successful; Cuban Americans found other ways to get money to their needy relatives through third countries (Díaz-Briquets and Pérez-López 1997).

Direct airline flights and remittances were reinstated in 1998, coinciding with Pope John Paul II's visit to Cuba (Albright 1998). In January 1999, Clinton unveiled another set of people-to-people initiatives, loosening license requirements for humanitarian and cultural travel, expanding air service, and allowing anyone, not just family members, to send remittances. He also licensed sales of agricultural inputs to private farmers "for the purpose of promoting economic activity that is independent of the Cuban Government"—a forerunner of Obama's 2014 decision to license US trade with Cuban small businesses (Clinton 1999; Albright 1999). By the end of the Clinton administration, remittances totaled some $800 million annually, up from $150–$200 million in 1990 (Tamayo 1999; "Cubans Complain" 1994).

In 1996, however, Clinton had made the fateful decision to sign the Helms-Burton bill, which became the Cuban Liberty and Democratic Solidarity Act. Passed in the wake of Cuba shooting down two small planes, killing four members of the Cuban American exile group Brothers to the Rescue, Helms-Burton sought to tighten the embargo by extending its extraterritorial reach, and by writing existing sanctions into law to prevent any president from lifting it.

The law, named after its sponsors, Senator Jesse Helms (R–NC) and Senator Dan Burton (R–IN), called on the president to seek a mandatory international embargo from the UN Security Council, to urge foreign governments to end their assistance to Cuba, and to oppose Cuba's entry into international financial institutions. It authorized US nationals, including Cuban Americans, to sue foreign companies for "trafficking" in their confiscated property on the island—an effort to deter foreign investors. (This provision, subject to a periodic presidential waiver, has never gone into effect). Finally, the law directed the attorney general to deny entry to the United States for anyone "trafficking in confiscated property," including officers of foreign companies with investments in Cuba and their immediate family.

Allied reaction to Helms-Burton was even more hostile than to the CDA. All of Latin America voiced criticism of the act. Canada and every EU country passed retaliatory legislation, and the EU filed a complaint against the United States in the World Trade Organization (Early 2015, 185). The contrast with the 1960s, when Latin America joined the US sanctions regime and Europe grudgingly cooperated with it, was stark. By 1996, no other country in the world was willing to abide by US sanctions.

The codification of the embargo into law was intended to freeze sanctions as of March 1, 1996, to make them "Clinton-proof," as cosponsor Senator Helms put it (Haney and Vanderbush 2005, 113). Previously, the embargo had been based on presidential executive authorities under the Trading with the Enemy Act, so it could be tightened, loosened, or abolished at the president's discretion. Helms-Burton aimed to eliminate that discretion by specifying exactly what conditions had to be met before the embargo could be lifted—transition to a democratic Cuba with a free market economy and compensation for everyone whose property the revolution had nationalized. However, the codification of the sanctions embodied in the Cuban Assets Control Regulations (CACR) simultaneously codified the president's authority to license exceptions to the embargo, thus preserving a great deal more discretion than Senator Helms had intended (Marshall 1998).

Ironically, the passage of Helms-Burton crystallized the business community's discontent with Washington's use of unilateral economic sanctions. The law's extraterritorial pretensions threatened to disrupt trade relations with Europe, Canada, and Latin America. Business associations were drawn into lobbying on Cuba to pressure the White House to waive implementation of the provision allowing Cuban Americans to sue foreign corporations (Lippman 1996).

In early 1998, coinciding with the pope's trip to Cuba and his call for an end to the US embargo, Americans for Humanitarian Trade with Cuba was inaugurated. Organized by the Chamber of Commerce, this coalition was an unusual alliance of some 600 business organizations and 140 religious and human rights groups dedicated to repealing the embargo on food and medicine. By focusing on food and medicine, the coalition was able to harness both the humanitarian impulses that arose in response to Cuba's economic hardship and the pecuniary interests of the business community, a combination that proved surprisingly powerful.

Rep. George R. Nethercutt (R–WA), a farm-state Republican in a tight race for reelection, sponsored a bill in 2000 to end the embargo on food and medicine. Large majorities in both houses of the Republican-controlled Congress voted in favor. Republican leaders, however, used their control of the rules to impose a "compromise" that denied Cuba any US government or private-sector financing to make purchases. Thus the practical effect of lifting the food and medicine embargo was minimized, and the Cuban government initially denounced the measure as a fraud—though by mid-decade, it was buying more than a half-billion dollars of US food (Holmes and Alvarez 2000; "Chaos Reigns in US Politics" 2000; US-Cuba Trade and Economic Council 2015). As a consolation prize to conservatives, the Trade Sanctions Reform and Export Enhancement Act (TSRA) also prohibited tourist travel to Cuba, defined as travel for any purpose other than the 12 categories of purposeful travel allowed under existing regulations.

A key element of President George W. Bush's Cuba policy was to cut travel in order to reduce the flow of hard currency to the Cuban government. In practice, that meant limiting legal travel and stepping up enforcement to choke off illegal tourism. Travel to Cuba, both legal and illegal, had been growing ever since the end of the Cold War. By most estimates, the total number of Americans visiting annually was 150,000 to 200,000, most of whom were Cuban Americans. Some 30,000 others traveled legally under approved licenses, and the rest—somewhere between 20,000 and 50,000—traveled illegally (Sullivan 2003, 5). Bush stepped up enforcement dramatically, bringing thousands of enforcement actions against travelers, among them a 75-year-old grandmother who unwittingly took an illegal bicycle trip, and an evangelical Christian who went to Cuba to distribute Bibles (Baucus, Enzi, and Flake 2004).

In March 2003, Bush promulgated new regulations abolishing "people-to-people" exchanges entirely, the largest category of travelers who were not Cuban Americans (Kirkpatrick 2003). In 2004, following the recommendation of his Commission for Assistance to a Free Cuba, Bush cut the allowed travel of Cuban Americans from one trip annually to only one trip every three years. The new regulations also restricted remittances and gift packages. Remittances constituted a major source of the Cuban government's hard currency—a huge hole in the sanctions regime—so the commission considered banning them entirely. But the politics were forbidding; to avoid an election-year uproar among Cuban Americans, the commission settled on restrictions to reduce the flow.

The purpose of the new sanctions, Bush explained, was to "prevent the regime from exploiting hard currency of tourists and remittances to Cubans to prop up their repressive regime" (Sullivan 2012, 2). The cumulative effect of the 2003 and 2004 regulations was to cut travel by US residents in half, reduce humanitarian assistance from some $10 million annually to $4 million, and shrink remittances from $1.25 billion to about $1 billion annually (Arrington 2005; Marx 2005; Acosta 2006).

From Hard Power to Soft

"We've been engaged in a failed policy with Cuba for the last 50 years, and we need to change it," declared presidential candidate Barack Obama in August 2007 at a political rally in Miami's Little Havana, the citadel of Cuban American conservatism. Obama promised to end restrictions on remittances and family travel for Cuban Americans, resume "people-to-people" educational and cultural exchanges, and engage Cuba in bilateral talks on issues of mutual interest. Engagement, he argued, offered the best hope for promoting "a democratic opening in Cuba" (Obama 2007).

Obama fulfilled his pledge in April 2009 by lifting travel and remittance restrictions on Cuban Americans (Obama 2009). In January 2011 he announced another package of regulatory changes that rolled back George W. Bush's restrictions on academic and people-to-people travel, thereby allowing everything short of unadorned tourism. The new rules once again allowed remittances to be sent to almost anyone in Cuba from anyone in the United States (Obama 2011).

In a December 17, 2014, address, Obama called for an end to the embargo while acknowledging that it required congressional action. He also agreed to review Cuba's designation as a state sponsor of terrorism, and he used his licensing authority to ease restrictions on remittances, sales to private businesses, financial transactions, travel, and the sale of telecommunications equipment and services to Cuba. Allowing US exporters to sell goods to Cuban private businesses was aimed at bolstering the emergent private sector in the expectation that this would create a social base economically independent of the government. Licensing telecommunications companies to expand Cuba's digital infrastructure was aimed at providing Cubans freer access to information. Loosening travel restrictions was aimed at expanding the diffusion of ideas. The implementing regulations issued by the Treasury and Commerce Departments were even more explicit about the aim of the new policy—Secretary of the Treasury Jack Lew said that they put in place "a policy that helps promote political and economic freedom for the Cuban people" (Lew 2015).

On April 14, 2015, just three days after meeting with President Raúl Castro at the Seventh Summit of the Americas in Panama, Obama announced his decision to remove Cuba from the State Department's list of state sponsors of terrorism (US Department of State 2015). Countries on the list are subject to a variety of economic sanctions, including restrictions on the export of military or dual-use goods; a prohibition on financial transactions; restrictions on humanitarian assistance; US opposition to assistance from international financial institutions; and authorization of private citizens to sue for damages stemming from acts of terrorism. Apart from the private lawsuits provision, however, the other sanctions remain in place as part of the broader embargo against Cuba under the Trading with the Enemy Act, so removal from the list had little effect on the sanctions regime (Propst 2015).

The Impact of Sanctions and the Cuban Response

Fidel Castro reacted to the imposition of US sanctions in 1960 with defiance. When US refineries refused to accept Soviet petroleum, Castro warned that if the United States was determined to wage economic war against the revolution, he would nationalize everything the Americans owned in Cuba, "down to the nails in their shoes" (Phillips 1960). And, as noted above, he did—all $1.8 billion worth (Fisher 2014). Castro turned to the Soviet Union, whose willingness to replace Washington as Cuba's economic partner cushioned the embargo's blow, which might otherwise have been fatal for the dependent Cuban economy. On April 16, 1961, during the Bay of Pigs invasion, Castro declared his revolution socialist, and eight months later, on December 1, he announced, "I am a Marxist-Leninist and will be a Marxist-Leninist until the last day of my life." By 1962, the Soviet Union had recognized Cuba as a member of the socialist bloc, thereby committing itself to the revolution's survival (Levesque 1978, 31).

The embargo was most effective in the early 1960s, when Cuba's capital stock was still of US manufacture and the embargo prevented Cuba from acquiring spare parts. The 1960s were also the high-water mark of allied cooperation with US sanctions. In 1964, under pressure from Washington, the Organization of American States adopted mandatory economic and diplomatic sanctions against Cuba. Washington's NATO allies in Europe were more reluctant to sever trade relations, but most complied by cutting aid and credits to Havana (Morley 1987, 178–239). Trade with the United States fell from 68 percent of Cuban trade in 1958 to 0 percent in 1962, while trade with the Soviet Union jumped from less than 1 percent in 1958 to 49 percent in 1962. Soviet economic assistance during that first decade of the revolution, when Cuba was most vulnerable, totaled $3 billion (LeoGrande and Thomas 2002).

Because of Soviet assistance, from the 1970s to 1990, the US embargo was more inconvenience than threat, though it forced Cuba to become increasingly integrated into the Council of Mutual Economic Assistance (CMEA). The Soviet Union paid above world market prices for Cuban sugar and sold petroleum at below world market—subsidies that by 1989 amounted to about $3 billion annually, and totaled about $62 billion between 1959 and 1990 (LeoGrande and Thomas 2002). That dependency proved ruinous when the European communist regimes collapsed.

The severe depression of the 1990s left the Cuban economy vulnerable once again to the US embargo, which slowed its recovery. When the Cuban Democracy Act ended Cuba's ability to buy food from US corporations abroad, it raised Cuba's shipping costs substantially for bulk commodities like sugar and grain at a time when the government's shortage of hard currency meant that food imports were already inadequate (US International Trade Commission 2001). This expense was exacerbated by prohibiting ships that called in Cuban ports from entering US ports for six months.

Restrictions on the sale of medicine made it virtually impossible for Cuba to obtain US patented drugs or equipment. A number of independent studies documented the deleterious impact of US sanctions on the Cuban health care system (Garfield and Santana 1997; Roman 1998; American Association for World Health 1997; Kuntz

1994). "The negative impact of the embargo is pervasive in the social, economic and environmental dimensions of human development in Cuba, severely affecting the most vulnerable socioeconomic groups of the Cuban population," the UN coordinator for development reported in 2008. A year later, Amnesty International concluded that the embargo stood in violation of international law because of its restrictions on food and medicine (Amnesty International 2009, 13).

The embargo also complicated Cuba's effort to diversify away from sugar production and into tourism. Although Cuba enjoyed considerable success in developing tourism, the future expansion of this sector was limited so long as the United States prohibited tourist travel to the island. A 2008 study by the International Monetary Fund (IMF) estimated that if sanctions were lifted, as many as 3 million US tourists would visit Cuba annually (Romeu 2008).

Foreign direct investment (FDI) in Cuba was hampered by the provisions of the Helms-Burton act, which made foreign corporations subject to lawsuits in US courts if they "trafficked" in property confiscated from US citizens, including naturalized Cuban Americans. Despite several revisions of Cuba's FDI law offering successively better terms to prospective investors, few took advantage of the opportunity—although the blame was shared by Cuba's uninviting business climate (Feinberg 2012).

Finally, Cuba's exclusion from international financial institutions meant that the impact of adjusting to the shock of the Soviet collapse fell fully on the backs of Cuban consumers. Neither the IMF nor the World Bank was available for emergency infusions of cash and credit. Cuba withdrew from these institutions in the 1960s and has been prohibited from participating in the Inter-American Development Bank (IDB) since its membership in the Organization of American States was suspended in 1962. The Helms-Burton act required US representatives to oppose allowing Cuba back into any of these institutions.

After the collapse of the Soviet Union, Cuba was forced to reorient its international economic relations. Europe, Latin America, and Canada have become important trade partners and sources of tourism, which has become the largest sector of the Cuban economy. By 2013, Europe accounted for 23.3 percent of Cuban trade, Latin America excluding Venezuela accounted for 25.1 percent, and Canada accounted for 4.6 percent (ONE 2014, tables 8.4, 15.3). Venezuela, China, and Brazil have given essential aid to Cuba. Venezuela provides about two-thirds of Cuba's oil, worth several billion dollars annually, financed by long-term concessionary credits and the services of some 40,000 Cuban healthcare professionals. In 2013, trade with Venezuela accounted for 35.4 percent of all Cuban trade (LeoGrande 2013; ONE 2014, table 8.4). Since 2001, China has granted Cuba over $1 billion in trade credits to purchase Chinese goods, and Brazil helped finance the modernization of Cuba's port of Mariel, a billion-dollar project (Early 2015, 190–96). These trade-based and aid-based "sanctions busters," as Bryan Early refers to them, have given Cuba an invaluable cushion against the impact of the US embargo (Early 2015).

In 2014, Cuba estimated the cumulative cost of the embargo at $116.8 billion since 1960 (Trotta 2014). Yet despite the cost, the embargo has never managed to extract the intended concessions. From the outset, Fidel Castro insisted that it had been imposed unilaterally by the United States and had to be removed unilaterally as a precondition for discussing the normalization of relations. Cuba could not negotiate, Castro often said, with "a dagger at our throat" (Marder 1975). Such declarations notwithstanding, he nevertheless quietly engaged in talks with Washington that resulted in agreements on a wide range of issues over the years (LeoGrande and Kornbluh 2014).

Raúl Castro, upon assuming the presidency in 2006, continued to demand that Washington lift the embargo (a demand he reiterated in his December 17, 2014, address to the nation), but he did not set it as a precondition for negotiations. From the outset he expressed his willingness to talk with Washington about anything, including human rights, so long as the dialogue was conducted "on an equal footing, with absolute respect for our sovereignty and for the right of the Cuban people to their self-determination" (Castro 2009).

A Counterproductive Backlash

One of Fidel Castro's great gifts as a politician was his ability to grasp the core values of Cuban political culture and, through his oratory, reflect them back to the public in ways that resonated deeply. Perhaps the most important of these values was nationalism. Having won independence three-quarters of a century after the rest of Latin America, only to have its sovereignty hamstrung by the US-imposed Platt Amendment, Cuba's nationalist sentiment has been especially strong.

Castro appealed to that sentiment during the insurrection against Fulgencio Batista, but even more so after the triumph of the revolution as his new government confronted the United States. Fidel understood very well the political value of mobilizing Cuban nationalism behind his radical program. "The revolution has to fight; combat is what makes revolutions strong," he said in early 1961. "A revolution that does not confront an enemy runs the risk of falling asleep, of growing weak. . . . Like armies hardening themselves, revolutions need to confront an enemy!" (Castro 1961).

As US-Cuban relations deteriorated in 1959–1960, Washington obligingly provided that enemy. Through the years, Castro proved adept at using confrontations with Washington to mobilize support. In 1961, on the occasion of the Bay of Pigs invasion, he announced the socialist character of the revolution. In 1964, he made a cause célèbre of Cuban fishermen detained by the US Coast Guard for fishing in US waters. In 2000, he used the campaign to return six-year-old Elián González to reinvigorate flagging revolutionary enthusiasm. For nearly a decade, demands for the release of the "Five Heroes" (the five Cuban spies imprisoned in the United States in 1998) boosted national solidarity. And for half a century, Cuba's leaders have been able to blame the nation's economic problems on the US embargo (although Raúl Castro has resorted to that excuse much less often than his older brother).

Washington's policy of hostility also gave Castro an excuse to suppress dissent. The very real threat of attack by the United States in the early years of the revolutionary government, combined with

Castro's intolerance of opposition, produced an authoritarian single-party system. Since the earliest years of the revolution, domestic opponents have been branded as agents of the United States and thus as enemies of the revolution. Washington gave the Cuban government a ready-made justification for its intolerance by actively recruiting and supporting domestic opponents as part of its regime-change strategy (LeoGrande and Kornbluh 2014, 359–363, 374–379).

In their comprehensive assessment of economic sanctions, Hufbauer, Schott, Elliott, and Oegg (2009) conclude that sanctions are most likely to be effective when they are multilateral, comprehensive, target a regime that is economically vulnerable, and have a modest, limited goal. As C. Fred Bergsten put it, you cannot expect a regime to "commit political suicide" (Council on Foreign Relations 1998).

US economic sanctions against Cuba have never met these conditions. In the 1960s, Cuba was vulnerable and US allies cooperated, making the embargo broadly multilateral, but the Soviet Union came to Cuba's rescue. By the 1970s, even US allies had begun to restore relations with Havana, and the Cuban economy had been successfully reoriented toward the communist bloc. Washington no longer had any leverage. Cuba's vulnerability rose dramatically during the Special Period, but by then, the United States was alone in its adherence to the sanctions regime. After the Soviet collapse, Cuba was able to reorient its trade to Western Europe, Asia, and Latin America, securing significant aid and investment from Venezuela and China. In 2015, the UN General Assembly voted for the twenty-fourth year in a row in favor of Cuba's annual resolution condemning the US embargo by the lopsided vote of 191 to 2 (the United States and Israel).

Even the United States has made significant exceptions to what was originally a comprehensive embargo. By 2014, half a million US residents were visiting Cuba annually, Cuban Americans were sending nearly $3 billion in remittances to the island and another $2 billion in goods, and US agribusiness was selling Cuba more than $200 million worth of food every year (Partlow 2014; US-Cuba Trade and Economic Council 2015).

Finally, US objectives have never been modest. During the Cold War, Washington demanded that Cuba abandon its foreign policy as the price of normal relations; after the Cold War, Washington demanded that Cuba abandon its socialist system. Cuban leaders consistently rejected these demands, even at the depths of the Special Period, when Cuba's economic situation was desperate.

Trying Something New

The ineffectiveness of the embargo and US isolation in pursuing it were key reasons that Obama decided to change course. The policy of economic denial was "an outdated approach that, for decades, has failed to advance our interests," he declared in announcing his intention to normalize relations. "No other nation joins us in imposing these sanctions, and it has had little effect beyond providing the Cuban government with a rationale for restrictions on its people" (Obama 2014). But with elements of the economic sanctions regime written into various laws—the Foreign Assistance Act of 1961, the Export Administration Act of 1979, the Cuban Democracy Act of 1992, the Cuban Liberty and Democratic Solidarity Act of 1996, and the Trade Sanctions Reform and Export Enhancement Act of 2000—Obama could modify the embargo through his licensing authority, but he could not remove it. Only Congress could do that.

With the 2016 Republican presidential aspirants advancing a narrative that Obama was weak on foreign policy, Republican congressional leaders were not about to allow passage of any legislation that would make Obama's Cuba policy look like a success. Nevertheless, with traditionally Republican business groups lobbying to open up the Cuban market, there proved to be significant bipartisan support for lifting the ban on tourist travel and ending the embargo. If the Democrats retained the White House in 2016, there was a reasonable chance that a new Congress might finally lift the legislative prohibitions on travel, trade, and investment.

A Republican victory in 2016, on the other hand, could delay the process significantly. Legally, a Republican president could reverse everything Obama did on Cuba, because all of his actions relied on executive authority, but the diplomatic cost would be enormous in Latin America and beyond. Obama's opening to Cuba was undertaken in part because of the deterioration in US relations with Latin America caused by the old policy, and his announcement on December 17, 2014, received universal and enthusiastic endorsement throughout the hemisphere. A Republican in the White House would be more likely to simply halt normalization rather than try to reverse it, leaving relations to languish for a time in a twilight zone between hostility and normality.

Yet less than a year after Obama's historic reversal of Cuba policy, the political momentum behind the new approach seemed to be growing. The American public welcomed the change by wide margins, according to the polls (CubaNow 2015). The Cuban public was virtually unanimous in its support (Bendixen and Amandi 2015a). Even Cuban Americans in southern Florida, the traditional stronghold of conservative rejectionists, favored the new approach (Bendixen and Amandi 2015b). Like the emperor's new clothes, the flimsy rationale for the old Cold War policy of hostility melted away once the president openly acknowledged its anachronism and adopted an alternative. In that sense, December 17, 2014, changed the terms of the debate fundamentally. Going forward, the question for Washington and Havana was not whether to normalize relations but when and how. "We know the road to fully normal relations is long," Secretary of State John Kerry acknowledged at the ceremony reopening the US embassy in Havana (2015). Nevertheless, he continued, "The time is now to reach out to one another as two peoples who are no longer enemies or rivals, but neighbors."

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