

## CUBAN EXCEPTIONALISM

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Like Americans, Cubans—on the island and in the diaspora—have laid claim to exceptionalism. While American exceptionalism may be self-evident, Cuba’s isn’t, at least to the outside world. Geographic location, the preeminence of Havana in colonial times, the cane-based economy when sugar meant wealth, the interest of European countries, and the special relationship with great powers like Spain and the United States engendered an uncommon national sense of self in Cuba.

Well before the revolution, Cubans reveled in their achievements while, at the same time, believing that Cuba could become much more than it was. And it would be after 1959, even if being exceptional turned into an irreparable tragedy for those who opposed the revolution, went into exile, suffered long imprisonment, and lost their lives for freedom’s sake. Still, the revolution raised the hopes of millions on the island and around the world.

Nearly six decades later, such hopes have largely been dashed, and Cuba is but the largest island in the Caribbean Sea. Until December 17, 2014, when President Barack Obama announced that the United States would normalize relations, Washington’s persistence against Havana—which the international community opposed—provided Cuban leaders a scapegoat for their failures. With Obama’s courageous turnabout, Cuba and Cubans may well start taking baby steps away from exceptionalism. And that’s a good thing.

## **U.S. Policy towards Cuba**

Since 1959, the United States has espoused three distinct approaches towards Cuba.

- As the revolution radicalized between 1959 and 1960, the Eisenhower Administration began to plan for an invasion. As American properties were nationalized, the president cancelled Cuba's sugar quota in the U.S. market. Finally, before leaving office, the president broke diplomatic relations with Havana. The Bay of Pigs invasion was already in the making. After its failure, the Kennedy administration authorized the CIA to carry out Operation Mongoose to promote a popular insurrection. After the Missile Crisis, the operation was canceled.
- A second approach crystallized in the 1970s amid détente with the Soviet Union, although it had already been considered by the Kennedy administration in the months before the president's assassination. JFK entertained the possibility of normalizing diplomatic and trade relations with "an independent communist state" in Cuba. Gerald Ford and Jimmy Carter applied Kennedy's template in the 1970s, but neither brought it to a fruitful conclusion.
- Under Reagan, the seeds of a third strategy were planted. While favoring regime change in Havana, the administration pursued ideological warfare, whether through attending the U.N. Human Rights Commission in Geneva, supporting meetings of anti-communist intellectuals in Europe, or launching Radio Martí. This approach—supported by neoconservatives and the Cuban-American community—did not mature until the 1990s. The Cuban Democracy Act (1992) and the Helms-Burton Act (1996) embodied the belief that a reinforced embargo would, at last, bring Havana to its knees.

For different reasons, none worked. The third template, in particular, was built on the premise that Havana would negotiate with the United States about the backbone of its power: the one-party system and the violation of human rights.

On December 17, Obama jettisoned the post-Cold War template. Ford, Carter, and Clinton had favored a step-by-step process—first in secret, then in open dialogue—to normalize relations. In no small part due to Cuban actions such as the intervention in Angola (1975), the intervention in Ethiopia (1978), and the shoot-down of two Brothers to the Rescue Cessna airplanes over international waters (1996), the piecemeal undertaking did not come to fruition.

### **Cubans/Cuban Americans and U.S. Policy**

At every opportunity over the past five decades, Cubans have played a part in U.S. policy toward the island. In 1959-1960, the revolution's leaders chose a path of radicalization: centralizing power, eliminating capitalism, and turning toward the Soviet Union. Notwithstanding, the new government retained deep popular support. Still, not a few Cubans—including many who had joined the armed struggle against the Batista dictatorship—rejected the chosen path; the restoration of democracy had been the driver of their struggle in the 1950s. At home and later from the United States, the opposition saw communism as an affront to longstanding Cuban ideals of independence, sovereignty, and freedom. For their alliance with the United States, exiles were vilified while the international community never brought the same onus on Havana for its relationship with the Soviet Union. In pursuing a free Cuba, exiles and opponents on the island joined or supported the Bay of Pigs invasion and Operation Mongoose. Armed struggle in the Escambray Mountains in Central Cuba (1960-1966), however, was launched and sustained without meaningful U.S. support. In 1963, Marcelina Chacón—a peasant

woman—said: “Two of my sons died fighting for Cuba’s freedom, one with one idea and the other with another.” That is, one died fighting for the revolution, the other against it. Even if the revolution thrust Cuba into the Cold War, at heart, the conflict was Cuban.

In the 1970s, the exile community largely opposed the efforts of the Ford and Carter administrations to normalize relations with Havana. Still, a small minority looked favorably on the rapprochement in the making. Influenced by the ideals of the sixties, some young Cubans who reached adulthood in the United States sympathized with the revolution and traveled to the island after the Carter administration lifted the travel ban. Liberal exiles who had opposed the revolution for its communist turn also started to consider dialogue as an avenue toward a better Cuba. A few Cuban Catholics likewise took their cues from the Church on the island, which had condemned the embargo in 1969. After Interests Sections were opened in Washington, D.C. and Havana, the two governments continued their negotiations. In 1978, after a dialogue with Cubans from the United States and other countries, Cuba agreed to free 3,000 political prisoners and the United States granted entry to more than 15,000 political prisoners and their families. In addition, Havana allowed Cubans abroad to visit their relatives on the island. More than 100,000 did so from the United States alone. Whatever the politics involved, exiles were more than willing to overlook them for the sake of embracing their loved ones.

Carter’s policies angered powerful sectors in Cuban Miami. In 1979, Jorge Mas Canosa (1939-1997) and other wealthy exiles began laying the groundwork for the Cuban American National Foundation (CANF). With Ronald Reagan in the White House, Mas Canosa crafted a strategy of influencing those in power. Between 1981 and 1997, their contributions to Republican and Democratic candidates who advocated a hardline towards Havana totaled \$3.2 million. Radio Martí was CANF’s most significant achievement. The foundation also cooperated

with the Reagan administration in helping the Nicaraguan *contras* and Jonas Savimbi's *guerrillas* in Angola. At the end of the 1980s, CANF engineered a program to bring to the United States Cuban exiles who had been stranded for years in Panama, Costa Rica, Peru, and Spain. The Cuban Democracy Act (1992) and, especially, the Cuban Liberty and Democratic Solidarity (LIBERTAD) (1996)—better known as Helms-Burton—codified the embargo, giving Congress the sole authority to end it. Neither would have been possible without Cuban Miami's political heft. Mas Canosa and the Cuban American National Foundation showed the exile community the efficacy of lobbying in Washington, D.C. and of making campaign contributions. Politics—not terrorism against Cuban officials, Cuban flights, and moderate exiles—was the way to go.

### **Cuban-American Public Opinion**

After Jewish Americans, Cuban Americans are the second most overrepresented group in the U.S. Congress, with three senators (two Republicans, one Democrat) and four representatives (three Republicans, one Democrat). All oppose Obama's policy changes regarding Cuba. While these elected officials will likely remain in Congress for a long while, Cuban Americans in Miami do not necessarily share their hardline stance. An overview of public opinion polls conducted over the past 25 years follows the changing—if sometimes conflicting—opinions.

- Early in the 1990s, nearly 87 percent supported the embargo; by 2000 that support declined to 62.4 percent. In 2014, 52 percent opposed its continuation. At the same time, whatever their position on the embargo, growing majorities of Cuban Americans in Miami thought it worked badly or not at all.

- In 1993, almost 50 percent said U.S. companies should be allowed to sell medicines to Havana; by 2000, over 66 percent did. Regarding U.S. companies selling food to Cuba, just under 25 percent approved at first, a proportion that had more than doubled by 2000 to 56.1 percent. Support for U.S. companies selling food and medicine increased between 2004 and 2011: from 55 percent to 65 percent (food); from 60 percent to 75 percent (medicine).
- In 1991, 40 percent favored a national dialogue that included the government, opposition, and exile; in 2000, nearly 52 percent did. By 2011, a solid 58 percent strongly or mostly supported such a dialogue.
- While travel to the island and sending remittances to their families always garnered majority support, by 2014 an overwhelming 80 percent of Cubans in Miami favored them. Sixty-nine percent supported unrestricted travel to Cuba by all Americans.
- In 2014, 68 percent of Cubans living in Miami-Dade County favored diplomatic relations with Cuba. Three quarters supported continuing or expanding trade with Cuba.
- In the 1990s, support for a U.S. invasion of Cuba remained constant (63 percent versus 60 percent). By 2007, it had declined to 51 percent.
- Sixty-three percent of Cuban Miami believes Cuba should remain on the State Department's list of countries designated as sponsors of terrorism.
- Eighty-six percent support the Cuban Adjustment Act.<sup>i</sup>

The most significant findings of these polls are the opinions of Cuban Americans under 44 years old and Cubans who arrived after 1998. Both groups—especially the latter—hold views on normalization of relations, trade, national dialogue, unrestricted travel for all Americans, and the

embargo more intensely than older cohorts and earlier exiles on the same issues. Cuban Americans under 44 and post-1998 immigrants constitute a majority of Cuban Miami. Even though Obama in 2012 and then Charlie Crist in 2014 (defeated in Florida's gubernatorial race) narrowly won their vote, younger Cuban Americans and the newer immigrants do not yet account for a majority of Cuban-American voters. Still, as life's course takes its toll and new generations reach adulthood, these trends are likely to continue. Similarly, as long as 20,000 or more Cubans arrive in the United States annually under the Cuban Adjustment Act and the immigration accords of the 1990s, recent arrivals—who have family members on the island—will tend to feed the same attitudes of moderation that older exiles over 70 still reject.

The findings above also highlight the emotional pull among Cubans in Miami. While attitudes toward the embargo have shifted over time, even when support was at 87 percent, most Miami Cubans did not think it worked well or at all. Even when most probably knew that the likelihood of a U.S. invasion was almost nil, a slight majority nonetheless supported the idea in the 2000s. Significant majorities today favor normalization of relations with Havana, yet two-thirds say that Cuba should remain on the list of countries sponsoring terrorism. Even though the Cuban Adjustment Act will at some point be rescinded, solid majorities favor it. There is, in fact, nothing particularly unusual about individuals holding contradictory views. That the emotional pull no longer determines attitudes toward changing U.S. policy is more telling. All the same, a few days after December 17, 48 percent of Cuban Miami opposed Obama's announcement while 44 percent supported the president—even though in June 2014 most favored an inclusive national dialogue, normalization of relations with Havana, and continued or expanded trade. After so long, when change finally came to Washington regarding Cuba, many Cuban Americans initially did not know what to make of it. Still, the 48-44 percent split suggests that 44 percent is

the floor of support for Barack Obama's announcement that the normalization of relations with Cuba is now the goal of U.S. policy.

### **Cuban Exceptionalism?**

Normalization of relations will take awhile. How could it not after nearly six decades? While Cuba was Obama's first concern, a larger one may well have been Latin America and the Caribbean. Once fully restored, diplomatic and trade relations between Cuba and the United States may well mean that the Western Hemisphere will also have fully normal relations with Havana. Cuba will no longer be the exceptional focus of U.S. enmity, and no longer have an excuse for being the exception to the Hemisphere's commitment to democracy. The emerging context may likewise lead some countries—Brazil, Mexico, Panama, and Chile, for example—to exert discreet pressure on Havana on human rights. Why shouldn't Cubans be entitled to free speech, peaceful assembly, and free, competitive elections? The Cuban government long ago exhausted the legitimacy initially bestowed upon it by the revolution. Cubans under 44 on the island may also see the world differently than their parents and grandparents.

At some point, Cuba may well be a normal country. By this I mean, one whose government cares more about its citizens' living standards and human rights than its foreign policy. Should it come to pass, such a government would start restoring the long-squashed hopes of ordinary Cubans. If at that point they chose to claim exceptionalism, I wouldn't object.

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<sup>i</sup> 2014 FIU Cuba Poll <https://cri.fiu.edu/research/cuba-poll/>. Links to earlier polls can also be found on this page.