

“Greenbacks vs. Gut: Human Rights Policy in Cuba over
Four Important U.S. Administrations”

Senior Capstone

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Since the Cuban revolution in 1959, the United States has devoted billions of dollars, and sacrificed considerable international prestige in the aim of overthrowing the Castro regime. These efforts at regime change are evidenced by: CIA-run covert actions, the economic embargo, democracy promotion campaigns, and motions for condemnation by international organizations. In any study of U.S. foreign policy towards Cuba, whatever the position espoused, neither side can argue with the fact that the U.S. goal of regime change has not been met. So what has the U.S. gotten out of its harsh policy towards Cuba? Have there been motivations for U.S. policy towards Cuba beyond regime change on the island nation?

The issue of U.S.-Cuban relations, especially in the area of human rights violations, is a polarizing one, with strong opinions on both sides. Two scholars interpreting the same event can see either abject failure or absolute success. For example, many consider the U.S. policy on limiting remittances by Americans to Cuba to be an ineffective policy.¹ However, scholars on the other side, like Daniel Fisk, see it as a vital method of choking the Castro regime economically.² It is important to bear this ambiguity in mind when considering the question of U.S. foreign policy in Cuba. Because of the expansive and complex nature of this question, it is helpful to focus on a single area of U.S. foreign policy towards Cuba.

Some of the most interesting developments in this conflict of ideas (and ideals) have been in the field of human rights. This is often the cover-all to justify U.S. policy in Cuba, as will be shown below. Is it possible that the U.S. genuinely wanted to see an

¹ Indira Rampersad, "Human Rights Groups and U.S. Cuban Policy". *Peace Review: A Journal of Social Justice* 18 (2006). Database on-line. Available from ProQuest Research Library, 22.

² Daniel W. Fisk, "Advancing the Day When Cuba Will Be Free." In *A Contemporary Cuba Reader*, edited by Philip Brenner, et al. (Lanham, Maryland: Rowman & Littlefield, 2008), 231.

improvement in the lives of everyday Cubans? If so, how much did this desire for improvement in human rights affect policy actions?

This research will explore the motivations, actions and consequences of U.S. foreign policy in Cuba during the Kennedy, Carter, Reagan, and Bush Jr. Administrations. This will be a treatment of their policies in terms of their rhetoric, executive decisions, and legislation enacted during their administrations. A study of these presidents is especially informative because they are spread evenly between the two major political parties, and because they represented the U.S. in crucial periods of Cuba-U.S. relations, such as the Cuban Missile Crisis, the Mariel Boatlift, the end of the Cold War, and the terrorist attacks of September 11, 2001. An analysis of whether rhetoric and legislation was motivated more by concerns for the Cuban people than by geo-strategic and political interests, or vice versa can lead to some interesting and useful policy prescriptions. Have U.S. actions and rhetoric towards Cuba, which often involve the words “human rights,” been an abuse of the emotional nature of human rights policy, or have they resulted from an honest attempt to improve the lives of everyday Cubans?

While many studies have explored different aspects of this question, (U.S. foreign policy goals in Cuba, human rights in Cuba, etc.) there has been no synthesis of these aspects into an examination of how—specifically—human rights has been used in U.S. foreign policy in Cuba. There is certainly research about each aspect of the question, but here I endeavor to put all of this together to suggest a conclusion about the reality of human rights in U.S.-Cuba policy. This is a work of synthesis that differs from any existing study in that I will explore the interrelated nature of this question in depth. An aggregated look at these issues could lead to policy prescriptions for the future.

In terms of methodology, I will use a comparative case analysis. This will be divided by U.S. presidents' administrations. I will begin with a literature review of the prevailing opinions of scholars on human rights policy in the U.S. as well as U.S. foreign policy towards Cuba. A section on the situation in Cuba during this time period will follow. The administrations will be looked at in terms of the geo-political situation at each time period and the motivations each president may have had for their stances on Cuba, as well as a discussion of how human rights rhetoric and legislation has been used in each of the four administrations. Policy decisions, speeches, and private correspondence will be used as evidence of these motivations.

Literature Review

In order to come away with a balanced appraisal of the human rights situation in Cuba, it is important to look at both human rights literature and literature on U.S. foreign policy in Cuba. Most of the prevailing theory maintains that human rights promotion has always acted as a rusty seesaw in U.S. foreign policy. Despite our stated ideals of freedom and liberty for all and our deeply ingrained liberalism, human rights promotion often flies out the window in the face of U.S. national interest. As "the legal foundation for justice, emancipation, and human freedom,"³ human rights should be universal, and are the basic obligations owed to all people. However in practice, money talks, and in the face of national interest or security, interests of a nation's own people come before those of citizens of a foreign nation. Simple national economic or geo-strategic interests often take precedence over human lives; this is one of the predominant issues in human rights policy towards Cuba. Human rights policy is also "not an intentionally planned

³ Rampersad, 18.

strategy,”⁴ in that it is often carried out in a piecemeal fashion that makes it difficult to establish trends. However, as noted above, there are several general tendencies, including the seesaw relationship of human rights and national interests. Often, unfortunately, the national pocketbook often dismisses the national guilty conscience.

The field of human rights is of course one that can be explored from several different perspectives. Some human rights theorists, like Joshua Muravchik, have a slightly cynical opinion on the relationship between human rights policy and motivations: “we have grown all too familiar with the misuse of terms like ‘democratic’...and ‘human rights’ by people who harbor disguised ideological agenda.”⁵ In his book, *Surrendering to Utopia*, human rights anthropologist Mark Goodale looks at human rights in terms of the “humanity” and morality of human rights.⁶ He was one of the first to use anthropology to form concrete theories on human rights. The interdisciplinary nature of human rights is one that is crucial but often ignored. Goodale’s analysis is one of few that take this into account and is quite important in the field.

As editors of *Human Rights and Conflict*, Julie Mertus and Jeffery Helsing study human rights in the context of conflicts and how the two relate.⁷ Because there has been no significant military conflict between the U.S. and Cuba, this very interesting analysis does not apply in this case. Clair Apodeca, another well-known human rights scholar, has explored the piecemeal nature of human rights policy and the lack of any defined strategy

⁴ Clair Apodeca, *Understanding U.S. Human Rights Policy* (New York: Routledge), 29.

⁵ Joshua Muravchik, “Human Rights Watch Versus Human Rights: The Cynical Manipulation of a Worthy Cause gas a History,” *The Weekly Standard* 011, no. 48 (Septemeber 2006) 3, available at <http://www.weeklystandard.com/Content/Public/Articles/000/000/012/649efeoasp?pg=2>.

⁶ Mark Goodale, *Surrendering to Utopia: An Anthropology of Human Rights* (San Francisco: Stanford University Press), 10.

⁷ Julie Mertus and Jeffrey Helsing, eds. *Human Rights and Conflict: Exploring the Links between Rights, Law, and Peacebuilding* (Washington, D.C.: United States Institute for Peace), x.

or set of policies.⁸ This very fact is responsible for the lack of theoretical work on human rights; there are very few definitive conclusions that can be drawn upon.

Otherwise, human rights literature consists mainly of specific case studies. Ann Elizabeth Meyer has worked on Islam and human rights.⁹ Donna Gomien and Wolfgang Benedek provide insight on human rights in Bosnia.¹⁰ Many others have done similar research in other nations and situations. Because of the emotional nature of human rights, it is often only studied on a case-by-case basis and not examined broadly in terms of the relationship between rhetoric and legislation in the name of human rights and geo-strategic goals. Are human rights “more an argument over unrelated questions than a substantive issue”?¹¹ The truth is, they often can be.

In addition to human rights scholarship and case studies of human rights, there is considerable research on U.S. policy as a whole on Cuba. Daniel Fisk, Special Assistant to George W. Bush,¹² is a leading analyst of the U.S.-Cuba relationship, and has extensively studied Cuba. He portrays the situation in Cuba as a positive one and fully supports U.S. tactics.¹³ He has spent time focusing on presidential rhetoric and its relation to real improvement in Cuba, but his unabashedly partisan approach precludes an honest appraisal of the facts. Philip Brenner is an expert on Cuba, and has studied the effects of

⁸ Apodeca, 30.

⁹ Ann Elizabeth Mayer, *Islam and Human Rights: Tradition and Politics* (Boulder: Westview Press), 9. Available on Google Books.

¹⁰ Donna Gomien in Wolfgang Benedek, ed. *Human Rights and Bosnia Herzegovina after Dayton: From Theory to Practice* (The Hague: Kluwer Law International), 107.

¹¹ Steven W. Hook and John Spanier, “The Human Rights Issue,” in *American Foreign Policy since WWII* (Washington, D.C.: CQ Press), 187., available from ProQuest Research library.

¹² “Daniel W. Fisk,” *Sourcewatch*, The Center for Media and Democracy, available at http://www.sourcewatch.org/index.php?title=Daniel_W._Fisk.

¹³ Fisk, 231.

U.S. policy on Cuban citizens.¹⁴ His focus is primarily on Cuba and less on U.S. foreign policy, however. Julia Sweig is a premier expert on Cuba, and has written on the inefficacy of U.S. policy in Cuba in enacting regime change.¹⁵ She maintains that the embargo has gone completely counter to U.S. goals in Cuba, as well as the well being of Cuban citizens. She has come closest to the type of research at hand here, but has not done an in depth study of direct relationships between U.S. rhetoric on human rights and the results in Cuba and for U.S. politicians. Because she is more a U.S. foreign policy scholar than a human rights scholar, her work does not focus on human rights. It is in light of the aforementioned research, that this project was conceived. It will endeavor to draw specific conclusions from the political actions of the U.S. foreign policy apparatus in the name of human rights, and the true results of those actions for the human rights situation in Cuba.

Historical Background on Cuba

First, it is important to establish a historical background by which to explore the administrations of Presidents Kennedy, Carter, Reagan, and Bush Jr. Cuba has been a communist country since the revolution of 1959. To Americans, this date conjures up thoughts of the Cold War, “Duck-and-Cover,” and McCarthyism. This political climate will be enormously important for explaining U.S. policy in Cuba since the revolution. The U.S. president at the time of the Cuban Revolution was Dwight D. Eisenhower. A hero of World War II, and an even-handed foreign policy maker, he was not the president to initially impose the embargo. President Kennedy first enacted the embargo, just before the Cuban Missile Crisis.

¹⁴ Philip Brenner, *A Contemporary Cuba Reader: Reinventing the Revolution* (Lanham, Maryland: Roman and Littlefield), xi.

¹⁵ Julia E. Sweig, “Fidel’s Final Victory.” *Foreign Affairs*. Jan/Feb 2007, 41.

The daily life of an average Cuban is much different from how most Americans would likely picture it. Although poverty is prevalent throughout the island, Cuba has maintained an average life expectancy of 77.25 years and a literacy rate of %99.8.¹⁶ Nearly 100% of all children in Cuba are enrolled in school through the 9th grade, and Cuba's infant mortality rate is lower than that of the U.S.¹⁷ Also, the government has contributed greatly to Cuba's health services and research and development apparatuses. All citizens have access to inexpensive housing and food at moderate prices. This being said, these statistics do not take into account the poor quality of Cuban housing, or the long lines and lack of nutritional variety in foods.

In terms of political rights, Cuba does not have a free press and it is clear from the 2003 crackdown on political dissidents that there is no political freedom either.¹⁸ Cuba has not had a single free election since the revolution, 50 years ago. In light of this lack of basic human rights for most Cubans, something must be done to improve their situation. The question now is whether the U.S. is on the right path to this goal, or if U.S. policy actions are not effective or even harmful to the cause.

Since its inception, the embargo has varied in severity and scope. At times, especially under President Carter, restrictions have been purposefully lax.¹⁹ At other times, when international climate turned a certain way, U.S. presidents have become more restrictive towards Cuba and Cuban-Americans. It is within the context of Cuba as a poor, communist country under an embargo from the world's most powerful country,

¹⁶ "Cuba" CIA Factbook. 11 September 2009, available at <https://www.cia.gov/library/publications/the-world-factbook/geos/cu.html> (accessed 20 September 2009).

¹⁷ Sweig, 41.

¹⁸ "Cuba: One Year After Crackdown." Human Rights Watch, 18 March 2004, available at <http://www.hrw.org/english/docs/2004/03/17/cuba8126.htm> (accessed 22 September 2009), 1.

¹⁹ Esteban Morales Dominguez and Gary Prevost. *United States-Cuban Relations*, (Lanham, Maryland: Lexington, 2008), 11.

that the question of U.S. human rights rhetoric and policy towards Cuba will be examined.

After having looked at the general situation in Cuba since the Revolution, it is important to look at the overall trends in the state of human rights in Cuba as related to U.S. policy. In many ways, U.S. foreign policy towards Cuba is helping to decrease human rights violations on the island. In terms of economics, restrictions on remittances “have deprived the Castro regime of over \$100 million dollars in hard currency”²⁰ This, Fisk maintains, has lessened Castro’s grip on power, and his ability to “repress his people”. The logic here is that it costs money to run a government, and without that money, a repressive government is not able to exert its authority. Also economically, the U.S. has helped end human rights abuses on Cuba with humanitarian aid. On average, U.S. based philanthropies and humanitarian aid organizations give more than \$270 million in aid to Cuba each year. According to President Bush, “the aid we provide goes directly into the hands of the Cuban people, rather than into the coffers of the Cuban leaders.”²¹ While it is important to note the occasion and circumstances of this statement, \$270 million is a substantial amount of money, and even if only a small portion of that makes its way into Cuban hands, it could help greatly improve the lives of those people.

Though limited, the U.S. does allow the transfer of some money to Cuba from family members in the form of remittances. The total amount of remittances, while difficult to measure, has been estimated to be up to one billion dollars,²² and makes up a large part of Cuba’s GDP and helps Cubans help themselves to a better life. Also, the fact

²⁰ Fisk, 231.

²¹ George W. Bush, “The Socialist Paradise is a Tropical Goulag.” Address to on U.S. Foreign Policy in Cuba, 24 October 2007, in *Human Events*. Volume: 63 Social Science Module: 9, 12, 14.

²² “Background Note: Cuba,” *The U.S. Department of State*, August 2008, available at <http://www.state.gov/r/pa/ei/bgn/2886.htm>

that Cubans are receiving this money from family members in the United States is a very provocative argument for American-style democracy and capitalism. The idea that Cuban-Americans have money to spare could lead some Cubans to demand as much from their own government.

Additionally, some civil society promotion programs and other politically minded democracy promotion programs directed at the Cuban people have been effective. Radio Marti and TV Marti, which broadcast messages of democracy and freedom to the Cuban people have provided them with information on the outside world. This serves to alleviate some of the human rights abuses of Castro that come in the form of censorship and propaganda.²³ The Cuban Internal Opposition Act of 2001 “allowed for the government to send...food, medicine, telephones, and fax machines...to Cuban democratic organizations opposed to the Castro regime.”²⁴ These items give the Cuban people the freedom to disseminate information, protest, and assert their rights. Another example of an effective policy is the Cuban American Alliance education fund, hosted by the U.S. The fund enables Cuban and American academics to come together to discuss education, and has allowed a select few Cubans the freedom to study and carry on a discourse outside of the repressive confines of the regime.²⁵ Though this conference was later moved to Canada when Castro denied the scholars permission to visit the U.S., the opportunity for such discourse would have not been possible in Cuba.

In addition to the effective economic and democratic elements of U.S.-Cuba policy, political maneuvers carried out by the various administrations have also proven in

²³ Fisk, 230.

²⁴ Stephen J. Randall, “Cuba-United States Relations in the Post-Cold War Transition.” In *Canada, the United States and Cuba*, ed. Sahadeo Basdeo and Heather N. Nicol. (Coral Gables, Florida: North-South Center Press, 2002) 86.

²⁵ Dominguez and Prevost, 133.

some cases to be a step in the right direction. In the mid 1990s, one could see the beginnings of another refugee crisis between the countries, the likes of which had not been seen since the Mariel exodus in 1980. By bending hard lines in order to solve a very pressing problem for both sides, President Clinton and Fidel Castro were able to come to an agreement to stem the crisis.²⁶ The result was that thousands more discontented Cubans remained on the island than would have if the U.S. had allowed the influx of refugees. These people may become the driving force behind the overthrow of the Castro regime. Additionally, many scholars maintain that refusal to conduct negotiations with Cuba without certain preconditions has shown Cuba that the U.S. is serious about improving human rights on the island. These hard lines and preconditions include: free and fair elections, the freedom of political prisoners, and the acknowledgement that the Castro family and other current high ups will not participate in the desired transition to democracy.

Despite these successes in U.S. foreign policy towards Cuba in eliminating human rights abuses, in other ways U.S. policy has been very ineffective. At times, it has even led to increases in restrictions by Castro that have decreased Cubans' access to basic human rights. This has been the case in the realm of economics. Many argue that the embargo itself, one of the most fundamental aspects of U.S. foreign policy in Cuba, harms the Cuban people. Though current policies do allow for some trade in agricultural products between the two countries, it is still very limited. Also, though the U.S. has comparative advantage in many essential goods, instead of buying them from the U.S., Cubans are forced to either produce those goods themselves (not often possible), or import them for higher prices from far away lands. Because Cuba is a very poor country,

²⁶ Randall, 76.

the differences in transportation costs can make a significant difference in their nutritional possibilities.²⁷

In a direct contradiction to the stated U.S. policy of regime change, the embargo has strengthened the legitimacy of the Communist state. Its “determination that all should eat was the only thing to keep Cubans from starving.”²⁸ This action by the state saved the lives of the Cuban people in the face of an American policy that could have destroyed them. This does little to garner support for U.S. from the international community, let alone the Cuban people. Even ignoring human rights and speaking purely in terms of the U.S. goal to choke the Castro regime, the embargo has been unsuccessful. In light of American refusal to engage Cuba, the nation has turned to European and Asian countries as well as other Latin American countries to create trade partnerships; these countries have been happy to oblige, despite U.S. admonitions decrying doing business with Cuba.²⁹ U.S. policy towards Cuba also restricts the flow of intellectual property, negatively affecting human rights in the form of limiting research and development and technology such as vaccines and medicines. This policy serves to maintain the many “backward” aspects of the Cuban government’s policies and is an American action that directly harms the Cuban people.

Other bad policy decisions have been made in the form of civil society and democracy promotion programs. Travel and remittance restrictions limit the mobility and human rights of American citizens, to say nothing for the Cubans. In the same vein as the economic inefficiencies listed above, restrictions on remittances inhibit the ability of

²⁷ Remy Herrera. “Why Lift the Embargo?” *Monthly Review* 55 (2004). Database on-line. Available from ProQuest Research Library. 52.

²⁸ *Ibid*, 54.

²⁹ Dominguez and Prevost, 141.

many Cubans to satisfy their basic human needs. Also, travel restrictions limiting family visits are cruel and unusual in that they serve no immediate purpose and needlessly tear families apart. In addition to the unjust remittances and travel restriction policies, civil society promotion has been a huge failure in U.S. policy towards Cuba. In terms of U.S. policies, “heightened tensions and pressures produce conditions that are the opposite of those that might lead to greater openness and respect for the rights of the individual.”³⁰ The U.S. has counted on the idea that the political and civil unrest it was creating would turn the Cuban people against their government, but instead it turned them against ours. The seemingly blatant U.S. attack on the Cuban people (in the form of the embargo, covert ops, and military exercises) has only legitimized Fidel’s government, and led him to increase pressures on any citizens suspected of being in cahoots with the U.S. In turn, this crackdown on those who are suspected of receiving aid from the U.S. has led to the refusal of Cuban dissidents to accept help from the U.S.³¹ It has pushed them into the arms of European and other foreign countries for help. This means that those people who do have the potential of contributing to the U.S.’s and their own goal would rather go-it-alone than accept aid from the U.S.³² This does not paint a pretty picture.

In addition to bad economic and democracy promotion policies, the political policies of the U.S. towards Cuba have been unsuccessful in improving the human rights status of the Cuban people. U.S. actions, such as covert operations and “terrorist acts”³³ as well as exercises performed by the U.S. military in Guantánamo Bay have led Cuban

³⁰ Smith, Wayne S. “Wanted: A Logical Cuba Policy.” In *A Contemporary Cuba Reader*, edited by Philip Brenner, et al. (Lanham, Maryland: Rowman & Littlefield, 2008), 246.

³¹ *Ibid*, 247.

³² Saul Landau. “Cuba: A Half-Century of Distorted News and Counting...” NACLA Report on the Americas. *Media Accuracy on Latin America*, May/June 2008. Database on-line. Available from EBSCO. (Last Accessed: 22 September 2009), 50.

³³ *Ibid*, 49.

leaders to tighten restrictions on Cuban citizens by way of response to hostile U.S. posturing.³⁴ U.S. actions such as these, coupled with the embargo, have provided a scapegoat for Castro's regime. He is now able to blame all of Cuba's problems on the United States, thus absolving himself of any responsibility.³⁵ He is now able to restrict human rights under the guise of protecting the nation from the big, bad U.S.A. His actions and decisions in the face of U.S. policy are perfectly logical and predictable and they mirror in many ways Americans' apathetic response to the government's restriction of their personal freedoms after September 11, 2001. Such a civil liberties restricting backlash could have been avoided had the U.S. made an effort to study possible effects of its policies.

Additionally, U.S. foreign policy towards Cuba has essentially amounted political suicide in the international community. For the past seventeen years running, the U.N. has condemned U.S. foreign policy towards Cuba by landslide margins.³⁶ Not only that, but actions abroad, such as the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan, have led to increased anti-American sentiment. This anti-Americanism has pushed many countries to look for ways of expressing their disapproval with American policy choices. One of those options is increased trade and dialogue with Cuba despite American threats.³⁷ This increases access of Cubans to medicines, foods, materials for shelter, and industrial goods,³⁸ pulling the rug out from under the force of the embargo. Additionally, attention to hard line Cuban-American groups like the Cuban Liberty Council can lead to policies which—albeit

³⁴ Sweig, 43.

³⁵ Bush, 864.

³⁶ "U.N. Celebrates 17th Annual Landslide Vote Against U.S. Cuba Policy," Sixty Third General Assembly Plenary, Department of Public Information, News and Media Division, New York (29 October 2008), 1, available at <http://www.un.org/News/Press/docs/2008/ga10772.doc.htm>

³⁷ Sweig, 44.

³⁸ "Mission Improbable." *Economist* 374, no. 8419 (March 26, 2005): 37. Academic Search Premier, EBSCOhost (accessed 22 September 2009), 37.

inexplicitly—favor vendetta over human rights. Also, the tendency in Congress of most Congressmen to base their positions on Cuba off of a desire to “help a friend,”³⁹ is prohibitive in terms of effective intelligence gathering. Finally, there is a fundamental flaw in U.S. Cuba policy that prevents it from improving the human rights of Cuban citizens as it purports: it is predicated entirely on violence.⁴⁰ A policy whose main goal is the overthrow of a government (not generally a peaceful activity, most certainly not in this case) cannot concern itself with human rights as well. Violence in a person’s backyard and increased value of human rights are mutually exclusive. Judging by the actions of the Cuban government in response to the U.S.’s democracy promotion efforts, it is unlikely that any regime change will occur without bloodshed and the deaths of many Cubans.

President John F. Kennedy—I was would have liked to, but...

Having established the overall trends of U.S. policy in Cuba and human rights, the next step is to take an in-depth look at the specific rhetorical and legislative actions of certain presidents to attempt to link U.S. policy, rhetoric, and human rights promotion in Cuba. John F. Kennedy is an important president to analyze here for several reasons. First, he is the president who put the embargo in place. Also, he was in office for two of the most crucial periods in U.S.-Cuba relations: the Cuban Missile Crisis and the Bay of Pigs Invasion.

³⁹ Philip Brenner, Patrick J. Haney and Walter Vanderbush. “Intermestic Interests and U.S. Policy toward Cuba.” In *The Domestic Sources of American Foreign Policy*, edited by Eugene Wittkopf and James McCormick, (Lanham, Maryland: Rowman & Littlefield, 2004), 67-83.

⁴⁰ Dominguez and Prevost, 56.

Kennedy made his position on Cuba clear from the very start; within a week of taking office,⁴¹ Kennedy severed all diplomatic ties with Cuba.⁴² During his administration, he presided over operations Mongoose and Northwoods, secret missions to undermine and overthrow the Castro regime.⁴³ Additionally, there is evidence that the head of the C.I.A.'s Special Affairs Staff, Desmond Fitzgerald (supposedly on the behalf of Robert Kennedy) was making plans to assassinate Castro.⁴⁴ Evidence discovered after his assassination suggests that Kennedy also considered opening a dialogue with Cuba. His legislative history, however, seems quite harsh on Cuba and communism, and had little concern for human rights.

President Kennedy was the first in a long line of “passing the torch” when it came to U.S. foreign policy in Cuba.⁴⁵ President John F. Kennedy took office in early 1961. He arrived at the White House with a bright vision of change for the future, and was one of the first to mention human rights by name, which he did in his inaugural address, one of the most important speeches he would make as president.

“Americans--born in this century, tempered by war, disciplined by a hard and bitter peace, proud of our ancient heritage—and unwilling to witness or permit the slow undoing of those human rights to which this nation has always been committed, and to which we are committed today at home and around the world.”⁴⁶

This mentioning of human rights right from the start is highly significant, as the term ‘human rights’ was not generally used in American rhetoric until the Nixon

⁴¹ Eisenhower, though an avowed anti-communist, did not sever ties with Cuba, likely due to his domestic focus.

⁴² “Cuba Timeline,” *The Mary Ferrell Foundation*, available at http://www.maryferrell.org/wiki/index.php/Cuba_Timeline

⁴³ *Ibid*, 2.

⁴⁴ *Ibid*, 2.

⁴⁵ Dominguez and Prevost, 14.

⁴⁶ John F. Kennedy, “Inaugural Address,” 20 January 1961, available from the John F. Kennedy Presidential Library at www.jfklibrary.org

Administration,⁴⁷ his speeches on peace and freedom for all suggested an underlying commitment to the tenets of human rights. Additionally, his focus on the Civil Rights Act showed a commitment to equal standing under law for all Americans; a belief he often applied to peoples all over the world. In an October 22, 1962 speech, broadcast by television and radio to both the American and Cuban people, Kennedy spoke of having no doubt that—

“[M]ost Cubans today look forward to the time when they will be truly free—free from foreign domination, free to choose their own leaders, free to select their own system, free to own their own land, free to speak and write and worship without fear or degradation. And then shall Cuba be welcomed back to the society of free nations and to the associations of this hemisphere.”⁴⁸

Unfortunately, even this declaration was made as a side note at the end of a speech focused entirely on geo-strategic interests. Kennedy, like President Carter after him, would see his focus on human rights and individual freedom for all citizens of the world consistently sidelined by realpolitik-style geo-strategic events. Had the world been more calm and stable during his presidency, Kennedy may have been able to focus on those causes he purportedly personally saw as important. However, when faced with what he saw as an imminent threat from Soviet missiles in Cuba, or a CIA disaster like the Bay of Pigs splashed across the front pages of the country’s newspapers, he was forced to let those causes fall by the wayside in favor of military and “national security” interests. This is not an unusual problem and faces all U.S. presidents.

⁴⁷ Hook and Spanier, 188.

⁴⁸ John F. Kennedy, “Radio and Television Report to the American People on the Soviet Arms Buildup in Cuba,” *The White House*, 22 October 1962, available from the John F. Kennedy Presidential Library, at www.jfklibrary.org.

Additionally, Kennedy spoke of and to the Cuban people in terms of freedom and democracy more than he did in terms of human dignity and human rights. He called them “puppets,” snatched away from democracy “just when it was hoped that Cuba was about to enter upon a new era of democracy and social justice.”⁴⁹ American presidents have always stated that they consider democracy to be of vital importance in the developing world. (Though their actions in Latin America in the 1960s and 1970s might prove otherwise.) Thus this sort of rhetoric is expected and is nothing new. However, in the same speech, he also spoke of “[p]eoples who have waited for centuries for opportunity and dignity,” and the need for “the rich [to be] willing to use some of their riches more wisely...the privileged [to be] willing to yield up their privileges to a common good.”⁵⁰ This sort of rhetoric shows a dedication to improving the lives of all. While it does not stress the political freedoms that are often discussed today in rhetoric on human rights, it does reference the need for all to have “the right to life, liberty, and security of person.”⁵¹ Even in this single speech, it is clear that President Kennedy saw the importance both of securing global stability and securing human rights for Cubans. Unfortunately, in terms of real change, the former often took precedence over the latter.

Somewhat surprisingly in light of his decision to impose the embargo and show a hard line towards Cuba, National Security Agency documents released since his presidency suggest that Kennedy was willing and eager to dialogue with the Cubans.⁵²

This again was put on the back burner in the face of “more important” national security

⁴⁹ John F. Kennedy, “Address at the Teatro Nacional in San Jose Upon Opening the Presidents’ Conference,” 18 March 1963, *The Presidency Project*, available at www.presidency.ucsb.edu, 3.

⁵⁰ *Ibid*, 3.

⁵¹ “Universal Declaration of Human Rights,” *The United Nations*, adopted 10 December 1948 by the General Assembly, available at www.un.org/en/documents/udhr

⁵² “Kennedy Sought Dialogue with Cuba: Initiative with Castro Aborted by Assassination, Declassified Documents Show,” *The National Security Archive*, posted 24 November 2003, available at <http://www.gwu.edu/~nsarchiv/NSAEBB/NSAEBB103/index.htm>.

interests. Just before his assassination, Kennedy had arranged to have a secret meeting in Havana with Castro.⁵³ This is of absolutely monumental importance for this research question because it shows that Kennedy was willing to risk the political backlash that would have resulted from negotiating with a man he had long ago designated as a Soviet puppet in order to enact real change. This sort of meeting could only have improved the lives of Cubans, as it is clear that Kennedy would have made that a priority, especially in light of his speeches quoted above. Cuba was interested in seeing the embargo eased or lifted, and that would have been an important bargaining tool for Kennedy. He could have improved the lives of everyday Cubans immeasurably. If the talks had been very successful, he might have even been able to lead Castro in a more democratic direction, perhaps influencing him to free political prisoners, or increase freedom of the press. Unfortunately, this will remain a mystery, though it does show that there was more to Kennedy's policy on Cuba than meets the eye.

In conclusion, there are indications that Kennedy would have liked to open a dialogue with Cuba that extended beyond Cold War rhetoric and arms-based discussions. However, because of the threat of the Cuban Missile Crisis and the PR disaster that was the Bay of Pigs, Kennedy was forced—either in reality or in his own perception—to focus on defense over human rights. If he had not had this longstanding tradition of favoring *realpolitik* over human rights behind him, President Kennedy may have been able to enact real change. There is little doubt that Kennedy had a personal desire to improve human rights. However, one wonders if perhaps his relative youth and inexperience motivated him to act more strongly on Cuba than he would have otherwise. In either case, there is little in Kennedy's legacy that shows a real improvement in human

⁵³ "Kennedy Sought Dialogue," 1.

rights in Cuba, quite the contrary. As the president who first put the embargo in place, he must be given considerable responsibility for the poverty and destitution in Cuba that it caused.

President Jimmy Carter—A Good Start

President Jimmy Carter is another interesting president to analyze in discussing human rights in Cuba, not just in light of his historical visits to Cuba post-presidency, but also because he was in office during the Mariel Boatlift, one of the most important diplomatic exchanges between the U.S. and Cuba since the Revolution. He came into office favoring normalizing relations with and denounced previous “U.S.-based terrorism against Cuba.”⁵⁴ President Carter, while he did not discuss Cuba as much as President Kennedy (in favor of working on the Iran hostage crisis, among others), seemed to be quite confident in his grasp of the situation in Cuba. In his 1980 run against Ronald Reagan, Carter mocked his opponent in his dealings with the country: “but when we asked [Reagan] what he would do about aggression in Southwest Asia, he suggested blockading Cuba.”⁵⁵ He felt that Cuba had not been adequately researched and understood. Essentially, the Carter Administration represented a thaw in relations between the U.S. and Cuba, but was not able to live up to its potential due to competing interests.

President Jimmy Carter was the first president to campaign on a platform of human rights for all and brought “unprecedented presidential commitment” to human

⁵⁴ Jimmy Carter, “Presidential Directive/NSC-6,” The White House, 15 Mar 1977, National Security Archive, compiled by George Washington University, available at <http://www.gwu.edu/~nsarchiv/news/20020515/cartercuba.pdf>

⁵⁵ Jimmy Carter, “Acceptance Speech at the Democratic National Convention,” 14 August 1980, Miller Center of Public Affairs, University of Virginia, available at <http://millercenter.org/scripps/archive/speeches/detail/5534>

rights.⁵⁶ Carter brought to the office a “certain religiosity that translate[d] into a desire to moralize politics.”⁵⁷ He personally has a great respect for the political, social, and economic rights of individuals all over the world, and provided a “receptive environment,”⁵⁸ to human rights movements all over the world. His personality and long held beliefs would lead one to believe that human rights conditions in Cuba would be at the top of his list, especially since many of their missing freedoms were a direct result of U.S. policy. While it was certainly a priority, there were several mitigating circumstances that denied the Cuban people the human rights improvements they might have hoped for.

In both words and actions, President Carter’s human rights record vis-à-vis Cuba started off strong. In the first month of his administration, Carter stopped the reconnaissance flights over Cuba that had been the norm since 1962.⁵⁹ Additionally, he chose not to “renew the ban on travel to Cuba by U.S. citizens.”⁶⁰ This ban had been continually renewed without much consideration for nearly twenty years. Not only this, but Carter lifted the ban on American spending in Cuba, which would bring money and opportunity into the impoverished country.⁶¹ As we saw above in the statistics on literacy rates, etc., this is money the government may have used to improve access to education and basic resources for its citizens. He also reopened the long vacant U.S. embassy in Cuba.⁶² The status of embassies between unfriendly nations is a hugely important diplomatic signal; the significance of this decision by Carter shows a true

⁵⁶ Julie Mertus, *Bait and Switch* (New York: Routledge, 2008), 29.

⁵⁷ Nicolas Guilhot, “Limiting Sovereignty or Producing Governmentality? Two Human Rights Regimes in U.S. Political Discourse,” in *The International Journal of Critical and Democratic Theory* 15, 4 (2008), borrowed through the InterLibrary Loan service at American University, p. 502.

⁵⁸ *Ibid*, 502.

⁵⁹ Wayne S. Smith, *The Closest of Enemies: A Personal and Diplomatic Account of U.S.-Cuban Relations Since 1957* (New York: W. W. Norton, 1987), 101.

⁶⁰ *Ibid*, 102.

⁶¹ *Ibid*, 102.

⁶² Dominguez and Prevost, 7.

commitment to overture with Cuba. While these may seem like small gestures, they did improve the mobility of U.S. citizens, and Cuban's access to goods and resources from their relatives across the strait.

Esteban Morales Dominguez and Gary Prevost, however, see these overtures quite differently. They maintain that Carter was more concerned with appeasing American businessmen wishing to do business on the island than with improving the lives of Cuban citizens.⁶³ While of course business interests are important to the U.S., President Carter has since shown himself to be wholly committed to human rights for Cubans. Had the island not contained attractive business prospects, President Carter would likely still have made Cuba a priority. Additionally, there were many scholars and politicians who felt that opening Cuba to American businesses would have a negative effect for the U.S. Many argued that “a partial opening of trade with Cuba would negatively affect U.S. sugar producers and would undermine one of the most important negotiating levers the U.S. Government had for dealing with Cuba.”⁶⁴ The ambiguity of interests involved in opening Cuba to American businesses is an interesting aspect to Carter's story in Cuba.

Not only was President Carter personally a proponent of improved human rights records for Cubans, but several external conditions also favored improved relations with Cuba in the mid- to late-1970s. First, the Cuban economy was doing comparatively well at that point, having been sheltered from the oil crisis that hit most of rest of the world.⁶⁵ Increased wealth often makes a dictator more limited by popular opinion, because they people have bargaining chips and capacities of their own. The people have greater

⁶³ Dominguez and Prevost, 7.

⁶⁴ *Ibid*, 82.

⁶⁵ Dominguez and Prevost, 84.

motivation to keep what they have or even add to it. For that reason, Cuba was starting to look much more attractive to U.S. businesses, and had been the object of interest for such American companies as Coca-Cola and General Motors.⁶⁶ Both Cuba and the U.S. were at a point where they could particularly significantly benefit from trade with one another. American businesses, Cuba, the Cuban citizens, and many Americans favored this trade. The jobs, goods, and capital brought in to their country could have significantly improved the lives of Cubans.

Fortunately, President Kennedy was not the only president to want to open a dialogue with Cuba. Carter also wished to talk with the Cubans. *Prima facie*, these talks would be about maritime borders and fishing,⁶⁷ but Carter expressed more than once a desire to discuss human rights with Cuba. He thought of it this way: “the human rights issue is the key element in relations between the U.S. and Cuba.”⁶⁸ Carter also kept an eye on the human rights conditions in Cuba with yearly reports from the State Department.

Despite both a president who was an active advocate for human rights in Cuba and favorable external conditions, it must be said that Carter encountered several pitfalls to influencing real change in the everyday situation of Cubans. First, the Cuban military’s involvement in Angola posed a significant problem for the Carter Administration. At the heart of the Cold War, an expansionist communist country in America’s backyard would not get much sympathy from the American people. Thus, Carter’s hands were somewhat tied.

⁶⁶ *Ibid*, 84.

⁶⁷ *Ibid*, 102.

⁶⁸ Jimmy Carter, “Statement at a Press Conference in Plains, Georgia,” 13 February 1977, in Smith, *The Closest of Enemies*, 102.

One of the most crucial moments with Cuba during the Carter Administration was the severe 1980 economic downturn in Cuba that led to the Mariel Boatlift. At the time of the downturn, Castro essentially stated that any Cuban that wanted to leave the country was welcome to do so. During the Mariel Boatlift, more than one hundred thousand Cubans crossed over into the United States.⁶⁹ Clearly, this was a demographic nightmare, as the U.S. now had thousands more people to support. Additionally, the fact that many of these new immigrants were convicts and mental patients purposefully let out by Castro to come to America further complicated the situation. The human rights paradox that remained suggested no easy escape. On the one hand, Carter had denounced the human rights situation in Cuba and stated that he wished for better lives and opportunities for Cubans. However, when those who came to the U.S. were given access to these opportunities, it put great strain on the Florida and Southeast economy and population. President Carter could neither refuse them entry, nor could he give them the support he might have liked. His failure in negotiating with Castro to end the crisis hurt his reelection prospects significantly.⁷⁰ The impact was severe and his inability to manage it would prove politically fatal. Castro would later use the prospect of another Mariel—which is one of the key points in U.S.-Cuban relations—as a bargaining chip with Ronald Reagan.

Another pitfall to real improvements in the human rights situation in Cuba during the Carter Administration was the “continued terror attacks” perpetrated by groups sponsored or tolerated by the U.S. against Cuba.⁷¹ As noted above, Carter had called for

⁶⁹ Kenneth N. Skoug, *The United States and Cuba under Reagan and Shultz*, (Westport, CT: Praeger, 1996), 5.

⁷⁰ *Ibid*, p. 6.

⁷¹ Dominguez and Prevost, 80.

an end to these attacks in 1977. However, this was too little too late and significantly undermined Carter's effort in Cuba. It also suggested that Carter was not in control and that his words and actions were contradictory. How was a country that was itself supporting and tolerating terrorism against another nation to legitimately ask for human rights improvements in said nation? The hypocrisy of the Administration was not lost on the Cuban government and did not improve the opinion of Cubans towards the U.S.

In terms of the rights of Cubans to access vital food and medicine from the U.S.—and their inability to do so as a result of the embargo—Carter tried to enact significant change. In 1977 “Cuban and U.S. diplomats responsible for the possible negotiations agreed in principle to a framework for moving forward...[with] negotiations over the embargo.”⁷² However, there was a “lack of administrative support” for the measure and negotiations over the Panama Canal treaties ended up taking precedence.⁷³ In order to get the Panama Canal treaties passed, the Administration needed support from conservative Congressmen who did not support easing the embargo. Once again Cuban human rights was to play second fiddle to geo-strategic interests.

The Carter Administration's inconsistency towards Cuba, Wayne S. Smith argues, was one of its fatal flaws, and significantly reduced the possibility of improvement for human rights in Cuba.⁷⁴ He cites Carter's apparent switch from a no-preconditions negotiation stance with Cuba to one in which he needed to be convinced of progress before beginning talks.⁷⁵ Carter often spoke in seemingly contradictory terms on Cuba,

⁷² *Ibid*, 85.

⁷³ *Ibid*, 85.

⁷⁴ Smith, 103.

⁷⁵ *Ibid*, 103.

which led to confusion on both sides of the strait. It also undermined Carter's genuine, wholehearted interest in increasing the rights granted to Cubans.

President Carter was one of the greatest champions of human rights that the American Executive Branch has ever seen. His commitment to human rights in Cuba was clear in both his speech and his actions. President Carter, though he did not verbally acknowledge it, seems to have appreciated the negative impacts of the embargo on Cuban citizens. He loosened the embargo and opened the doors for talks with Cuba. However, he was not able to significantly improve human rights for Cubans, except perhaps for the 125,000 Cubans who made it to the U.S. in the Mariel Boatlift. Carter's overtures towards Cuba seem to have been primarily one-sided, with little comparable loosening from Castro. On the other hand, he did improve Cuban-Americans' mobility in allowing them to travel to Cuba. In doing so, he also indirectly increased Cubans' access to American dollars and the improvement in quality of life that came with it.

President Ronald Reagan—(Un?)Intended Consequences

President Ronald Reagan is known as the Cold Warrior. He is thought of in terms of his hard-line politics and his realpolitik. He is also an especially interesting case when looking at Cuba because it was during his term that the Cuban-American contingent in Miami was at its strongest and most important. As a Republican, this powerful lobby made up a not insignificant part of the people who elected him. Because Cuban-Americans in the 1980s were almost assuredly anti-Castro, and lived predominantly in the swing state Florida, Reagan came into office with an enormous obligation to be hard on Cuba. He even campaigned on the stance that "the United States should subject the island to a military blockade as a counter measure against the Soviet

invasion of Afghanistan.”⁷⁶ This is eerily reminiscent of Jimmy Carter’s earlier charge against Reagan noted above. Reagan’s personal crusades in Latin America and against Communism in all of its forms, most notably in Nicaragua, made it such that his policy towards Cuba was no less than “aggressive.”⁷⁷

Ronald Reagan thought of Cuba primarily as a Soviet satellite⁷⁸ and took little time to study Cuba for what it was. While it is true that at this point Cuba also saw opportunities in the prevailing instability in Latin America, Reagan seemed to be quite shortsighted when it came to the island nation. His behind-the-scenes diplomacy, which had worked so well in other nations, was not widely used towards Cuba because of his firm anti-communist stance.

There were many issues at hand in U.S.-Cuban relations right from the beginning of the Reagan Administration. When he first came into office, Reagan’s primary objective with Cuba was to deal with the aftermath of the Mariel Boatlift; he had to make sure that the criminals and mental patients that had come over were taken care of.⁷⁹ One of the biggest reasons for doing this was actually for human rights. Reagan worried that American agitation over some of the more unsavory Cubans released from prison and allowed to come into America were hurting Americans’ willingness to take in political refugees.⁸⁰ During his second term, once other issues were resolved, Ronald Reagan took a more involved stance towards improving human rights in Cuba, moving to increase their access to outside information and ensure their freedom from being imprisoned for political reasons. The specifics of these actions will be discussed below.

⁷⁶ Dominguez and Prevost, 92.

⁷⁷ *Ibid*, 92.

⁷⁸ *Ibid*, 92.

⁷⁹ Skoug, 10.

⁸⁰ *Ibid*, 10.

In terms of rhetoric, Ronald Reagan was quite clear on how he viewed Cuba. Cuba was rarely if ever spoken of without the accompaniment of its ties, perceived or otherwise, to the Soviet Union. In a 1983 speech, Ronald Reagan spoke of Cuba over twelve times, but mention of the Soviet Union was never more than 15 words away.⁸¹ This highlights Reagan's failure to understand Cuba as its own nation, with its own interests and history outside of its ties to the U.S.S.R. Almost no mention of human rights conditions in Cuba was made during Ronald Reagan's term. When Cuban human rights were mentioned, Reagan spoke in terms of Communism itself:

“The record is clear. Nowhere in its whole sordid history have the promises of communism been redeemed. Everywhere it has exploited and aggravated temporary economic suffering to seize power and then to institutionalize economic deprivation and suppress human rights. Right now, 6 million people worldwide are refugees from Communist systems. Already, more than a million Cubans alone have fled Communist tyranny.”⁸²

This focus on the ideology of Communism over the specific living conditions and political situation for everyday Cubans shows where Reagan's true concerns lay. He thought in terms of war, and when at war with Communism, the individual had to play second fiddle to the greater battle at hand. In his speech at the Organization of American States in 1982, his leanings toward realist politics shined through; he spoke of Cuban leaders having “trained, armed, and directed extremists in guerilla warfare and economic sabotage” to “exploit troubles in Central America and the Caribbean.”⁸³ The fact that this

⁸¹ Ronald Reagan, “National Security,” *The White House, U.S. Embassy*, 23 March 1983, available at <http://usa.usembassy.de/etexts/speeches/rhetoric/rsecure.htm>.

⁸² Ronald Reagan, “Speech about the Caribbean to the Organization of American States,” *New Media*, 24 February 1982, available at http://www.newmedia.ufm.edu/gsm/index.php?title=Ronald_Reagan%27s_speech_about_the_Caribbean%2C_at_the_Organization_of_American_States

⁸³ *Ibid*, 1.

speech was given at a meeting of the Organization of American States, to delegates who more than likely had family and friends in Cuba and saw the issue as much more complicated shows Reagan's unwavering commitment to ending and speaking out against Communism first and foremost.

Meanwhile, outside of the realm of rhetoric, which is never as enlightening as it is meant to be, Ronald Reagan took steps to show that he meant business when it came to crushing the Communist will in Cuba, however misguided these attempts may have been. In reality, all this did was hurt the everyday Cubans that every American president for twenty years had sworn to support. In the first few years of his first term, the Caribbean Basin Initiative Act was passed, which "prohibited setting aside federal resources to promote commerce with Cuba."⁸⁴ Additionally, the Reagan Administration threatened to boycott the UN Conference on Trade and Development if it were held in Cuba,⁸⁵ an event that would have opened Cuba up to the world and vice versa. It could have been used as motivation for Castro to improve human rights for his citizens. Not only that, but Reagan threatened to re-introduce "covert" CIA missions in Cuba to overthrow the regime and resumed the airplane fly-overs of Cuba that Carter had shut down.⁸⁶ All of these actions, along with severe restrictions on American travel to Cuba showed that Reagan would not continue Carter's policies, which had been relatively beneficial to the human rights conditions in Cuba.

Having argued that the Reagan Administration was fairly severe towards Cuba, it must be said that this was not the case throughout the administration, and the President took many actions that suggested quite the opposite. For example, the Administration did

⁸⁴ Dominguez and Prevost, 94.

⁸⁵ *Ibid*, 94.

⁸⁶ Dominguez and Prevost, 94.

signal that it was ready for talks with Cuba as early as 1982. However, there was much dispute over the agenda and talks were delayed. Reagan also spearheaded the “Radio Marti” program, which was to broadcast news of the outside world and anti-communist news about what was going on in Cuba to Cuban citizens.⁸⁷ Despite the inevitable slant this radio station would have, it would mark an additional source of news and information available to Cubans. This increased outside information would mean significant “intellectual nourishment” for Cubans.⁸⁸ Unfortunately, Cuba stilted this effort by using its transmitters to interfere with U.S. radio signal.⁸⁹ Nevertheless, broadcasting did begin in 1985 and the effort to establish Radio Marti and improve Cuban’s access to information showed Reagan’s commitment to human rights in Cuba, at least inasmuch as it targeted a “hostile” Communist nation.

Human rights in Cuba also took the spotlight in 1987, when the UN Human Rights Commission met in Geneva. The U.S. was on a mission to have Cuba censured for its human rights violations. They enlisted former Cuban political prisoners, or *pantados*, to argue the case against Cuba.⁹⁰ Even with all of the effort the U.S. put in, they struggled to convince their European allies to support them. The campaign included speeches, impassioned pleas, and “high-level demarches.”⁹¹ Though Cuba “narrowly escaped censure” it was clear that the U.S. had put a great deal of effort into raising awareness of human rights violations in Cuba, and Castro later admitted that the campaign had been damaging to his prominence on the world stage.⁹² It must be said, though, that this

⁸⁷ Skoug, 17.

⁸⁸ *Ibid*, 18.

⁸⁹ *Ibid*, 19.

⁹⁰ *Ibid*, 152.

⁹¹ *Ibid*, 152.

⁹² Skoug 152.

campaign also would have served to ostracize Cuba from the world and led to the results intended by embargo. While there were surely geo-strategic reasons for this move, the fact remains that it was a concerted campaign for improving human rights in Cuba.

Finally, as in any question dealing with Ronald Reagan and Communism, it is important to discuss the end of the Cold War. Reagan left office with Castro still in power of a Communist Cuba. Cuba was still a stated ally of the Soviet Union, and no significant changes had been made in the regime.⁹³ However, the Soviet Union was falling, the Migration Agreement between Cuba and the U.S. was holding strong and the end of the Cold war would “turn Cuba into a nuisance rather than a threat to the United States.”⁹⁴ At this point, many of the changes in Cuba’s role in the world arena and its policies at home were due more to actions by the Soviet Union than to any move that the U.S. made. It is up to speculation whether Cuba would have been more willing to negotiate on human rights issues as it saw the Soviet Union and Soviet support of Cuba tumbling down.

In conclusion, Ronald Reagan’s presidency was more human rights focused than one may have guessed. His support for Radio Marti and a freer press in Cuba, and his Administration’s heavy lobbying for censure of Cuban human rights violations at the U.N. showed that commitment. Ronald Reagan took real steps to improve the rights of Cubans; he even appointed a former Cuban political prisoner to be a member of the U.S. delegation to the Human Rights Commission.⁹⁵ However, throughout the Administration, it was clear in his rhetoric and actions that Reagan saw Cuba through a geo-strategic and ideological lens. Here was a Communist country a mere ninety miles from Miami, and a

⁹³ *Ibid*, 207.

⁹⁴ *Ibid*, 199.

⁹⁵ Skoug, 151.

Cold Warrior like Ronald Reagan had to do something about it. All in all, Ronald Reagan's record on human rights is one of both positive and negative points, for which the motivations are often shady.

President George W. Bush—Three Steps Backwards

The George W. Bush Administration was one that the Cuban Foreign Minister called “a period of □extreme aggressiveness, unilateralism and arrogance in the foreign □policy.”⁹⁶ George W. Bush's policy towards Cuba was arguably more aggressive than that of any other U.S. president. He passed several pieces of legislation, which limited the rights of Americans' to travel to Cuba, and increased economic and political pressures on Cuba. What was the motivation for this hard stance on Cuba? Was George Bush acting in response to 9/11? Was the legacy of his father and many of his chief advisors as anti-communist warriors influencing him to be strong on Cuba? Was he truly interested in improving the human rights situation in Cuba, and saw a hardline stance as the only way to do so?

President George W. Bush is well known for his neo-conservative policies and his national-interest driven rhetoric. However, he is also seen as a president who valued freedom over everything else. He saw a democratic regime in Cuba as the most important step in improving human rights for Cubans. Unfortunately, the U.S.'s record on imposing democracy in other countries is not a wholly positive one. The conditions for change in U.S. policy towards Cuba during the 2000s were perfect. Stateside, anti-Castro Cuban-Americans were declining in influence, with their sons and daughters taking a much more conciliatory stance on the island of their ancestors. “Cuba's success had the

⁹⁶ Bruno Rodriguez Parrilla, “Speech Delivered at the U.N. General Assembly,” 28 September 2009, available at <http://www.ain.cubaweb.cu/idioma/Ingles/2009/0928discurso.htm>

potential to drive a move for change in U.S. policy since it did not appear likely that the Cuban government was going to change anytime soon.”⁹⁷ Cuban had survived the tough economic climate of the mid-1990s and was buying everything they needed from other nations who were opening up to Cuba more than ever.⁹⁸ The embargo was at its least effective, and the U.S. was gaining nothing from continuing to castigate Cuba—the international community was not on the same side and was ignoring American pleas to follow their example. Unfortunately, whether it was 9/11, his strong base of support from Cuban-Americans, or his neo-conservative advisors, Bush did not take advantage of these conditions.

Bush spoke often of human rights when giving speeches on Cuba. A highly moralistic person, Bush was passionate about human rights. However, he often had difficulty accepting that newly formulated policies could help more than sticking with long-running policies. In May 2008, even during his lame duck time of the presidency, he showed his commitment to a strong line against Cuba:

“The Cuban government recently announced a change at the top. Some in the world marveled that perhaps change is on its way. That's not how I view it. Until there's a change of heart and a change of compassion, and a change of how the Cuban government treats its people, there's no change at all. The regime has made empty gestures at reform, but Cuba is still ruled by the same group that has oppressed the Cuban people for almost half a century. Cuba will not be a land of liberty so long as free expression is punished and free speech can take place only in hushed whispers and silent

⁹⁷ Dominguez and Prevost, 136.

⁹⁸ *Ibid*, 136.

prayers. And Cuba will not become a place of prosperity just by easing restrictions on the sale of products that the average Cuban cannot afford.”⁹⁹

Clearly, Bush was not able to accept that idea that lifting or easing the embargo would improve the lives of Cubans, since he did not believe that Cubans would be able to afford such products that would then enter their country. He seems to have forgotten that communism is all about the state ensuring that certain basic needs are met for every citizen.

Bush most often mentioned the lack of political freedoms in Cuba, mentioning the people “attending school, and dreaming of a better life. Unfortunately, those dreams are stifled by a cruel dictatorship that denies all freedom in the name of a dark and discredited ideology.”¹⁰⁰ Here again we see how ideological this president was, thinking always in terms of right and wrong. In many ways, this made him uncompromising in his pursuit of freedom. He spoke of Cuban political prisoners as being in a gulag,¹⁰¹ again highlighting how inextricably linked to the Cold War this and other politicians of this ilk view Cuba. It is interesting to look at the turmoil in Iraq and Afghanistan occurring at the time, which may have led him to dig in his heels with Cuba to show his stick-to-itiveness.

One final important point when discussing Bush, Jr.’s rhetoric on Cuba, is that he thought of opening talks with “enemy leaders,” a category into which he felt Castro fell, as “embracing a tyrant.”¹⁰² He saw no way to have a discussion with someone he felt was

⁹⁹ George W. Bush, “Remarks to the Council of the Americas,” Washington, D.C., 7 May 2008, *Presidential Rhetoric*, available at <http://www.presidentialrhetoric.com/speeches/05.07.08.html>

¹⁰⁰ George W. Bush, “Commencement Address at Miami Dade College-Kendall Campus,” Miami Florida, 28 April 2007, *Presidential Rhetoric*, available at <http://www.presidentialrhetoric.com/speeches/04.28.07.html>

¹⁰¹ George W. Bush, “Remarks on Freedom Around the World,” Washington, D.C., 24 July 2008, *Presidential Rhetoric*, available at <http://www.presidentialrhetoric.com/speeches/07.24.08.html>

¹⁰² George W. Bush, “Domestic Issues of 2008: The President’s Press Conference,” Washington, D.C., 28 February 2008, *Presidential Rhetoric*, available at <http://www.presidentialrhetoric.com/speeches/02.28.08.html>

an enemy to the United States. Clearly, this had implications much farther reaching than Cuba. If no dialogue takes place between countries that disagree, there is no chance for a solution. Bush expected these enemy nations to meet unrealistic preconditions in order to even speak with the all-powerful hegemon, and these preconditions essentially amounted to a refusal to negotiate. This approach has been incredibly damaging to the Cuban people, because the U.S. is not able show its version of freedom to them. Had Bush even held one meeting with Castro, he may have been able to free political prisoners and improve rights of Cubans. This refusal to speak indicated Bush's disrespect for Cuba to Cubans and strengthened Castro's position.

Not only did Bush *speak* about human rights in Cuba, he also created and stepped up several programs to help the Cuban opposition. He began to use USAID more and more to aid the dissenters.¹⁰³ The goal of the program was to increase Cubans' access to information about democracy and the rights that they could have if they over threw the Cuban government.¹⁰⁴ This was done through the distribution of \$26 million to Cuban grassroots organizations, as well as the distribution of "informational" materials and pamphlets.¹⁰⁵ The group also supported journalists on the island, publishing their stories on the Internet and training them to work in a free press situation. While the merits and/or perversions of democracy promotion are not up for debate here, but it is clear that steps were taken during the Bush administration to improve Cubans' access to information.

Conversely, though his anti-Castro rhetoric was much more ubiquitous than any Cuba-based legislation, Bush did make several moves to close Cuba off even further, and undo all of the work towards opening relations that Clinton had made a priority. The

¹⁰³ Dominguez and Prevost, 139.

¹⁰⁴ *Ibid*, 139.

¹⁰⁵ *Ibid*, 139.

biggest indicator of his plans for Cuba was the Powell Commission Report, released in 2004, which “reaffirmed the basic outlines of U.S. policy ever since 1959 and undertook a new series of measures aimed at reversing Cuba’s economic successes of the last ten years.”¹⁰⁶ It outlined the Administration’s plans to enforce the ban denying U.S. citizens the right to travel to Cuba.¹⁰⁷ It also banned imports of Cuban products, restricted family visits and educational trips to Cuba, and severely limited remittances. Bush aimed to close off Cuba completely.

This report was detrimental to the human rights of both Cubans and Americans wishing to visit Cuba. The restriction of movement, and limitations of the possibility to study in Cuba were terrible for freedom of expression. Without the money that people of Cuban ancestry in America were sending back to their family members in Cuba, many of those people were plunged further into poverty and unable to support themselves, non receiving the money they relied on from American relatives. The commission’s report even restricted the rights of American and Cuban sports teams to play each other.¹⁰⁸ What purpose could this move possibly serve but to demoralize and restrict cultural interaction? The Powell Commission and the legislation that went along with it were extremely detrimental to human rights in Cuban and in the States and will likely mark the Bush Administration as one that was particularly unsuccessful in Cuba.

In conclusion, while President Bush’s rhetoric was filled with mentions of freedom for the Cuban people, he actually hurt human rights conditions on the island. His policies

¹⁰⁶ *Ibid*, 141.

¹⁰⁷ *Ibid*, 141.

¹⁰⁸ *Ibid*, 144.

were the stated reason for the wave of political repression in 2003¹⁰⁹ and the negative effects of his policies went on from there. Bush's intentions seemed to be good, but whether as a result of the quagmires in Iraq and Afghanistan, the terrorist attacks of September 11, 2001, or his own personal neo-conservative, anti-communist beliefs, he missed the mark in Cuba. There had rarely been a better time to bury the hatchet with Cuba, and had another president been in office things might have gone very differently.

It is especially interesting that while Bush did little that actually improved the human rights of Cubans, he was followed by a president who has arguably already done more than most of the Administrations that preceded him. Obama eased restrictions on travel by Americans to Cuba and has made many overtures to the new Castro Administration in Cuba, seeking "a new beginning with Cuba."¹¹⁰ George Bush did almost everything wrong when it came to human rights in Cuba. As seen from the near-continuous torch passing noted above, Obama seems to realize that the status quo in Cuba has shown itself to be ineffective.

Conclusions and Policy Prescriptions—What Previous U.S. Policies Towards Cuba Mean for the Future

From 1959, the human rights situation in Cuba has without a doubt fluctuated. There have been high points: in the 1970s and 1990s when Cuba was able to survive and prosper in spite of the embargo. However, there have also been severe crackdowns and waves of political repression, most recently in 2003. However, the general situation of human rights in Cuba is not at issue here. What has been studied is the effect of U.S.

¹⁰⁹ Over 80 journalists and dissenters were put in jail for political reasons. Castro claimed that this was in response to U.S. policies towards Cuba, most notably the embargo and Bush's increased restrictions on travel.

¹¹⁰ Barack Obama, "Remarks at the Summit of the Americas," 17 April 2009, *Presidential Rhetoric*, available at <http://www.presidentialrhetoric.com/speeches/04.17.09.html>

policies on human rights in Cuba. The fact of the matter is that most U.S. policies have not been successful in improving human rights in Cuba. The vacillations in the human rights situation in Cuba have largely been independent of U.S. policies. When they have been related to U.S. policies, it has largely been in the negative sense. Both the Mariel Boatlift and the 2003 crackdown were directly related to U.S. policies and had horrible consequences for hundreds and hundreds of Cubans.

In 2007, the U.N. sent a mission to Cuba to explore the human rights conditions on the island. What they found would likely surprise most Americans. They found that the embargo was the reason for a large part of Cubans' suffering.¹¹¹ The U.N. Human Rights Council has reported "the suffering inflicted on the people of Cuba as a result of the embargo is compounded by restrictions on the fundamental rights and freedoms of individuals."¹¹² The entire report by the Human Rights Commission mission in Cuba of 2007 continually links the embargo and the human rights situation in Cuba. To them, the two are perpetually and inextricably linked.

Since 1959, there has been very little serious talk of lifting the embargo by U.S. politicians. It is essentially taboo. It is political suicide to talk about, due in large part to the strong electorate of Cold War era ardent anti-communists and Cuban-Americans in Florida, one of the biggest swing states in the Union. Lifting the embargo has hardly been an option. But, with the changing demographic in both the U.S. and Cuba, and with fewer people concerned with the ideological differences between capitalism and communism, the time is ripe for change.

¹¹¹ "Implementation of General Assembly Resolution 60/251 of 15 March 2006; Situation of Human Rights in Cuba," *UN Human Rights Council*, The United Nations, 28 February 2007, available at <http://daccessdds.un.org/doc/UNDOC/GEN/G07/105/23/PDF/G0710523.pdf?OpenElement>

¹¹² *Ibid*, 9.

The evidence above shows without exception that U.S. policies in Cuba have not been successful in the U.S.'s primary goal of overthrowing the communist regime in Cuba. There is also little debate about whether the vast majority of U.S. policies in Cuba, especially those linked to the embargo, have either hurt Cubans or not affected them. Also in this respect, the policies have not been successful.

One thing that the U.S. has not tried is dropping old Cold War grudges and treating Cuba like it would any other country in Latin America, hopefully better. Cuba has important business opportunities for Americans and vice versa. The embargo is doing nothing for either side of the strait. All of the food and medicine that is not sent to Cuba as a result of the embargo is also not put in the hands of a needy Cuban. This is keeping U.S. businesses from making money in Cuba, keeping Cubans from making money from Americans, and needlessly pulling families apart.

American ostracizing of Cuba is hurting Cuba economically less and less as the rest of the world is refusing to bow to American pressure and cut off a country they see no reason to hurt. It is also hurting the U.S. economically more and more. As Cuba grows and prospers, American businesses lose money and opportunities. In terms of human rights, Cuba is indebted to the European and Asian countries that provide it with the vital foods and medicines necessary to the survival of its citizens, when it could be indebted to the U.S. for doing the same thing. This would be a better way for the U.S. to exert influence over the human rights restrictions of the Cuban regime.

All of the signs point to opening up to Cuba as being the best way to enact change. It is clear that the embargo is not doing its job, nor is the restriction on travel and remittances, nor the cultural restrictions. These tired tools that have been used over and

over for the past fifty years have not helped Cubans. They have not helped overthrow the communist regime in Cuba. It is time for a new tack.

If the U.S. can still exert influence over Cuba, if the past fifty years have not ruined all hope of positive U.S. influence on Cuba, now is the time to try. Obama needs to work quickly to lift the embargo with Cuba and enter into talks with the government as soon as possible. U.S. involvement in Cuba has always been one of sticks over carrots. The argument that we cannot engage with Cuba because of its human rights violations and communist regime is completely unsubstantiated. A quick look at U.S.-China relations blows that argument out of contention. The U.S. needs to exert positive influence over Cuba, needs to lead by example. The time to act on ceremony and tradition is over. The fact that the Guantanamo Bay prison is in Cuba is a perfect example of the irony and futility of U.S. policy in Cuba that needs to end now. The U.S. government is no longer fighting the Cold War. It is no longer forced by its electorate to ostracize a nation based on its ideological beliefs. The history of U.S.-Cuba relations shows the inutility of these uncompromising, hard line positions. In the future, one can only hope that the U.S. will learn from its mistakes.

Nearly throughout its history with post-revolutionary Cuba, the U.S. has consistently mentioned human rights as a primary reason for its castigation of the island nation. The reason we cannot negotiate with Cuba is because they take advantage of their citizens, because they imprison people without trial or reason, because they deny their people access to information. There are several issues with this argument. First, there are very few examples of cases in which the U.S. refused to negotiate with countries because of human rights. Even in Cuba, the anti-communist narrative is a much more realistic

reason the U.S refused to negotiate with them. The U.S. is not one to turn down attractive economic or geo-strategic interests in favor of human rights concerns. Our current relationship with China is a perfect example of this.

This phenomenon extends across political, ideological, and historical lines. Both Republicans and Democrats, hawks and doves, find themselves consistently bowing to economic and geo-strategic interests over human rights interests. Presidents Kennedy and Carter show the vast differences in leadership style of presidents within the Democratic Party. The differences between Reagan and Bush, Jr., both of the Republican Party, are vast and stem from personality, leadership, and historical differences. The truth is that these presidents cover the gamut of personal backgrounds, political leanings, and personal beliefs and we have seen above that none of them were able to really make a difference for human rights in Cuba. What this indicates is that there has to be significant change in the way that we look at human rights in order to change the “pass the torch,” and “human rights last,” legacies that have been prevailing not only in Cuba, but all over the world.

This revelation is quite daunting for policymakers. It shows that simply electing a new, exciting president with a personal commitment to human rights will not be enough to overcome the stagnant, uninspired role of human rights in U.S. foreign policy. While this may not be something that policymakers want to hear, now is the time to make a fundamental change to the system and make human rights a priority. More and more people are falling under the poverty line than ever, and more people need the protection of the U.S. Now is the perfect opportunity, with the U.S. being criticized for its policies of torture in Guantanamo Bay and Abu Graib, for the U.S. to finally take human rights

policy seriously. For all of the ubiquitous rhetoric, only touched on in the above, the United States should be doing more to guarantee human rights to all people. Cuba is only a single case study, but it shows how human rights are consistently left out in favor of geo-strategic and economic concerns.

In conclusion, the huge chasm between U.S. human rights rhetoric and actual policies and decisions taken to improve human rights is a real problem. The U.S. needs to put the money where its mouth is and take real action to improve human rights the world over. If not, it is time to be honest with the American people and with the people of the world who look to the U.S. to end human rights abuses. The U.S., like any other country, is acting in its national interest, if it so happens that this also gives them an opportunity to help the people of another nation, all the better. If not, so be it. The rhetoric on human rights is deceptive, perhaps unintentionally, but deceptive nonetheless. Cuba is a perfect example of a lost opportunity in which the U.S. could have made a real difference in the lives of everyday Cubans. Unfortunately, rhetoric and reality do not always line up.

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