

ESTABLISHING, NOT RESTORING, NORMAL RELATIONS BETWEEN THE UNITED STATES AND CUBA

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When President Dwight D. Eisenhower ended diplomatic relations between the United States and Cuba on January 3, 1961, few imagined that 54 years would intervene before his decision was reversed. Yet the restoration of diplomatic relations should not be confused with restoring normal relations between the two countries. In fact, Presidents Barack Obama and Raúl Castro cannot restore a normal relationship, because one has never existed. This article will provide a brief overview of the abnormal U.S.-Cuban relationship during the last two hundred years, and then examine what must change for the United States and Cuba to establish a normal relationship for the first time.

A History of Abnormal Relations

Even while Cuba was a colony of Spain, which in itself precluded a normal relationship, the United States debated its future relationship with the island. In 1823, Thomas Jefferson wrote longingly about incorporating Cuba into the United States: “I have ever looked on Cuba as the most interesting addition which could ever be made to our system of States.”¹ His dreams were challenged, though, by Secretary of State John Quincy Adams, who feared that the addition of Cuba would strengthen the Southern coalition in Congress. The Massachusetts statesman argued

that the United States should bide its time. Like a ripe fruit that inevitably falls to the ground due to the laws of gravity, Adams predicted, Cuba “can gravitate only towards the North American Union, which by the same law of nature cannot cast her off from its bosom.”ⁱⁱ Notably, by 1898, U.S. trade with Cuba was greater than Spain’s.

At that point, as Cuban independence fighters were about to win their struggle against Spain, the United States intervened to steal away their victory. Denying Cubans permission even to attend the peace treaty negotiations in Paris, the United States proceeded to rule Cuba for five years as an occupied territory. U.S. troops departed only after Cuban constitutional convention delegates agreed to include the Platt Amendment in the new constitution. As the U.S. State Department’s history of the Amendment acknowledges,

The rationale behind the Platt Amendment was straightforward. The United States Government had intervened in Cuba in order to safeguard its significant commercial interests on the island in the wake of Spain’s inability to preserve law and order By directly incorporating the requirements of the Platt Amendment into the Cuban constitution, the McKinley Administration was able to shape Cuban affairs without violating the Teller Amendment.ⁱⁱⁱ

Between 1903 and 1933 the United States sent troops to Cuba three times, including one stint from 1906 to 1909 under Governor General Charles Magoon, who was so overtly contemptuous of Cubans that today they use his name as a synonym for treachery. In 1933, after insurgents overthrew the dictatorship of Gerardo Machado, President Franklin D. Roosevelt refused to recognize the new government, which lasted only one hundred days as a

result. The Cuban economy had become so dependent on the United States that Cubans understood their only choice was bending to U.S. political pressure. While Roosevelt may have eschewed military intervention under his “good neighbor” policy, he was quite ready to intervene in other ways, and subsequent Cuban governments understood the limits of their constrained sovereignty.

Fulgencio Batista’s dictatorship tried U.S. patience in other ways—by giving U.S. organized crime syndicates carte blanche to plan global operations based in Cuba and blatantly thumbing his nose at U.S. requests to curtail violence against Cubans and cease human rights violations. Batista’s behavior nearly led the Eisenhower administration to seek his ouster when the January 1, 1959 victory of Cuban revolutionaries removed the option of finding a “third way” in polarized situation—a favorite U.S. ploy in cases where its backing of dictators had gone sour.

Over the next half century the U.S.-Cuban relationship was marked by both sides contributing to a legacy of fear and mistrust. To be sure, U.S. officials often exaggerated the alleged “Cuban threat.” In general, Cuba’s support for insurgents fighting against oppressive regimes or colonial rulers challenged U.S. hegemonic ambitions, not the United States itself. But the Cold War perspective of U.S. policymakers encouraged them to apply zero-sum analyses, in which any loss for the United States was a gain for a worldwide communist movement. And the 1962 Cuban missile crisis validated their worst fears, that the existence of a country in the Western Hemisphere that did not subordinate itself to U.S. dominance could ultimately confront the United States with a real threat to its very existence.

In contrast, the existential threat Cuban officials perceived had greater validity. The United States organized, funded, and managed the 1961 Bay of Pigs Invasion, along with at

least seven attempts to assassinate the Cuban leadership.^{iv} It engaged in numerous covert operations aimed at regime change. The largest was the multi-faceted Operation Mongoose from 1961 to 1963, which the United States could have reasonably labeled as state-sponsored terrorism had another country undertaken such a plan.^v The history of these maneuvers leads Cuban policymakers to envision worst-case scenarios even in the twenty-first century. When the most powerful country in the world engages in seemingly harmless clandestine programs, such as the twitter-like ZunZuneo campaign unmasked in 2014,^{vi} Cuban analysts worry that U.S.-supported provocations could spiral out of control and lead the United States to use the resulting situation as a justification for military intervention.

With this legacy of tension and hostility, the usually unobjectionable ways in which any two countries engage each other has become problematic for the United States and Cuba. For example, orderly migration or even travel has been compromised by the 1966 Cuban Adjustment Act, which distinguishes Cuban *emigrés* from all others for special benefits that encourage Cuban emigration. Scientific and academic exchanges have been compromised by fears in both countries that scholars may be spies or might be used by the other country for propaganda purposes.

In short, the United States and Cuba have never had a normal relationship to which they can return: not when Cuba was a Spanish colony; not during the 1898 to 1903 occupation; not during the 1903 to 1933 period when the Platt Amendment was in force; not during the Good Neighbor period; not during the Batista years; and certainly not during the period of hostility since 1959. The two countries need to draw a new road map if they are going to travel the road from normal diplomatic relations to normal relations.

From Normal Diplomatic Relations to Normal Relations

Several analysts have well summarized key issues on the U.S.-Cuban negotiating agenda once the matter of normal diplomatic relations is formalized.^{vii} The issues include: U.S. activities that Cuba considers subversive, such as so-called “democracy promotion” programs and the Cuban Medical Professionals Parole Program, which encourages Cuban doctors working abroad to give up their Cuban citizenship and come to the United States;^{viii} the Cuban Adjustment Act; Cuba’s membership in international financial institutions; the U.S. embargo; property claims by citizens of both countries; and U.S. occupation of the naval base at Guantánamo. The resolution of differences on these issues unquestionably would contribute to the development of a normal relationship. Yet the essential elements in fully realizing normality would be the removal of fear and the development of trust between the two countries.

Both countries can take steps to reduce fear and build trust. Consider the U.S. democracy promotion programs. U.S. officials correctly argue that they are required by the 1996 Helms-Burton law (Cuban Liberty and Democratic Solidarity Act) to create and implement such programs. But the State Department is relatively free to determine the programs’ nature and how to implement them. It could, as it does with other countries, consult with the Cuban government. There is no certainty that the Cuban government would reject such consultation out of hand, if it were undertaken with respect. For example, U.S. officials could interpret the Helms-Burton requirements to mean that training Cubans to use capitalist business practices would ultimately promote democracy. The Cuban government recognizes that an insufficient knowledge of ordinary business skills in the country—such as standard accounting practices—undermines its ability to accumulate capital, and it has welcomed the Catholic Church’s introduction of extracurricular business classes.

Fears also could be ameliorated in modest ways, such as in the public discourse officials of each country use. For example, Cuba's favorite metaphor is "David and Goliath." It is, fundamentally, a hostile depiction in which the small warrior David kills the giant Goliath. Metaphors are not mere stylistic embellishments. As George Lakoff explains, they "limit what we notice, highlight what we do see, and provide part of the inferential structure that we reason with."^{ix}

Trust will more difficult to build than reducing fears. Even as many Cubans celebrated the December 17 announcements on diplomatic relations, former President Fidel Castro waited more than five weeks to issue a comment. In a letter to the Cuban Federation of University Students on the seventieth anniversary of his matriculation at the University of Havana, he wrote that "I do not trust the policy of the United States, nor have I exchanged a word with them, but this is not, in any way, a rejection of a peaceful solution to conflicts."^x

One might argue that the personal experiences of Fidel and Raúl Castro will soon be irrelevant as they pass from the scene. Yet the senior ranks of Cuban policymakers include several people who have personal memories of numerous times when the United States responded with hostile actions to positive gestures from Cuba. From the U.S. side, many diplomats know that several colleagues who attempted to improve relations with Cuba have compiled an unenviable record of failed careers.

Still, diminishing fear and building trust are the cornerstones of establishing a normal relationship, because fear and mistrust prevent adversaries from empathizing with each other. Political psychologist Ralph White helpfully explains that empathy "does not necessarily imply sympathy, or tolerance, or liking, or agreement . . . [E]mpathy implies especially a focus on the other's situation—trying to look out at his situation through his eyes rather than at him as an

individual.”^{xi} Standing in another’s shoes is the essential, though insufficient, activity in pursuit of empathy. In addition, the policymakers of one country also must see their own country’s behavior as the adversary does. Third, empathy is grounded in three requirements. Each adversary must: 1) acknowledge its opponent’s understandable anger; 2) recognize its opponent’s fear of being attacked; and 3) believe that its opponent wants a workable peace. Consider how positively Cuba responded when President Obama empathetically acknowledged on December 17 that the United States “tried to overthrow” the Cuban government with the 1961 Bay of Pigs Invasion.

Without empathy, two countries are more likely to misinterpret unintended slights or insults as animosity, to perceive bellicose language intended for a domestic audience as a threat, or to treat a minor action, such as a visa denial, as a policy decision, when it may have been no more than a low-ranking official acting in accord with standard operating procedures. Without empathy, behavior that countries in a normal relationship readily dismiss can become a new source of friction for two former adversaries.

The effort to empathize is especially difficult between a large and a small country, because the calculus of threat for each is so different. A great power tends not even to think about whether it will be swallowed up by another power, whether its identity will be submerged by the interests of a larger state, or whether its internal life will be subject to the whims and dictates of outsiders. In contrast, the Cuban concept of security includes “economic, political, and even social aspects,” Cuban political scientist Carlos Alzugaray Treto explains, “precisely because Cuba, as a small country, is more vulnerable than a big superpower like the United States to all kinds of pressures.”^{xii} As a result, Cuba pays extraordinarily close attention to every U.S. utterance and every small movement made by U.S. officials, which can readily lead to

misinterpretation when taken out of context.

Most countries are small in comparison to the United States. This is one reason the U.S.-Cuban imbroglio has held such fascination for the Third World, because leaders in these countries can so readily empathize with Cuba. For similar reasons, U.S.-Cuban tensions also remain important to Latin American leaders. They are likely to be unsatisfied only with U.S. diplomatic recognition of Cuba, and they are likely to watch closely how the United States proceeds with the full process of normalization.

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Notes

- i. As quoted in Lars Schoultz, *That Infernal Little Republic: The United States and the Cuban Revolution*. 2009. Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press. p. 19.
- ii. As quoted in Schoultz, *That Infernal Little Republic*, pp. 18-19.
- iii. U.S. State Department, Office of the Historian. n.d.. "The United States, Cuba, and the Platt Amendment, 1901." Available at <<http://history.state.gov/milestones/1899-1913/Platt>>.

- iv. Inspector General, Central Intelligence Agency. 1967. "Report on Plots to Assassinate Fidel Castro." May 23; National Archive and Records Administration, JFK Record Series, No. 104-10213-10101, February 3, 1999.
- v. See "Testimony of Richard M. Helms," U.S. Congress, House, Select Committee on Assassinations, "Investigation of the Assassination of President John F. Kennedy," Hearings, 95th Cong., 2nd Sess., September 22, 25 and 26, 1978, vol. IV.
- vi. Sanger, David E. 2014. "U.S. Says It Tried to Build a Social Media Site in Cuba, but Failed." *New York Times*, April 4.
- vii. For example, see William M. LeoGrande, "Normalizing Relations With Cuba: The Unfinished Agenda," available at *Newsweek* <<http://www.newsweek.com/normalizing-relations-cuba-unfinished-agenda-303232>>; or Jorge Bolaños. 2015. "La táctica de EEUU hacia Cuba cambia, pero la estrategia se mantiene." *CubaDebate*, February 6. Available at <www.cubadebate.cu/opinion/2015/02/06/la-tactica-de-eeuu-hacia-cuba-cambia-pero-la-estrategia-se-mantiene/#.VNSmP0tIhjA>.
- viii. Armstrong, Fulton. 2011. "Time to clean up U.S. regime-change programs in Cuba." *Miami Herald*, December 26; Editorial, 2014. "A Cuban Brain Drain, Courtesy of U.S." *New York Times*, November 17.
- ix. George Lakoff. 1992. "Metaphor and War: The Metaphor System Used to Justify War in the Gulf," in Martin Pütz, ed., *Thirty Years of Linguistic Evolution*. Amsterdam: John Benjamins, p. 481. Also see: Brenner, Philip, and Soraya Castro. 2009. "David and Gulliver: Fifty Years of Competing Metaphors in the Cuban–United States Relationship," *Diplomacy & Statecraft*, 20: 236–257.

- x. Castro Ruz, Fidel. 2015. "Para mis compañeros de la Federación Estudiantil Universitaria." *Granma*, January 26. [Translation by Philip Brenner.] Note that the Spanish version reads: "No confío en la política de Estados Unidos," which could be translated as "I do not trust U.S. *politics*."
- xi. White, Ralph K. 1991. "Empathizing with Saddam Hussein," *Political Psychology*, 12:2: 292.
- xii. Alzugaray Treto, Carlos. 1989. "Problems of National Security in the Cuban-U.S. Historic Breach," in *U.S.-Cuban Relations in the 1990s*, eds., Jorge I. Domínguez and Rafael Hernández. Boulder: Westview. p. 86.