

Political Conditions Cuba

CountryWatch Reviews

September 2, 2019

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Length: 23759 words

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Cuban economic landscape in the 1990s

Cuba experienced serious economic duress entering the 1990s as a result of the dissolution of its prime ideological sponsor and financial backer, the Soviet Union (Union of the Soviet Socialist Republics or U.S.S.R.). At times during the 1980s, military and general aid from the U.S.S.R. had totaled as much as US\$3 million per day. The Soviet Union purchased Cuban sugar at a premium price above the going world market rate and, conversely, supplied Cuba with Russian oil at a discount. When this largesse was abruptly withdrawn, hardships ramified for the island's entire population.

Thus, for most of Cuba's people, the major focus at the time had been the difficulties attendant on the country's attempts to stabilize its economy. The country's infrastructure is crumbling, motor fuel and electricity shortages are endemic, and housing conditions for many people are severely inadequate, although a state-provided place of residence is one of the paramount rights enshrined in the Cuban constitution.

In general, a spartan existence, providing a minimum level of necessities, remains the norm on the island, but by the late 1990s conditions had improved significantly in comparison to the situation earlier in the decade. Factors driving this process include diversification, notably through the continuing emergence of Cuba's tourism industry; modest economic reforms that have begun, albeit on a very small scale, to ameliorate the formal Leninist model of totally state-controlled production; and gradually diminishing international isolation, as more nations throughout the world have re-opened economic and cultural contacts with Cuba. This pattern of rapprochement, however, does not include Cuban relations with the United States.

Cuba legalized transactions using the United States (U.S.) dollar in 1993. Remittances from people of Cuban heritage living abroad, notably in the United States, provide an important underpinning for the functioning of the island's economy. To an increasing extent, the buoyant expansion of Cuba's tourism industry creates another significant flow of hard currency into the country.

Prior to the Castro revolution, Cuba was one of the premier resort centers of the Caribbean, and it has lately taken steps to begin to reclaim this role. Tourist arrivals surged from less than one million per year before 1996 to up to two million in recent years, while hotel capacity has more than doubled, including a large number of luxury-class

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units. Europeans are the predominant visitors to Cuba and, along with Canadians, the principal investors in its tourist sector.

Although the tourist industry has virtually rescued the Cuban economy from its state of near-collapse early in the 1990s, it also causes some economic distortions. Cuba has become a two-tier society, divided between those with access to dollars or other foreign currency, and those whose income is denominated in Cuban pesos.

Aside from Cubans who receive remittances from abroad, island residents connected to tourist enterprises enjoy the readiest access to valuable foreign exchange. This distinction has led many highly trained Cubans such as doctors and educators to halt their professional careers and become low-level service workers at tourist hotels and restaurants, who on tips alone can earn an income that dwarfs conventional employment in the state-owned, peso-denominated economy. People whose livelihoods remain defined by the official system (still a large majority on the island) are paid the equivalent of just a few dollars per month, but because housing and medical care are free, while subsidized food costs only pennies, average Cubans, while deprived of other amenities, experience a materially adequate existence.

The Cuban economy expanded at an impressive six percent rate in 1999, but the ongoing retrenchment of the sugar industry continued to have adverse effects on those traditionally dependent on this sector. In February 2001 (the sugar harvest occurs early in the calendar year), Cuba's economy minister reported a delay in the harvest, along with a projection that output would fall to about 3.7 million tons from 4.047 million tons in 2000. However, prices were expected to improve. The generally weak position of the sugar industry was a less crucial concern than in previous years, due to progress in diversifying Cuba's economy, especially via the expansion of tourism.

Cuban Political landscape in the 1990s

While economic discontent is a more germane issue for most Cubans than the government's suppression of political expression (though, to be sure, the two issues intertwine), Cuba's questionable human rights record is a focus of substantial international attention.

The regime purportedly violates its citizens' fundamental civil and political rights on a systematic basis, as reported not just by direct opponents of the Castro regime such as Miami-based Cuban exile organizations but also by independent nongovernmental entities such as Amnesty International and Human Rights Watch. The government has reportedly used harassment in the form of detention, threat of long-term imprisonment, exile, physical injury, and search and seizure of private property, to intimidate pro-democracy and human rights activists. Allegedly, Cuba holds hundreds of political prisoners. Although the Cuban government invited the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights to visit the country in 1994, the government later refused permission for international human rights monitors, including the United Nations Special Rapporteur for Human Rights, to visit Cuba.

A sequence of events beginning in early 1996 continues to have influence in demarcating Cuba's position vis-à-vis the international community, and particularly its difficult relations with the United States. At that time, the Cuban government acted aggressively to prevent a meeting of a new umbrella organization called "Concilio Cubano" that represented an attempted alliance of 140 groups of pro-democracy and human rights activists. First the Cuban government did not respond when the organization submitted a request to hold a legal meeting; then it initiated an island-wide crackdown on the dissidents, arresting, interrogating and otherwise harassing them.

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On Feb. 24, 1996, the day when the activists had originally hoped to meet, two light airplanes belonging to a Miami-based Cuban exile organization called Brothers to the Rescue were shot down by Cuban MiG fighter jets, reportedly in international airspace. Three American citizens and one legal permanent United States resident, all members of the Miami group, were killed.

Brothers to the Rescue was formed primarily to assist Cubans trying to reach the Florida shore, using rafts or other flimsy craft; it had a record of confrontations with both the United States and Cuban governments. Under the immigration regime then in place, which continues to be United States policy, Cubans who illegally reach the United States are permitted to stay, but those intercepted at sea are returned to Cuba.

The downing of the two planes hastened United States imposition of punitive measures on Cuba that were already being considered by the United States Congress. This legislation, which President Clinton signed into law in March 1996, is commonly referred to as the Helms-Burton Act. Its provisions include United States sanctions against non-United States companies that do business with Cuba, an item that entails a controversial interpretation of the concept of sovereignty within the evolving field of international law. Although this and subsequent episodes marked a chilling in the historically tense United States-Cuban relationship, humanitarian aid and other contacts between the two countries have since resumed.

The aftermath of Cuba's downing of the two Brothers to the Rescue aircraft had recent repercussions stemming from a wrongful death lawsuit against Cuba, filed in the United States court system by relatives of the men killed and initially ruled on in 1997, with a decision in favor of the plaintiffs. In October 2000 the United States Congress enacted a measure allowing part of the US\$187.7 million settlement awarded in this case to be drawn from US\$121 million in Cuban assets previously frozen in the United States. In response, Cuba announced a 10 percent surcharge on incoming telephone calls from the United States, and after United States telecommunications carriers refused to comply, citing lack of authorization, direct long-distance phone service between Cuba and the United States was suspended. On President Clinton's last full day in office in January 2001, he issued an executive order releasing a payment of US\$96.7 million from the frozen Cuban funds to the Miami relatives.

Meanwhile, in January 1998, Pope John Paul II visited Cuba. He offered unmitigated challenges to the Cuban government's record on human rights, and conducted a full mass that was televised internationally. These aspects of the papal visit demonstrated a softening of the Castro regime, at least with respect to religious tolerance. In recognition of Cuba's hospitable treatment of the pope and climate of openness in regard to the occasion, United States President Clinton's administration pledged to strengthen diplomatic ties with Cuba, mostly in the areas of orderly movement of migrants and humanitarian aid. Although, during the time since the papal visit, negative reports on human rights issues in Cuba appeared recurrently, religious expression has definitely become freer on the island.

One of the most publicized recent news item pertaining to the complicated, fluctuating bilateral relationship between Cuba and the United States first appeared in November 1999, when a six-year-old Cuban boy named Elian Gonzalez was rescued at sea. The boy, and others including his mother and her boyfriend, were on a boat operated by smugglers attempting to bring a small group of Cubans ashore in the United States. The boat capsized and sank, and Elian's mother and stepfather both drowned; the boy, clinging to an inner tube, was saved just off the coast of Florida. The child was placed in the temporary care of a great-uncle and second cousin in Little Havana, the heart of Miami's fiercely anti-Castro Cuban-American community. This set the stage for a protracted battle for custody of the boy, pitting the United States relatives against his father in Cuba.

Elian's father, Juan Miguel Gonzalez, although divorced from the boy's mother, had maintained a close relationship with his son. His ex-wife, with her son and boyfriend, had boarded the clandestine, ill-fated boat without Juan

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Miguel's knowledge. Elian's mother and the mother's boyfriend did not match the profile of political refugees ideologically dedicated to ending the Castro regime, nor could they particularly be characterized as economically desperate emigrants (they had to pay a large fee to their smugglers). Most likely, they simply wanted to establish a new life in a new place. For his part, Juan Miguel Gonzalez, who worked in the resort industry in the tourist town of Cardenas, was able to provide his family with a material standard of living significantly higher than that experienced by the majority of Cubans. The custody fight, which lasted about seven months, received intense media coverage both in Cuba-where massive, government-orchestrated rallies were held demanding Elian's return-and in the United States. Indeed, for much of that time, it was the dominant news story in both countries.

Shortly after Elian was rescued, his Miami relatives made a formal claim for custody, but early in January 2000 the United States Immigration and Naturalization Services, or INS, ruled that the boy should return to his father in Cuba, in line with the normal policy of assuring that children remain, if possible, with their closest relative. This prompted a flurry of lawsuits from the Miami claimants, along with sustained demonstrations outside Elian's temporary home in which Cuban-Americans demanded that the order to send the boy back to live under the Castro regime be rescinded. No court ever ruled in favor of Elian's great-uncle in the custody case, but the dispute dragged on for months as every possible avenue of appeal was pursued, including one grounded in the novel theory that a six-year-old was entitled to make an independent claim for political asylum. In addition, anti-Castro congressmen in the United States House of Representatives proposed legislation that would give Elian a special exemption to live in the United States. In April 2000, his father, Juan Miguel, flew to the United States to meet with INS officials and others, and to plead publicly for the child's return to Cuba.

Finally, on April 22, after the custody dispute had been finalized in favor of Juan Miguel's parental rights and repeated negotiations aimed at inducing the Miami relatives to comply with the decision voluntarily had proven fruitless, INS authorities forcibly removed the boy from the great-uncle's residence in a predawn raid. Elian was promptly flown to the Washington, D.C. area, where he was reunited with his father. This action ratcheted up the tumult of the anti-Castro and anti-INS demonstrations taking place in Little Havana. One impediment, however, still blocked the return of father and son to Cuba: the petition for political asylum in the United States filed on Elian's behalf. On June 1, a court denied this request, but the appeals process, taken all the way to the United States Supreme Court, delayed final adjudication for nearly another month. The ultimate ruling cleared the way for the boy and his father to return to Cuba. At last, on June 28, 2000, Juan Miguel Gonzalez and his son departed in Havana to a hero's welcome.

The ramifications of the case extend beyond one family's custody battle. In an unprecedented statement, President Castro described the day of the INS raid facilitating Elian Gonzalez' reunion with his father and return to Cuba as a time of truce between his country and the United States, the first in 41 years. At the same time, a fairly widespread perception emerged in the United States that the Miami-based anti-Castro Cuban-Americans had imprudently expended some of their political capital by couching an essentially apolitical family tragedy in terms of an ideological battle. Mostly, perhaps, the Elian affair served to spotlight the problematic issue of Cuban emigration to the United States.

At the end of 1999, as the Elian Gonzalez saga was just starting to unfold, Cuba and the United States began a new round of immigration talks. The discussions were aimed at reviewing the 1994-95 migratory accords, under which 20,000 Cubans per year, a small fraction of the number who wish to leave the island, are granted United States visas. Another principal concern of the Cuban government concerns the United States Cuban Adjustment Act, passed in 1996.

This law, still the status quo, grants automatic asylum to Cubans who successfully reach American territory, while the United States maintains a policy of actively intercepting and returning others detected at sea who are in the process of making the same attempt. The Cuban government has stated that the act tends to encourage illegal

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emigration from the island, a claim that the numbers tend to bear out. Many of the illegal immigrants try to rely on very ill-equipped vessels for the perilous passage across the Florida Strait, risking and not infrequently losing their lives.

At the same time, the clandestine movement of people fosters the existence of both Cuban and American smuggling rings, who may have a propensity for a variety of inhumane, criminal and reckless acts. Though both governments acknowledge that the current situation is less than satisfactory and has undesired effects, changing it would require profound modification of such deeply ingrained historical and ideological patterns on both sides that anything except small, piecemeal alterations may not be possible while Castro remains the Cuban president. Exemplifying the centrality of this issue in Cuba, after the long island-wide campaign agitating for the return of Elian Gonzalez culminated in the achievement of the desired objective, banners and posters all over Cuba with pictures of the boy and slogans demanding his return were taken down and replaced by new posters that featured slogans criticizing the Cuban Adjustment Act.

The economic sanctions levied by the United States against Cuba, in place for the last 40 years, are another bone of contention. The degree to which the embargo cripples Cuba is debatable. Many analysts believe other factors, such as the inefficiency of Cuba's state-controlled economy, and the particular hardships that resulted when long-term Soviet aid, on which the island had grown enormously dependent, came to a sudden end, have more to do with Cuba's poor economic performance.

Entities within the United States have also voiced opposition to the sanctions; in this respect, the Elian Gonzalez matter seemed to instill wider acceptance of the idea of halting the sanctions, although support for them had been gradually waning before this episode.

Key developments from the late 1990s through the 2000s

In late 2000, the United States Congress passed a measure authorizing food sales to Cuba, on its face a significant breach in the embargo policy. Since the law did not include any provision enabling Cuba to obtain financing for potential purchases, however, it had nearly no practical effect.

In 2001, early indications from the new Bush administration, after a change in president and in the political party holding the United States presidency, suggested that a commitment to uphold the embargo would stay in place.

According to a study released in February 2001 by the International Trade Commission, or ITC, a nonpartisan fact-finding agency under United States government auspices, the overall effect of the embargo is "minimal" on the economies of both countries. A limited concentration of sectors, however -- especially American farmers, who could sell Cuba a substantial amount of rice, wheat, and some other crops if the embargo were lifted -- bears the brunt of lost American exports to the island that the sanctions entail.

The ITC estimated that without the embargo, United States exports to Cuba would total at least \$658 million annually, yet the United States would likely run an overall trade deficit with the island if it instituted open trade. Most of the outflow would take the form of American tourism to Cuban resorts. Meanwhile, Cuba has had no trouble filling its burgeoning hotel space with non-United States nationals, along with a few Americans who defy the ban, which can be done with apparent impunity as long as a traveler enters and leaves the island via a third country. Conversely, since the 1980s United States agriculture has found the effort to compete profitably on the international export market fraught with difficulty.

The Castro government cites repeated instances in which hard-line anti-communists allegedly acted covertly and illegally to destabilize or destroy the Cuban regime. This claim includes, according to the Cuban reckoning, more

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than 600 assassination attempts or plots against Fidel Castro. Collaborations between the CIA and American gangsters in fizzled plots to kill the Cuban president in the early 1960s are now definitively known.

In terms of more recent history, Cuban officials' greatest concern relates to possible actions fomented by Cuban-born exiles now in the United States. The extent to which such groups operate from within American borders against the Castro regime is uncertain, and the possibility that United States officials may be apprised of or even participate in such action all the more doubtful. Still, hypothetical dealings of this type are a source of lingering suspicions among Cuban officials.

In late 1999, a United States federal jury in Puerto Rico found five Cuban-born exiles in Florida not guilty of conspiring to kill Fidel Castro. The men had been arrested two years earlier when ammunition and telecommunications equipment were found on their yacht. Allegedly, they were going to sail to the Venezuelan island of Margarita, where Castro was attending a summit, and attempt to kill him. The defense lawyers for the men, however, claimed that they simply meant to provide safe passage to any members of Castro's delegation who wished to defect.

In a related matter, Castro noted that Cuba's intelligence services had uncovered a plot to assassinate the president of Venezuela, Hugo Chavez. The attempted assassination, orchestrated by Cuban exiles, was scheduled to take place in December 1999. These exiles were allegedly operating under the aegis of the Cuban American National Foundation, one of the major anti-Castro organizations. Castro has also linked certain members of the foundation to the bombing of a Cubana airliner in 1976, and to several bombings in Havana. The significance of the alleged assassination attempt on Venezuela's leader seems to rest upon the amicable relationship Castro shares with Chavez.

Still another uncovered plot to kill Castro was linked to the Cuban leader's appearance at the Ibero-American Summit held in Panama City in November 2000. Shortly before this event, Panamanian police found explosives and detonators and arrested five men, one Panamanian and four Cuban exiles who had allegedly traveled to Panama using false passports. The Cuban government requested extradition of the suspects, but Panamanian officials declined to grant it and said they would prosecute them in a court in Panama.

On June 23, 2001, Fidel Castro collapsed during a rally of tens of thousands of people. Though he was back standing before the crowd a few minutes later, the incident shook the Cuban establishment and led Fidel Castro to reinforce the succession. The 74-year-old leader was speaking when suddenly he listed off to the side, creating a mild panic amongst the crowds. "Calmness and courage, we lift our flag," Foreign Minister Felipe Perez Roque said, taking the microphone immediately after Castro appeared to faint. "Companero Fidel obviously has had in the middle of the heat ... a momentary fall," Perez Roque said. Within 10 minutes though, Castro was back behind the podium, asking the crowd not to worry, that he was merely tired and would return in the evening to finish his speech. "Let me rest, sleep a few hours," Castro told the crowd. "Last night I did not sleep at all. I am fine. We will see you tonight."

In July 2001, Raul Castro was confirmed as the next in line for the leadership in Cuba after President Fidel Castro. Though Castro had been named the heir apparent to his elder brother several years ago, the succession was reiterated days after Fidel Castro collapsed during a public gathering that was also being aired live on television. Fidel Castro said, "If tomorrow I have a heart attack, a stroke, a sudden death, then the person with more authority and experience in Cuba is Raul."

The younger brother of the President of Cuba is the second secretary of the Communist Party of Cuba, second secretary of the Central Committee of the Communist Party, first vice-President of the Council of State, first vice-

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president of the Council of Ministers and Defence Minister. Raul is believed to be closely connected with the Union of Young Communists and his closest allies are said to be the Foreign Affairs Minister, Felipe Perez Roque and the Minister of the Economy, Carlos Lage.

In September 2001, the United States-Cuban relations took a beating with the arrest of a top official of the United States Defense Intelligence Agency who was charged with spying for Cuba. Ana Belen Montes became the highest level United States official to be ever charged with spying for Cuba. Montes had been working with the DIA as its top Cuba analyst for nearly a decade before she was arrested on Sept. 21, 2001. The United States investigators charged that for at least five years Montes was supplying information to Cuban intelligence agents on United States military plans affecting Cuba, as well as information on at least one United States intelligence agent who visited Cuba. Montes did not enter a plea, and was being held without bail.

Meanwhile, the Federal Bureau of Investigation of the United States arrested two more suspected members of a Cuban spy ring while they allegedly attempted to infiltrate a South Florida military headquarters and conduct surveillance on a powerful Cuban exile group. George Gari, 40, and his wife, Marisol Gari, 42, were arrested in Orlando, where they moved in 2000 after the FBI investigation began. George Gari was born in Brooklyn, New York, but moved with his family to Cuba as a child, while his wife was born in Cuba. The pair allegedly received several years of training in weapons, explosives, encryption and surveillance before moving to the Miami area about 10 years ago. The couple was accused of having spied for Cuba between 1991 and 1998. The FBI alleged that the pair were part of a Cuban spy ring called "La Red Avispa," Spanish for "The Wasp Network." Ten people have been convicted on espionage charges in connection with the group. Officials said the couple also conducted surveillance on the Cuban American National Foundation, a politically influential Cuban exile organization. The Garis also allegedly tried, though unsuccessfully, to infiltrate the United States Southern Command, which oversees American military operations in the Caribbean and Latin America.

On Nov. 4, 2001, Cuba was hit by a powerful hurricane that flattened thousands of homes and caused massive economic damage. Hurricane Michelle made landfall in Cuba as a powerful Category Four storm with winds of 216 kph, killing five people before crossing into the Florida Straits. The storm caused severe damage in eight provinces and Isle of Youth, areas that account for over 45 percent of the country's land mass and 53 percent of the population. The high winds devastated the country's telecommunications system, knocking out Cuba's main communications tower, disrupting phone service. Michelle also caused extensive damage to the country's electrical infrastructure and wiped out tens of thousands of homes. Before making landfall in Cuba, Hurricane Michelle took 12 lives in Honduras, Nicaragua and Jamaica.

December 2001 saw a historic milestone in the relations between Cuba and the United States with the arrival of ships carrying food from the United States. This was for the first time in over 40 years that trade officially took place between Cuba and the United States. The shipments were part of a \$30 million purchase of United States food by the Cuban government in the wake of the devastating hurricane that hit the island early November. A ship called the Express brought in 500 tons of frozen chicken legs while another ship transported 24,000 tons of corn grown in nine Midwestern states. Representatives of the United States companies involved in the business expressed hope that the first shipment would serve as the stepping stone for restoration of normal trade between the two neighbors. Political obstacles, however, have held up bilateral trade in the past.

Earlier, in 2000, the United States Congress amended the embargo law in order to permit the sale of food and medicine, however, the permit required cash payments, without any United States financing. That condition infuriated Fidel Castro, who vowed never to purchase the first ounce of American food. Cuba spends \$900 million annually on farm product imports. Yet, because of the embargo, Cuba prefers to shop in China and other far-flung markets. Though the influential United States farm lobby has been urging the government to review its sanctions regime, they were confronted by the equally influential Cuban American lobby that got the Congress to prohibit the

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United States banks from financing exports to Cuba. This restriction indicates that not much has changed that would allow the United States farmers to tap into the lucrative Cuban market.

The United States embargo on Cuba allows ships to dock in Cuba only if they carried a special license from the United States Treasury Department. Cuban officials have insisted that the food purchase is a one-time event as part of dealing with the aftermath of Hurricane Michelle. Cuban officials, however, used the occasion to point at the folly of the embargo which hurts United States companies as much as it affects the Cuban economy.

The United States government also rejected a Cuban offer to compensate Americans whose properties were confiscated at the time of the revolution if the United States agreed to lift the embargo and make other concessions. Cuban Foreign Minister Felipe Perez Roque said that the embargo prevented United States citizens from receiving proper compensation. "Cuba recognizes their rights, and would be willing to reach an agreement that also takes into account the extremely heavy economic and human damages and losses inflicted on our country by the blockade," he said. In response, the United States said it would not support any efforts to weaken sanctions against the Cuban government.

In December 2001, Cuba marked the 45th anniversary of Fidel Castro and his revolutionaries' landing in the island. A special military parade was organized in the city of Santiago de Cuba on the occasion, which was witnessed by Castro, his brother Raul and thousands of Cubans. Fidel Castro, accompanied by his revolutionaries landed here in December 1956, arriving from Mexico in the yacht Granma, with the intention of toppling the Fulgencio Batista government. The landing marked the beginning of a guerrilla war that lasted for years. Addressing the gathering on the occasion, Castro urged the country's youth to carry on the revolutionary battle that began 45 years ago. Addressing questions of a post-Castro Cuba, Raul Castro emphasized that the revolution will go forward even when the 'historic leaders of the revolution are no longer here.' Raul said Cuba already had the future leaders.

Even as the relations between United States and Cuba remained largely on a standstill during 2001, Cuban relations with the 15-member European Union improved significantly. The two sides agreed to hold negotiations to improve trade but without any preconditions. A high level delegation of the European Union travelled to Cuba in December 2001 to begin negotiations for restoration of trade relations. The two sides agreed that irrespective of the results of the talks, it was important to maintain the spirit of political dialogue.

Meanwhile, the United Nations passed a resolution for the 10th consecutive year condemning the United States embargo against Cuba. The General Assembly passed the resolution with 167 countries in favor and only three voting against it, matching the record set in 2000. The resolution also called upon the United States to end the embargo imposed after Fidel Castro came to power in 1959 following a revolution. The only two countries to support the United States were Israel and the tiny Pacific Ocean state of Marshall Islands. Cuba says the sanctions have cost the 11 million people of Cuba over \$70 billion and 15 years of lost development. Cuba also says that the embargo had deprived its citizens of vital medicines, and that Washington has carried out a "chemical war" against the island alongside the embargo.

In May 2002, former United States President Jimmy Carter traveled to Cuba for a trip scheduled to last for five days. Carter was the first United States President to visit the communist Caribbean island since 1959 when Washington cut ties with Havana. Upon his arrival, Carter promised that during his visit, he would focus on issues concerning peace, democracy, human rights and the alleviation of suffering. Indeed, he was scheduled to meet two key Cuban dissidents on the issue of human rights in this regard.

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On the night of his arrival in Cuba, the former president had discussions and dinner with Cuban President Fidel Castro and other key members of Cuba's leadership at Havana's Palace of the Revolution. All reports suggest that the dinner went exceptionally well, lasting until 1:00 a.m.

During his stay, Carter was scheduled to visit biochemical facilities, including the Center of Genetic Engineering and Biotechnology. Castro stated Carter would have full and complete access to all sections of the center. This commitment came in the wake of accusations by the United States Undersecretary of State John Bolton that Cuba would like to develop biological weapons. In response, Castro adamantly denied the accusations and, indeed, he committed to full and complete access for Carter at Cuba's biotechnology sites, noting that they have been used to produce only medicine and vaccines. Various voices from within the United States government and the Bush administration, however, contend that such facilities are threats to United States national security.

While in Cuba, Carter also delivered a historic speech in the form of a live televised address to the people of Cuba. Castro promised that Carter would be allowed to speak freely about any topic of his choice; Castro also sanctioned the live broadcast on national (state-controlled) media. Carter's address was unprecedented in the recent history of relations between the United States and Cuba since the revolution.

For his part, Carter has charted a far different approach to United States -Cuban relations than other presidents. Specifically, he has been forthright in his opposition against United States sanctions on Cuba. During his time in office, he actively pursued a policy of rapprochement between the two countries, overseeing the re-establishment of diplomatic relations, negotiating the release of thousands of political prisoners, and relaxing a travel ban on United States citizens to Cuba.

In contrast, the Bush administration intends to further tighten the economic embargo -- in place since 1961 -- and it also recently added Cuba to the list of states it accuses of supporting terrorism.

In early 2003, Cuban President Fidel Castro met with the Japanese government and offered to try to resolve the North Korean crisis. These talks came on the heels of earlier discussions with the Chinese, Malaysian and Vietnamese governments as Castro traveled to these countries on an 11-day Asian tour.

In March 2003, President Fidel Castro was re-elected to another five-year term, thus securing his sixth presidential term. He was the only candidate and his nomination for the presidency was easily approved by all members of Cuba's National Assembly.

In April 2003, the United Nations Human Rights Commission passed a resolution calling for Cuba to accept a visit by a human rights inspector. The resolution emerged in the wake of a government crackdown on dissidents, which resulted in the arrest and imprisonment of 75 members of Cuba's opposition, and the execution of three men convicted of hijacking a ferry in an attempt to reach the United States. The resolution was met with angry disdain from the Cuban government. At the United Nations, the Cuban representative, Juan Antonio Fernandez, said that the resolution had been devised by "lackeys" of the United States.

In response, Cuba put forth a counter-resolution criticizing the United States embargo against Cuba, which according to the document, constituted "a flagrant violation of the human rights of the Cuban people, in particular their right to food and health." The Cuban government also accused Cuba's critics of being silent about the hundreds of Afghan captives being detained at the United States naval base in eastern Cuba at Guantanamo Bay. Cuba also rejected the United States' repeated claim that it sponsors terrorism.

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In May 2003, the United States expelled 14 Cuban diplomats; the expulsions were levied because the diplomats allegedly engaged in "activities inconsistent with diplomatic status," according to a United States official. This description is generally regarded as the diplomatic euphemism for spying. The diplomats expelled included those from the Cuban interest section in Washington and the Cuban interest section in the United Nations. Only months before, the United States was itself accused of spying on various countries in the United Nations Security Council in the months leading up to the war in Iraq.

Meanwhile, the United States' Bush administration was considering a halt on flights to Cuba, and also banning the repatriation of funds by Cuban exiles to relatives living in Cuba. The New York Times reported this plan would effectively decrease Cuba's annual revenues by about \$1 billion.

Since the imprisonment of political dissidents in Cuba in June 2003, by July, speculation arose about the possibility of sanctions by the European Union against the Socialist Caribbean country. Then, on the 50th anniversary of the Cuban Revolution, President Fidel Castro denounced the European Union as the "trojan horse" of the United Nations, and referred to the regional body as "a group of old colonial powers historically responsible for slave trafficking, looting, and even the extermination of entire people." Regardless of his vitriolic condemnation, the European Union said it would continue to provide Cuba with aid, which in recent years, had been helpful to Cuba's isolated economy. Since the collapse of the former Soviet Union, Cuba has been greatly dependent on tourism and aid from Europe.

In October 2003, both houses of the United States Congress voted to lift the 40-year old travel ban on Americans traveling in Cuba. United States President George W. Bush promised to veto the legislation, which barred the use of government funds to restrict travel to Cuba. For its part, the government of Cuba has welcomed the vote and anticipated close to one million American visitors, if the ban is ultimately lifted.

In May 2004, relations between Cuba and some of its traditional hemispheric allies became strained among allegations of human rights abuses by the international community. Indeed, Mexico and Peru announced the withdrawal of their ambassadors from Cuba following strident remarks made by President Fidel Castro during a May Day address. Although one of Cuba's staunchest allies, Mexico said it was taking strong action because Havana had interfered in its affairs. Meanwhile, Peru chastised Castro for his "offensive" remarks during the speech. For his part, President Castro virulently decried both countries for supporting the recent United Nations censure of Cuba's human rights record.

In September 2004, former Czech president Vaclav Havel opened an international conference in Prague on promoting democracy in Cuba. Attended by ex-government heads from many nations, the International Committee for Democracy in Cuba issued a declaration on opening a new era on steps needed to implement a democratic transition on the island nation. How this proposal would resonate in Castro's Cuba was unknown.

By late 2004, Cuban authorities said they were now on "war footing" as they undertook a series of military drills aimed at warning the United States against repeating Vietnam-style mistakes. Indeed, the drills were intended to demonstrate Cuban preparedness in the event of an invasion by United States forces. The Cuban government said it was forced to take such measures because of the hardline stance of the Bush administration in the United States in regard to Cuba.

In a move that suggests a retrenchment of socialist power, workers in Cuba's tourism industry were ordered to restrict their contact with foreigners. In the new directive issued in February 2005, workers were also instructed to pay attention to the activities of their foreign employers and report any activities that might threaten Cuba's revolution to the authorities. Workers from hotel staff to taxi drivers were affected. The new directive came on the heels of the decision by the government to remove the United States dollar from circulation and to curtail private

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enterprise in Cuba. President Fidel Castro said that a recentralization process was needed to strengthen the Cuban state.

On May 1, 2005, more than one million people gathered in the Cuban capital of Havana to mark Labor Day. The main event of the government-sponsored rally took place in Havana's Revolution Square, and was attended by people wearing red T-shirts with Cuban flags at hand. Also in attendance were hundreds of visiting socialist delegations. In his speeches, President Fidel Castro expounded on the positive developments in Cuba, as well as the enduring strength of the spirit of the Cuban revolution. During his lengthy speeches, Castro also took the opportunity to refer to the Bush administration in the United States as both "stupid" and "genocidal."

During his Labor Day speeches, President Castro had also castigated the United States for its hypocrisy in the war on terror, noting that a Cuban-born militant and possible assassin, Posada Carriles, was reportedly seeking asylum in the United States. Presumably in response to strong media attention regarding the Carriles case, United States authorities arrested the Cuban dissident in Miami weeks after Castro's statements. Carriles, a suspect in various acts of terrorism, including the bombing of a Cuban airliner in 1976, had apparently managed to enter the United States while he awaited an asylum hearing.

Venezuela entered the fray when it called for Carriles to be extradited to that country. Venezuela wanted Carriles to stand trial for the deaths of 73 people in the 1976 airliner bombing. But the United States said it would not deport Carriles to a third country, which might very well hand him over to Castro. In response, President Hugo Chavez of Venezuela assured the United States authorities that he would not hand Carriles over to Castro. Still, he warned that if the United States continued its path of intransigence on the matter, diplomatic ties between Caracas and Washington D.C. would have to be reconsidered. As a result a diplomatic imbroglio was brewing.

In the backdrop of these developments was the rare meeting of political dissidents in Cuba. Normally, such meetings had been prohibited, however, in May 2005, Cuban dissidents held public meetings debating democracy bills and calling for freedom.

In August 2005, President Fidel Castro celebrated his 79th birthday. Cuba's state-run newspapers and broadcast media paid tribute to Castro's 46 political accomplishments in celebration of his birthday. Despite a fall in 2004, which left him with a fractured arm and broken knee, Castro has recovered sufficiently to give 38 televised speeches thus far in 2005. His political influence has been strengthened in the Western Hemisphere in recent years by the election of left-leaning leaders in Venezuela, Brazil, Uruguay and Ecuador, thus undermining United States' efforts to alienate him. For its part, the United States in mid-2005 announced its intent to "accelerate the demise" of the Castro regime.

Also in mid-2005, demonstrations by political dissidents ensued, however, the authorities responded with the arrest of about 20 people, and a police crackdown.

In the first part of 2006, Juan Carlos Robinson -- one of 24 members of the Politburo of the ruling Communist Party -- was sacked from the Cuban government. His dismissal was due to allegations of arrogance, dishonesty and the abuse of power. The announcement regarding the matter noted that an investigation would be carried out to determine the legal consequences of Robinson's behavior.

The Cuban government suggested that changes, such as the dismissal of a high ranking official like Robinson, were enacted deal with rising corruption. Such measures were viewed as necessary at a time when Cuba has had to grapple with serious economic hardship and political pressures. In this regard, the Cuban government has been advancing the structural re-organization of the Communist Party -- including the revival of the Soviet-era

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Secretariat, which was disbanded in 1991. the Secretariat has been given the responsibility of making sure that the party line is followed and that indiscipline is curtailed.

In March 2007, Cuba and Sweden were ensconced in a diplomatic altercation. The situation was sparked on March 12, 2007, when Swedish Foreign Minister Carl Bildt gave a speech before the United Nations (U.N.) Human Rights Council in which he made allegations of human rights violations in various countries, including Cuba. After that speech, the Cuban representative at the U.N., Juan Antonio Fernandez Palacios, reacted by accusing Sweden of hypocrisy. To this end, he said, "Cuba, unlike Sweden, does not persecute migrants or carry out ethnic cleansing that only allows those whose skin and hair fit with the racial patterns of former Viking conquerors to remain in the country."

Bildt then responded to the counter-charges of hypocrisy by noting that "the Viking days are gone," and that he had merely "pointed out a fact that was well known to everyone: that they don't respect human rights in Cuba." Over a week later, the situation was unresolved and the Swedish foreign minister was reported to be maintaining his view of Cuba's human rights record. Moreover, Bildt issued charges that there was tampering of the diplomatic correspondence at the Swedish embassy in Havana. He said that he was not sure whether or not it was connected to the unfolding imbroglio.

Castro to Castro -- a hand-over of power

On July 31, 2006, a statement was read on Cuban television by the president's personal secretary explaining that for medical reasons, President Fidel Castro was temporarily relinquishing power. The statement also noted that the president's brother, Defense Minister Raul Castro, would take over the leadership role in Cuba. It was the first time since coming to power in 1959 that Fidel Castro had ever stepped away from the presidency.

In recent years, Fidel Castro has experienced some health challenges. These included a fainting spell during a speech in 2001, and a fall that resulted in a broken knee and fractured arm in 2004. Now, more recently, Fidel Castro had apparently undergone surgery to stop internal bleeding. As well, it was revealed that a difficult schedule in recent weeks, associated with a recent trip to Argentina as well as the anniversary of the Cuban Revolution, exacerbated his health problems. It was also revealed that Castro, who would soon turn 80 years of age, said that he wanted to postpone his birthday celebrations for a few months when he expected to be fully recovered.

That said, despite these plans for the future, the fact that Fidel Castro's statement was not delivered personally, as well as the Cuban leader's absence from public life for several days, led to speculation about the true extent of his illness.

Should Fidel Castro's health deteriorate seriously to the point of death or incapacitation, however, the continuity of the Castro regime was assured by the fact that Raul Castro had long been designated as the president's successor.

While anti-Castro Cubans celebrated in Miami about the prospects of an end to Fidel Castro's lock on power, many local Cubans at home expressed anxiety and worry about the condition of their leader. Local Cubans also reported feeling uneasy about the celebrations by exiled anti-Castro Cubans in the United States. Many expressed fears that if and when Castro died, exiled Cubans would return to their homeland and "take over" control of the island. The situation augured clear divisions between the perspectives of local and exiled Cubans.

In mid-August 2006, the state-controlled Juventud Rebelde newspaper published current photographs of President Fidel Castro in an edition. The newspaper also published a birthday message to the Cuban leader, who celebrated his 80th milestone on August 13, 2006. It was the first glimpse of Castro since his temporary relinquishment of power for health reasons. For his part, Castro thanked the Cuban people for their support, expressed happiness

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about his birthday, and called on Cubans to be patient and resilient as he recuperated. On this latter issue, he said, "I ask you all to be optimistic and at the same time to be ready to face any adverse news."

Meanwhile, Raul Castro, who was acting as the country's leader in his brother's stead, had been out of sight for the previous two weeks. He emerged in the public eye when he welcomed Venezuelan President Hugo Chavez, who was visiting Cuba on the occasion of Fidel Castro's birthday. Chavez, a key Castro ally, earlier said that he was bringing his Cuban counterpart some gifts that included a dagger and a cup, which was once owned by the Latin American independence fighter, Simon Bolivar.

By early 2007, Fidel Castro's health was said to be improving.

In July 2007, one year after Fidel Castro handed over power to his brother because of health problems, the ailing Cuban president was absent from the country's Revolution Day celebration. Indeed, the last time Fidel Castro was seen in public was at the 2006 Revolution Day ceremony, and only days later, the Cuban president announced his impending surgery and the handover of control to his brother.

While the 2007 Revolution Day ceremony in the capital city of Havana was attended by about 100,000 people wearing red and waving flags, the mood was generally quiet and somber as Raul Castro presided over the national celebration. Raul Castro addressed his brother's absence both from the ceremony and public life saying, "These have been difficult months but the outcome has been diametrically opposed to the hopes of our enemies, who dreamt that chaos would be unleashed and Cuban socialism would end in collapse." Raul Castro also repeated a previously-uttered offer to participate in dialogue with the United States, albeit only after the 2008 election.

In September 2007, Cuban leader Fidel Castro who was recovering from intestinal surgery in 2006, appeared in his first televised interview in several months. Observers noted that Castro appeared to be regaining his strength and his interview, which lasted approximately one hour, included current events and issues, including the international sphere.

Ailing Cuban leader, Fidel Castro, suggested twice in late 2007 that he would retire from office. Castro issued a letter, which was read aloud to Cuba's National Assembly, in which he noted that he had changed his perspective about clinging to power. A week earlier, he issued a similar message in which he noted that it was his duty not to stand in the way of the younger generation. Nevertheless, he called on Cubans to rally their support behind his brother, Raul Castro, who had been acting-President since he [Fidel Castro] had underwent surgery in 2006.

On February 19, 2008, Fidel Castro announced that he would not seek re-election and would be stepping down as Cuba's leader after five decades in power. His announcement, which was published in Cuban newspapers, included the acknowledgement that his physical ailments would prevent him from being an active and engaged leader. To that end, he wrote, "It would be a betrayal to my conscience to accept a responsibility requiring more mobility and dedication than I am physically able to offer. This I say devoid of all drama."

United States President George W. Bush responded to the news by noting that the embargo against Cuba would remain in place. United States presidential hopefuls, Senator Barack Obama (D-Illinois), Senator Hillary Clinton (D-New York), and Senator John McCain (R-Arizona), reacted by calling for democratic elections and the release of political dissidents in Cuba. However, the Democratic candidates signaled the possibility of easing the embargo while Republican McCain echoed Bush's hard-line stance on trade. The European Union expressed the desire to revive ties with Cuba, while China said that it would continue to cooperate with its "old friend," Cuba. It was believed that Cuba's change in leadership would likely lead to economic reforms ahead of sweeping political transformation.

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Less than a week after Fidel Castro's announcement, Cuba's National Assembly unanimously selected Raul Castro to be the new president. The vote by the members in the National Assembly formalized the de facto role Raul Castro had been playing for two years. Indeed, Raul Castro had been named acting president in 2006 when

his

brother, Fidel Castro, had intestinal surgery.

Raul Castro accepted the presidency by paying tribute to his brother as the "commander in chief of the revolution" and characterizing him as "irreplaceable."

President Raul Castro's decision to name hardliner, Machado Ventura, to be Vice President seemed as odds with speculation about introducing a new generation of Cuban leaders. To that end, younger politicians, such as Carlos Lage, had been mentioned as possible contenders for the role. The decision to choose Ventura -- a stalwart of the revolution -- for the deputy slot dashed hopes of quick reformation.

In June 2008, the European Union (EU) said it would lift sanctions on Cuba. The EU said it was taking a principled stance, which was presumably aimed at urging political transformation in Cuba now under the leadership of Fidel Castro's brother, President Raul Castro. For his part, Fidel Castro railed at the EU for linking the policy change with human rights progress in Cuba. He said the move was "an enormous hypocrisy," given the fact that the EU had passed a law allowing illegal immigrants to be jailed for up to 18 months. Castro argued that such legislation hardly showed regard for human rights. Nevertheless, even with the EU policy shift, the United States' trade embargo against Cuba was to stay intact. The Bush administration in the United States said that its hardline stance against Cuba would be maintained. In early 2009, it was yet to be seen how the new Obama administration in the United States would handle relations with Cuba.

On March 2, 2009, Cuban leader Raul Castro reshuffled his cabinet. The change was regarded as significant since two of his most prominent ministers -- Foreign Minister Felipe Perez Roque and Cabinet Secretary Carlos Lage -- were among the 10 politicians replaced by Castro. Also included in the cabinet changes was the replacement of the finance, labor and economic ministers. In all five cases, the outgoing cabinet ministers had been regarded as stalwarts of Fidel Castro. Accordingly, there was some speculation that Raul Castro was ousting the old guard who had served under his brother for several years.

Two days later, Fidel Castro himself weighed into the discussion by offering a de facto stamp of approval for his brother's decision. The revolutionary leader and former president characterized the cabinet reshuffle as "correct" and acknowledged that he had been consulted on the changes. In an article published on a government website, Fidel Castro said the government has made "healthy changes." He also dismissed the notion that the reshuffle was intended to "substitute 'Fidel's men' for 'Raul's men.'"

Foreign Policy Changes

In April 2009, the Obama administration in the United States decided to ease restrictions on Cuban Americans traveling to or sending remittances to relatives in Cuba. Under the previous Bush administration, Cuba Americans were permitted to travel to Cuba only once every three years and there were strict restrictions on how much money they could spend or send to relatives in Cuba. Since the average salary in Cuba is \$20USD a month, such remittances provide much-needed income for many Cubans.

Another policy adjustment involved allowing telecommunications companies to do business in Cuba. Such access could include fiber-optic cables, which would impact Internet access. It was yet to be seen if the Cuban

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government would allow United States companies to procure licenses to operate in Cuba. However, were such a change to take place, the exchange of information could have manifold effects.

With these changes afoot, members of Congress were now looking toward legislation that would lift the travel ban on all Americans traveling to Cuba.

United States Secretary of State Hillary Clinton acknowledged that her country's policy toward Cuba -- based on the notion of isolation -- had failed. To that end, some analysts suggested that the Obama administration's stance of engagement (vis a vis isolation) was being applied across the board, and was also being applied to Cuba. United States President Barack Obama explained that the policy shift was ultimately aimed at bringing greater freedom to Cuba. He said., "There are no better ambassadors for freedom than Cuban Americans." But both President Obama and Secretary Clinton noted that Cuba must make steps toward democracy and improving human rights. Such steps would include freeing political prisoners and cutting fees on remittances sent from Cuban Americans in the United States.

The Obama administration's announcement on Cuban policy was made ahead of the Summit of the Americas -- a landmark meeting of the Organization of American States (OAS) held in Trinidad and Tobago from April 17-19, 2009.

In an opinion editorial published in the Trinidad and Tobago Express on April 16, 2009, United States President Barack Obama signaled the spirit of change in hemispheric relations. He wrote, "We can overcome our shared challenges with a sense of common purpose, or we can stay mired in the old debates of the past. For the sake of all our people, we must choose the future." Staying on the theme of past versus the future, President Obama said that the United States-Cuba relationship was often "dragged back to the 20th century" and eschewed the usual communism versus capitalism debate. Instead, the United States leader called for "pragmatic and responsible action" aimed at advancing "common prosperity."

President Obama emphasized that OAS members have had their own paths but that they must be "joined together" in the pursuit of "liberty, equality and human rights." With a nod to Cuba, President Obama expressed the hope that all OAS countries might one day sit at the table. Cuba had been suspended from the body decades earlier because its communist system was at odd with OAS principles of democracy. But in recent years, OAS members have come to support Cuba's return to the body, regarding its exile from the body to be a throwback to the Cold War era. United States policy toward Cuba has been an enduring sticking point.

President Obama suggested that even as his country extended its hand to Cuba -- in the form of the new policy changes -- the following move would have to come from Havana. In essence, the United States leader was noting that Havana should reciprocate the administration's decision to change its policy by allowing travel and remittances to Cuba.

Within 24 hours, Cuban President Raul Castro responded by making clear that Cuba would welcome talks with the United States; he also signaled that all topics would be open for discussion. Such a position has stood in contrast to previous stances by Havana, upon which matters such as human rights and political prisoners were not welcomed subjects of discourse.

United States Secretary of State Hillary Clinton, who was traveling in the Caribbean en route to Trinidad, characterized Raul Castro's comments as a "very welcome gesture."

She said, "We welcome his comments, the overture they represent and we are taking a very serious look at how we intend to respond."

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During his speech on the opening day at the summit, President Obama made a history-making assertion when he expressly said, "The United States seeks a new beginning with Cuba." It was the most significant opening for bilateral relations in decades. He acknowledged that such an endeavor would entail a "longer journey to be traveled to overcome decades of mistrust."

Nevertheless, he emphasized that there were "critical steps" that could be taken "toward a new day." In a tacit acknowledgment of Raul Castro's offer of open discussion, President Obama warned that he was "not interested in talking for sake of talking," but he made it clear that he looked forward to a new era in bilateral relation with Cuba. President Obama ended by auguring the spirit of change between Washington and Havana. He said, "I do believe we can move U.S.-Cuban relations in a new direction."

On September 14, 2009, United States President Barack Obama extended the 47-year-long trade embargo on Cuba for one year. He said, "I hereby determine that the continuation for one year of the exercise of those authorities with respect to Cuba is in the national interest of the United States." This move to extend the 1917 Trading With the Enemy Act (TWEA) with regard to Cuba was undertaken despite an earlier vow to seek a new beginning in the United States-Cuba relations. Indeed, in April 2009, at the Fifth Summit of the Americas, held in Trinidad and Tobago, President Obama had said that he hoped bilateral relations could move in "a new direction." The extension of the embargo was viewed by some as a contradiction of this promise. Nevertheless, President Obama has directed his administration to ease restrictions on travel as well as the transfer of money by Cuban-Americans to Cuba. President Obama also authorized American companies to enter into limited Cuban commercial arenas, such as the telecommunication and satellite television markets. He explained that such a move would help advance freedom and self-determination in Cuba, which would -- by extension -- be in the national interest of the United States.

Dissidents and Human Rights

In November 2009, the human rights advocacy entity Human Rights Watch accused Cuban President Raul Castro of continuing the repressive policies of his brother, former President Fidel Castro. In a report titled, "New Castro, Same Cuba," Human Rights Watch noted that Raul Castro was continuing Fidel Castro's policy of imprisoning political opponents. Indeed, Jose Miguel Vivanco, Americas director at Human Rights Watch, said: "In his three years in power, Raul Castro has been just as brutal as his brother." Human Rights Watch explained that it was basing its conclusions on data in 40 cases in which Cuban citizens exercising rights of expression were arrested and imprisoned under a broad criminal code provision called "dangerousness." Human Rights Watch also said the Cuban government has continued to utilize "draconian laws" to silence free speech, deny labor rights and criminalize dissent and opposition. Prosecutions performed under the aegis of such laws typically included harsh interrogations, denial of legal counsel, sham trials and poor prison conditions.

In March 2010, 30 members of the group, "Las Damas de Blanca" or "Ladies in White," were detained by police as they marched in protest of the death of a political prisoner a month earlier in February 2010. "Ladies in White" was composed of the wives and mothers of political dissidents in Cuba. They had held protests to demand the release of 50 dissidents who have been jailed following mass protests in 2003. Their detainment was part of a crackdown by the communist government on dissidents. In this particular case, they took to the streets to draw attention to the case of Orlando Zapata Tamayo, who was the first Cuban dissident to die as a result of a hunger strike in four decades. Zapata Tamayo gained notoriety when the human rights group, Amnesty International, declared him to be a prisoner of conscience.

Economic Reforms

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In August 2010, Cuba issued two free-market decrees, paving the way for foreign investors to lease government land for up to 99 years, and also for Cuban citizens to grow and sell their own produce. The first decree -- modification of property laws -- could spark a golf-course construction trend on an island with a limited tourism industry. Indeed, it would facilitate foreign investment, potentially increase the flow of foreign currency, and generate new revenue for the government, which has been weakened by the global financial crisis, the ongoing weakness of the international economies, and lowered prices of its commodities. The second decree would allow Cubans at home to sell their own fruit and vegetables. Both moves signified some degree of economic reform on the part of President Raul Castro, effectively downgrading state control of the communist country's economy.

Leading up to these changes to property rights and self-employment rights, President Raul Castro made incremental domestic reforms that embrace some degree of the free market. These reforms included allowing Cubans to own land, allowing barbershops to set their own prices, but also making them pay for rental space and supplies. As well, Cuban authorities approved more licenses for private taxis. Moreover, the government moved to allow Cubans increased access to computers and cell phones. In the realm of telecommunications, the year 2009 saw the United States facilitate commercial relationships in Cuba. To this end, United States President Obama authorized American companies to enter into limited Cuban commercial arenas, such as the telecommunication and satellite television markets.

In September 2010, President Raul Castro announced his most radical reforms yet for Cuba when he said that the country would dismiss at least half a million state employees by mid-2011. This decision did not come as a complete surprise since President Raul Castro had introduced the notion of redundancy among state employees during a nationally televised address on Easter Sunday. At that time, he noted that about one in five state employees were redundant, although he stopped short of outlining actual plans to reduce the country's workforce. Now, months later, such plans were clearly being put into practice. In fact, the layoff process was to begin immediately, with phased layoffs to continue through the first part of the next year. In addition, Cuban authorities said the country would be changing its labor structure and salary systems from ones that protect and subsidize workers' employment and salaries on an unlimited basis, to one where salaries would be tied to performance.

President Raul Castro, who had earlier said that Cubans would have to rely less on the government, also announced that the number of restrictions on private enterprise would be decreased, in an effort to assist the state employees in finding private sector jobs. More self-employment among Cubans would also be facilitated, along with the formation of employee-run cooperatives in the place of government administrators. As discussed above, there would also be increased private control of land, businesses, and infrastructure through long-term leases. Clearly, these reforms would significantly change the economic landscape of communist Cuba, by decreasing the level of state control in favor of limited private enterprise.

Special Note on Fidel Castro

Meanwhile, as analysts speculated about the economic transformations in Cuba, the narrative of change in Cuba expanded as foreign policy and political history entered the public purview. Indeed, September 2010 saw Fidel Castro -- the country's former president and revolutionary leader -- making a foray onto the global scene with a handful of significant admissions. At issue was Fidel Castro's first interview with an American journalist since leaving office. That interview with Jeffrey Goldberg, a national correspondent for The Atlantic magazine, was extraordinary in and of itself due to the circumstances that led to their discussion. Indeed, it was Goldberg's article on Iran's nuclear program in The Atlantic, which explored that Israel's choice of whether or not to strike nuclear facilities in Iran that motivated Castro to talk with the American journalist. Goldberg disclosed via his blog that he was summoned for a visit with Castro where their discussions ensued over a three day period.

On the issue of Iran, Castro expressed concerns about the nuclear threat across the world, saying to Goldberg: "This problem is not going to get resolved, because the Iranians are not going to back down in the face of threats." Castro also characterized President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad of Iran as anti-semitic, and excoriated the Iranian leader for being a holocaust denier. The matter of the Cuban Missile Crisis was also featured in the interviews, with Goldberg asking Cesar if at one time "it seemed logical for you to recommend that the Soviets bomb the U.S."

Goldberg posed the question, "Does what you recommended still seem logical now?" Castro surprising answer was as follows: "After I've seen what I've seen, and knowing what I know now, it wasn't worth it all."

But Castro's revelations to Goldberg did not remain focused on international relations. Of great significance was Castro's acknowledgement that the Cuba's communist economic model was unworkable. The fact that communism in Cuba has been greatly challenged since the fall of the Soviet Union has not been a recent revelation; the revelatory aspect resided in the fact that this assessment came from Cuba's 1959 revolutionary leader. The acknowledgement by Castro came after Goldberg asked if Cuba's economic system should be transposed to other countries; Castro replied: "The Cuban model doesn't even work for us anymore." Indeed, with the Cuban state responsible for over 90 percent of the economy, including workers salaries, health care, education, as well as most transportation and housing, and without the normal flow of currency from the global marketplace, Cuba has been under extreme pressure economically. It may well be the unsustainable aspect of that economic model that led to the reforms instituted by Raul Castro, as discussed above.

Soon after Goldberg publicized the former Cuban leader's remarks, Fidel Castro appeared to distance himself to some extent from Goldberg's interpretations. As he unveiled his new book, "Strategic Counteroffensive" at Havana University, Fidel Castro clarified his position on the Cuban model saying, "It's obvious that implicit in the question was the theory that Cuba was exporting the revolution." He continued, "I said that with no bitterness or concern but the real thing is that my answer meant the exact opposite of what Goldberg and the analyst Julia Sweig, who accompanied him, interpreted on the Cuban model." Castro said his idea was that the capitalist system, which was now charting the path of the world from crisis to crisis, no longer functioned for either the United States or the world, let alone a socialist country like Cuba.

Castro's statements -- their actual intended meaning notwithstanding -- coming as they did at a time of economic reform in Cuba, has focused attention on the Caribbean island nation. Is Cuba indeed entering a period of long-awaited transformation? Do such reforms, likely induced out of sheer need by the difficult economic conditions in Cuba in the post-Soviet and increasingly transnational era, actual signify transformation? For his part, President Raul Castro has said that although changes were afoot in Cuba, there would be no grand departure from Cuba's socialist system. Still, in current context, can reforms affecting state employment, property rights and private sector growth be understood only in terms of pragmatism in Cuba? What are the social, political and economic implications of the downgrading of state control in a self-described communist country? These are questions that are yet to be answered but will undoubtedly define the debate surrounding Cuba going forward.

On March 22, 2011, former Cuban President and revolutionary leader, Fidel Castro, asserted that he had definitively resigned as the head of the country's Communist Party and was no longer leading the country. Castro said that he had not served as leader of Cuba for five years. Specifically, Castro said that when he became gravely ill in 2006, "I resigned without hesitation from my state and political positions, including first secretary of the party ... and I never tried to exercise those roles again." This statement was made in the context of a wider opinion piece Castro had written on United States President Barack Obama, which was published on the state run website and in Cuban newspapers.

Castro's declaration appeared to surprise the Cuban populace who generally believed he remained, in some measure, at the helm, even though his brother, Raul Castro, was administering the day to day governance of the country. Now, it would seem that Raul Castro's decision to introduce recent economic reforms were independent decisions. But with Fidel Castro ailing and stating that he was out of the political scene, and with Raul Castro already approaching 80 years of age, attention was on the matter of who would take up the revolutionary mantle in the future. A forthcoming meeting of the Communist Party would be illustrative of the path to be traversed. Would the old guard prevail, or would the leadership of Cuba be opened up to include younger reformists? Some of the possible successors have included Lazaro Exposito, the Communist Party chief in Santiago de Cuba, and Lazara Lopez Acea, the party leader for Havana, Foreign Minister Bruno Rodriguez, and Economy Minister Marino Murillo.

Recent Developments

In mid-April 2011, Cuban President Raul Castro raised the hopes of the reform-minded when he proposed setting term limits for public office.

Given that President Raul Castro, along with his predecessor, former President Fidel Castro, have governed Cuba for more than five decades, this proposal was regarded as quite a shift in perspective. In an address to the Sixth Communist Party Congress, President Raul Castro said: "We have arrived at the conclusion that it is advisable to limit the fundamental political and state offices to a maximum period of two consecutive periods of five years." President Raul Castro indicated that such reform was needed to rejuvenate the political system, which has been dominated by aging revolutionaries and Castro stalwarts. President Raul Castro also called for changing Cuba's economic model saying: "No country or person can spend more than they have. Two plus two is four. Never five, much less six or seven, as we have sometimes pretended." Together, these proposals may well be regarded as some of the most significant potential changes on the Cuban landscape in decades. Already, the Cuban leader warned of state layoffs in a country hard-hit by global recession and a deleteriously affected sugar industry.

Note that on April 19, 2011, Cuban President Raul Castro was elected chief of the ruling Cuban Communist Party (CCP). President Castro said that he would take on his new post "with commitment and honor" and asserted that his goal was "to continue perfecting the socialism and not ever allow for the return of the capitalist regime" in Cuba. In attendance at the meeting of the Cuban Communist Party was former President Fidel Castro, who sat silently through the event.

In the spring of 2012, Pope Benedict traveled to Cuba on an official visit.

Pope Benedict was treated to music by traditional mariachis and gifted with a sombrero. The pope then traveled onward to Cuba, where he celebrated mass in Havana's Revolution Square with thousands of Cubans in attendance as well as Cuban President Raul Castro. While in Cuba, Pope Benedict decried the United States trade embargo, characterizing it as an "unfairly burden" the people of Cuba. But he also tacitly criticized the communist state as he called on Cubans to embrace "authentic freedom."

In a meeting with Cuba's revolutionary leader, Fidel Castro, Pope Benedict was reported asked about church liturgy as well as the "job" of a pontiff.

In late July 2012, at an impromptu Revolutionary Day address, Cuban President Raul Castro expressed a willingness to convene talks with the United States. President Castro's speech was unscheduled and occurred as crowds gathered for Revolutionary Day celebrations in the eastern province of Guantanamo. President Castro said that his country would be interested in engaging in a bilateral discussion if it was "a conversation between equals." To that end, Castro said he was prepared to discuss "the problems of democracy, human rights etc. But on equal terms because we are no one's colony." Such an occurrence -- should it occur in the near future -- would be ground-breaking since the United States and Cuba have not enjoyed diplomatic relations for five decades. Of course, such a possibility looked a bit remote since the United States on Aug. 1, 2012 was decrying the arrest of dissidents attending the funeral of political activist, Oswaldo Paya. In fact, the White House noted that the arrests presented "a stark demonstration of the climate of repression in Cuba." Back at home, President Castro also addressed the domestic scenario in Cuba saying that social and economic reforms within Cuba would progress "little by little."

Parliamentary elections were set to take place on Feb. 3, 2013, in Cuba. The last elections were held on Jan. 20, 2008. At stake was the composition of the unicameral "Asamblea Nacional del Poder Popular" (National Assembly

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of People's Power). That body consists of 614 members who serve five-year terms; they are directly elected from candidate lists drawn up by special candidacy commissions of the "Partido Comunista de Cuba" (Cuban Communist Party or PCC). Of course, in Cuba, Members of the Cuban Communist Party fill all seats in parliament.

There was no suspense about the outcome in this country where only members of the Cuban Communist Party fill the seats in parliament. That being said, the attention was on the vote for president, which was to follow the parliamentary vote. Cuba's Electoral Act stipulates that 45 days of less after elections to the National Assembly, the new Assembly must convene an inaugural meeting and appoint a Council of State, including a president, for a term of five years.

Incumbent President Raul Castro was expected to secure a second and final term at the upcoming meeting.

It would be Castro's last term in office due to a 2011 law limiting individuals from holding government office to 10 years.

Typically, presidents are elected by the National Assembly for a five-year term. The presidential election was ultimately held on Feb. 24, 2013. The election result gave victory to Raul Castro with 100% of the vote share against Miguel Diaz-Canel Bermudez.

International Imbroglio

An international imbroglio was in the making in mid-July 2013 when a North Korean ship carrying Cuban weapons was intercepted by Panamanian authorities. According to Panamanian President Ricardo Martinelli, the ship was targeted by drug enforcement officials as it traveled from Cuba and approached the Panama Canal. Of concern to the Panamanian authorities was the fact that the ship disappeared from satellite tracking systems after it left the Caribbean side of the Panama Canal. This situation raised the suspicions of Panamanian authorities who wondered why the ship's crew would de-activate the tracking system that conveys details of the vessel's location.

As stated by Panamanian President Ricardo Martinelli, "We had suspected this ship, which was coming from Cuba and headed to North Korea, might have drugs aboard so it was brought into port for search and inspection." When the vessel, Chong Chon Gang, was taken into port and subject to search and inspection, its cargo of suspected missiles was uncovered. Of note was the fact that the weapons were discovered amidst a shipment of sugar.

The drama in the Panama Canal reached new heights, according to Panamanian President Martinelli, when the North Korean ship captain had a heart attack and tried to commit suicide, while a riot involving the ship's crew of 35 ensued. The entire crew was subsequently taken into custody while the vessel and its shipments were seized. As well, President Martinelli posted an image via his Twitter account depicting a large green object inside a cargo container, which he characterized as the suspected "sophisticated missile equipment."

Soon after the fracas unfolded, Cuba admitted that this stash of weapons was included in its shipment of 10,000 tonnes of sugar to North Korea. Cuba explained that the weapons were obsolete Soviet-era arms from Cuba being sent for repair in North Korea. That explanation was plausible since North Korea possesses some expertise in the weapons arena. However, Panama called on the United Nations to lead an inquiry into the weapons materials to determine precisely what was stashed in the shipment.

Under the aegis of prevailing United Nations sanctions, the transportation of all weapons to or from North Korea is prohibited. Moreover, even a benign matter such as the transportation of weapons for repair to North Korea would,

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nonetheless, require a waiver from the United Nations Security Council. It would seem that no such waiver was procured by Cuba or North Korea.

As well, regulations pertaining to the transfer of shipments through the Panama Canal required the declaration of military cargo, including so-called "obsolete" weapons. Thus, an investigation into the matter was underway, while the North Korean crew was faced with the prospect of charges of illegal weapons smuggling in Panama. As noted by President Martinelli, "The world needs to sit up and take note: you cannot go around shipping undeclared weapons of war through the Panama Canal."

It should be noted that North Korea issued a demand that its ship be returned and the crew of the Chong Chon Gang be released. Panama was not acquiescing to this demand and, instead, was moving forward with the aforementioned investigation.

By the close of July 2013, woes for Cuba and North Korea over the infamous ship carrying weapons cargo only increased. At issue was the report by Panamanian authorities that four new undeclared containers were found aboard the Chong Chon Gang, quite likely in violation of United Nations sanctions. That determination, however, was yet to be made.

In February 2014, Panama had released the Chong Chon Gang and the ship's owner was forced to pay a fine totalling almost \$700,000 for violating navigation regulations (specifically those attending to the transportation of weapons). As well, three crew members were facing weapons trafficking charges, although the charges against the other 32 crew members were dropped.

At issue for the Panamanian government was the fact that the weapons being smuggled were not "obsolete defensive weapons" as claimed by Cuba, but in fact several sophisticated weapons in perfect condition. Indeed, it was soon revealed that the stash of weapons included two MiG-21 aircraft, 15 MiG engines and nine anti-aircraft missiles.

A preliminary report by a panel of experts to the Sanctions Committee at the United Nations Security Council concluded that the Chong Chon Gang violated prevailing United Nations sanctions against North Korea, which ban the transfer of weapons to that country.

Yet to be determined would be the type of penalties the United Nations Security Council would levy against Cuba

Special Note

Pope Francis travels to Cuba and United States

While critics of President Barack Obama have criticized his re-engagement policy towards Cuba, the president of the United States had a strong ally for his actions in Pope Francis.

Indeed, the Holy See has long frowned upon the United States' embargo on Cuba, and applauded President Obama's attempt to improve bilateral ties with its former Cold War foe. Moreover, Pope Francis himself was reported to have played a role in the diplomatic efforts that ultimately yielded the normalization of ties between the United States and Cuba from late 2014 and well into 2015.

Now, with the process of rapprochement underway between the two countries, Pope Francis was making landmark trip to Cuba and the United States. Indeed, Pope Francis called on Cuba and the United States to "persevere on the path" of detente. To this end, he praised the negotiations and ensuing reconciliation between Cuba and the United States as "an example of reconciliation for the whole world."

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During his visit to Cuba, Pope Francis visited with the country's revolutionary leader, Fidel Castro, and also held a meeting with President Raul Castro. In public, the pontiff stayed away from overtly political remarks, and refrained from criticism of Cuba's poor democratic rights record, including its suppression of dissent. That being said, Pope Francis called for a "revolution of tenderness" and paid tribute to generations who kept Catholicism alive in Cuba despite an official policy of atheism. To this end, the pontiff said, "The soul of the Cuban people ... was forged amid suffering and privation which could not suppress the faith."

Pope Francis spent a good portion of his time in Cuba at the shrine to the Virgin of Charity in the eastern town of El Cobre, near Cuba's second city of Santiago.

The Virgin of Charity statuette was said to have been rescued from the ocean in dry condition four centuries prior and is generally regarded as an important spiritual symbol in Cuba by Catholics as well as followers of Afro-Cuban religions, such as Santeria. Speaking from that site in El Cobre, Pope Francis said, "Like Mary, Mother of Charity, we want to be a Church which goes forth to build bridges, to break down walls, to sow seeds of reconciliation." Pope Francis made clear that the Roman Catholic Church would continue to "support and encourage the Cuban people in its hopes and concerns."

After his trip to Cuba, Pope Francis traveled on to the United States on Sept. 22, 2015, on a chartered Alitalia papal plane. On the flight from Cuba to the United States, he previewed his impending addresses at the White House and before Congress, noting that he was not likely to discuss the controversial matter of the embargo. He said instead, "My desire is that they end up with a good result, that they reach an accord that satisfies both sides, an accord, certainly." The Pontiff also indicated that his speeches would concentrate on "bilateral relations and multinational relations as a sign of progress and coexistence."

Special Report:

United States President Barack Obama makes landmark trip to Cuba after restoration of bilateral ties between United States and Cuba

Introduction:

After decades of antipathy rooted in the Cold War, a process of re-engagement of ties between the United States and Cuba was undertaken. History was made as the two countries moved to normalize their diplomatic relations and move along the path of rapprochement.

Going back to Dec. 17, 2014, United States President Barack Obama announced a landmark policy shift aimed at normalizing diplomatic relations with Cuba after more than 50 years of animosity. At the start of 2015, the governments of the United States and Cuba commenced negotiations aimed at achieving re-engagement. In April 2015, there was a historic thaw in bilateral relations between the United States and Cuba as United States President Barack Obama met with Cuban President Raul Castro at the Summit of the Americas in Panama. It was the first meeting of the leaders of the two countries in decades. Historians noted that the meeting was part of the legacy that would likely define the respective presidencies of Obama and Castro, essentially underlining the reality that the Cold War was officially over.

In the immediate aftermath of the historic meeting, the Obama administration in the United States announced that it was removing Cuba from its list of state sponsors of terrorism. That move was formalized at the end of May 2015 and solidified Cuba's re-integration into the full international community. The action also augmented the process of rapprochement between the United States and Cuba.

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July 2015 was the date set for the official opening of the two countries' embassies in Washington DC, and Havana. The Cuban flag thus flew for the first time in 50 years aloft the Cuban embassy in Washington DC in July 2015.

United States Secretary of State John Kerry traveled to Cuba in August 2015 to attend a formal ceremony marking the raising of the United States flag at the American embassy in Havana.

Still to be determined was the matter of the economic sanctions, which would have to be removed via legislation in the United States Congress. But before that issue was resolved, President Obama made a landmark trip to Cuba making him the first sitting United States president to set foot on Cuban land in almost a century. President Obama's arrival on Cuban soil on March 20, 2016, marked a very real benchmark in the international sphere, serving as a reminder that the Cold War was over.

See below for a full report on the process of rapprochement and re-engagement between the United States and Cuba.

United States and Cuba announce landmark shift in policy as they move to normalize relations:

The year 2015 was marked by the historic re-engagement of ties between the United States and Cuba. Going back to Dec. 17, 2014, United States President Barack Obama announced a landmark policy shift aimed at normalizing diplomatic relations with Cuba after more than 50 years of disengagement. President Obama made the historic announcement following a shared telephone call with Cuban President Raul Castro. In his remarks, President Obama noted that the diplomatic breakthrough occurred partially due to action by Pope Francis as well as the government of Canada. Indeed, the effort to forge this historic agreement was ongoing for 18 months via clandestine talks facilitated by the government of Canada and thanks to endorsement and support from Pope Francis, the leader of the Holy See.

As noted by a senior Obama administration official in remarks to Reuters News ahead of the president's historic moves, "These steps will be the most significant changes to our Cuba policy in more than 50 years." The official continued, "We will be immediately initiating discussions with Cuba to re-establish diplomatic relations that have been severed since 1961. If there is any U.S. foreign policy that has passed its expiration date, it is the U.S. Cuba policy."

As stated by President Obama in a nationally broadcast landmark announcement: "We will end an outdated approach that for decades has failed to advance our interests and instead we will begin to normalize relations between our two countries." President Obama continued, "These 50 years have shown that isolation has not worked. It's time for a new approach." He added that the agreement would herald "a new chapter among the nations of the Americas" and move beyond a "rigid policy that's rooted in events that took place before most of us were born."

At the diplomatic level, the expected outcome of the new United States-Cuba policy would be the opening of embassies in the respective capitals of Washington D.C. and Havana.

Meanwhile, United States Secretary of State John Kerry would have to review his country's classification of Cuba as a state sponsor of terrorism, and also negotiate the terms of this policy of re-engagement. These terms could not simply reverse the prevailing embargo against Cuba since that would take Congressional action. However, the president could -- and would -- impose exceptions to the embargo that would open up new pathways for cultural and commercial interactions between the United States and Cuba. Down the line, all expectations were that there would be improved circulation of commerce between the United States and Cuba.

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Also on the agenda was the easing of travel restrictions between the United States and Cuba, including travel authorized for family visits, official visits, journalistic, professional, educational and religious visits, as well as trips intended for public performances. Tourism, however, was not yet on the agenda for easing of travel restrictions.

Another tangible outcome was the release of Alan Gross, a United States national held in a Cuban jail for five years, and an anonymous United States intelligence agent who was held in Cuba for 20 years. Gross, along with the intelligence agent, were freed as part of a prisoner exchange deal in which three Cubans held by the United States would also be released from American custody.

Gross was arrested, tried, convicted and imprisoned in Cuba in 2009 for delivering satellite telephone equipment capable of obfuscating Internet connections and deemed to be a spy. Despite high profile calls for his release, the Gross case seemed to be unresolvable until Dec. 17, 2014, when he was freed. Meanwhile, the release of the anonymous intelligence agent was described by United States authorities as follows: "In light of his sacrifice on behalf of the United States, securing his release from prison after 20 years — in a swap for three of the Cuban spies he helped put behind bars — is fitting closure to this Cold War chapter of U.S.-Cuban relations."

In the hours after the United States leader Barack Obama made his historic remarks on the policy shift with Cuba, Alan Gross was on a flight returning from captivity, accompanied by Senator Patrick Leahy (D-Vermont), Senator Jeff Flake (R-Arizona), and Congressman Chris Van Hollen (D-Maryland).

Despite that diplomatic delegation being bipartisan in composition, some Republicans were outraged by the decision to engage with Cuba and to go forward with a prisoner exchange. Senator Marco Rubio (R-Florida) vociferously condemned the president's decision, saying, "This whole new policy is based on an illusion, on a lie, the lie and the illusion that more commerce and access to money and goods will translate to political freedom for the Cuban people. All this is going to do is give the Castro regime, which controls every aspect of Cuban life, the opportunity to manipulate these changes to stay in power."

Nevertheless, President Obama addressed those critics, declaring that while he shared their commitment to freedom, there were differing ways of achieving it. He said, "The question is how do we uphold that commitment. I do not believe we can keep doing the same thing for over five decades and expect a different result."

In Cuba, President Raul Castro made his own national address that was broadcast across the island. Castro's address came with no preamble and went directly into an announcement that he had spoken with President Obama. The call, which lasted 45 minutes, was the first direct conversation between a United States president and a Cuban president in more than 50 years. President Castro said they had agreed to a policy change and a prisoner swap. He said, "We have been able to make headway in the solution of some topics of mutual interest for both nations." President Castro also paid tribute to the American leader -- a historic moment after decades of mutual hostility -- as he said, "President Obama's decision deserves the respect and acknowledgment of our people."

From the Holy See, the Vatican authorities released a statement hailing the historic agreement. That statement read as follows: "The Holy Father wishes to express his warm congratulations for the historic decision taken by the governments of the United States of America and Cuba to establish diplomatic relations, with the aim of overcoming, in the interest of the citizens of both countries, the difficulties which have marked their recent history."

Negotiations on Normalization of Relations

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At the start of 2015, the Obama administration in the United States said it would dispatch a delegation to attend talks in the Cuban capital of Havana on Jan. 21 and 22, 2015, aimed at normalizing relations between the two countries.

Meanwhile, Cuba was making good on its promise to release detainees as part of the process of rapprochement. As a result, there was a positive landscape in place within which the bilateral talks on normalizing relations could take place.

Ahead of the negotiations in Havana, some new measures were being put into place allowing United States citizens to use credit cards in Cuba and also to take into the United States up to \$100 worth of Cuban alcohol and tobacco. This would mean that it would be legal to bring Cuban cigars to the United States after a five-decade long ban. Other new measures included the relaxation of rules for United States businesses to export technologies, such as software, Internet, and telecommunications technologies to Cuba. There would also be opportunities for United States investment small businesses and agricultural operations in Cuba.

Heralding the changes, United States Treasury Secretary Jacob Lew said, "Today's announcement takes us one step closer to replacing out-of-date policies that were not working and puts in place a policy that helps promote political and economic freedom for the Cuban people."

Also of note was the fact that in mid-January 2015, the Obama administration also relaxed rules on travel to Cuba. While so-called "ordinary tourism" remained restricted, there was a relaxation of the travel ban to Cuba, providing potential travelers with a wide range of rationales for travel to Cuba without having to obtain a special license. The new rules would allow Americans to travel to Cuba for family visits, government business, journalism, research, and religious activity. With travel between the United States and Cuba opening up, United Airlines in mid-January 2015 announced it would offer regular commercial flights between the United States gateways of Houston and Newark to Cuba.

On Jan. 21, 2015, a United States diplomatic delegation, led by Assistant Secretary of State Roberta Jacobson, arrived in the Cuban capital of Havana to commence negotiations aimed at restoring diplomatic relations, and advancing the eventual opening of trade and travel ties between the two countries. For Cuba, whose delegation was being led by Josefina Vidal, director of United States affairs at the Cuban foreign ministry, a key demand during negotiations would be the removal of Cuba from the United States' list of state sponsors of terrorism. Cuba was also demanding that the United States end its practice of granting safe haven to Cuban under special status, noting that it encouraged Cubans to defect and contributed to the country's "brain drain." For the United States, the key demand would be improved respect for human rights by Cuba.

During his annual State of the Union address the day before (Jan. 20, 2015), President Barack Obama of the United States of America said, "We are ending a policy that was long past its expiration date. When what you're doing doesn't work for 50 years, it's time to try something new." He also called on members of Congress to end the embargo against Cuba although some members of Congress have opposed that move.

Note that in February 2015, the United States Department of State made clear that the return of the United States naval base at Guantanamo Bay was not on the agenda during bilateral discussions with Cuba. In testimony before the House of Representatives in Washington D. C., Roberta Jacobson, the assistant secretary of State for the Bureau of Western Hemisphere Affairs, said, "The issue of Guantanamo is not on the table in these conversations." Of note was the fact that Cuban President Raul Castro has called for the return of Guantanamo Bay. The issue, however, was not likely to stymie progress on broader negotiations aimed at normalizing relations between the United States and Cuba.

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In the United States, some policy changes regarding Cuba were being advanced in mid-February 2015. A bipartisan group of Democratic and Republican senators were crafting legislation to repeal long-standing laws that have prevented Americans for doing business with Cuba. The bills would loosen legal restrictions on travel and trade with Cuba, while leaving in place provisions protecting long-standing property claims against the Cuban government. It was quite possible that hardline factions in Congress would prevent the new bills from being passed; however, the sponsors of the legislation said they would not be deterred and would simply include it as additions to appropriations bills in the future.

Meanwhile, the Obama administration in the United States eased some restrictions on the importation of goods and services from private Cuban entrepreneurs. Some arenas, such as live animals, tobacco, and textiles, were not included in relaxed rules. The intent by the United States government appeared to be geared to allowing private enterprise to flourish in Cuba. Of course, Cuban entrepreneurs would still have to secure permission from the Cuban government to export their goods; they would also have to come up with "documentary evidence" for the United States authorities to prove they fell into the category of approved enterprises.

Note that another round of bilateral talks between Washington and Havana commenced in the United States on Feb. 27, 2015. During this round of negotiations, Cuban envoys called for their country to be removed from the United States' list of state sponsors of terrorism. United States envoys said that the talks should concentrate on the opening of their respective embassies and the exchange of prisoners, rather than on this more contentious issue. United States Secretary of State John Kerry addressed the issue himself, saying that the designation of a country being a terrorism sponsor was a separate process and "not a negotiation" linked with the current push to normalize relations. He said, "It is an evaluation that is made under a very strict set of requirements, congressionally mandated, and that has to be pursued separately and it is being pursued separately."

Nevertheless, there were high hopes that an agreement would be reached by April 10, 2015, when regional heads of state were expected to meet in Panama, and where United States President Barack Obama and Cuban President Raul Castro could officially meet for the first time since the announcement of their plan to normalize bilateral relations.

Yet another round of bilateral talks ensued in mid-March 2015 -- this time in the Cuban capital of Havana. Success in these negotiations was somewhat undermined by a move by the United States to impose sanctions on Venezuela -- a leftist ally of Cuba. While the United States has argued that deteriorating relations (and associated sanctions) with Venezuela should have no impact on the effort to normalize ties with Cuba. However, Cuban Foreign Minister Bruno Rodriguez warned that hostile actions towards Venezuela would be interpreted as an attack on Cuba. To this end, Rodriguez said that the United States had "provoked serious damage to the environment in the hemisphere on the eve of the Summit of the Americas." He continued, "I hope that the U.S. government understands that it can't handle Cuba with a carrot and Venezuela with a garrote."

Historic Thaw in U.S.-Cuban Relations

April 2015 was marked by a historic thaw in bilateral relations between the United States and Cuba. At stake was the impending Summit of the Americas in Panama where United States Secretary of State John Kerry would meet with his Cuban counterpart, Bruno Rodriguez, in the highest level meeting between the foreign ministers of the two countries since the Eisenhower era in the United States. But all the attention quickly turned to the leaders of the two countries as United States President Barack Obama was expected to cross paths with Cuban President Raul Castro at the summit in Panama.

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While the two men encountered one another at the 2013 memorial for the iconic South African leader, Nelson Mandela, the 2015 meeting of the Organization of American States would be the first official venue where the two leaders would be present. Cuba had, for some time, been banned from attending the Summit of the Americas until this time, making President Castro's participation significant simply for that reason. But the significance of the meeting was accentuated because the political landscape was now markedly different, given the ongoing negotiations aimed at normalizing bilateral ties between the two countries after decades of animosity.

Of note would be the meeting between the two leaders on the sidelines of the summit, although all eyes were on the initial encounter between Obama and Castro, ready to judge the meeting as either positively or negatively in terms of mood.

On April 10, 2015, at the opening ceremony of the Summit of the Americas, cameras captured the brief but historic moment when President Obama and President Castro shook hands and chatted informally. Global watchers cast the encounter as cordial and deemed it to be an optimistic start to the meeting of leaders of the countries of the Organization of American States (OAS). Historians noted the meeting would be part of the legacy that would likely define the respective presidencies of Obama and Castro, essentially underlining the reality that the Cold War was officially over.

For President Obama, the legacy would be particularly pronounced, as the normalization of ties with Cuba would quite likely be regarded as one of the most significant foreign policy accomplishments of his presidency.

During his plenary session address to the 35 OAS countries, President Obama acknowledged that while differences remained between his country and Cuba, bilateral relations between the United States and Cuba were now at a "turning point." He said, "This shift in U.S. policy represents a turning point for our entire region. The fact that President Castro and I are both sitting here today marks a historic occasion." He continued by emphatically underlining the shift in United States policy towards Cuba, as he declared: "The United States will not be imprisoned by the past. We're looking to the future." He added,

I'm not interested in having battles that frankly started before I was born. The Cold War has been over for a long time."

President Castro had kind public words for President Obama in his address on the second day of the summit. After a lengthy speech that tracked the history of between the United States and Cuba, and particularly highlighted Cuba's grievances with the United States over the years, President Castro admitted he tended to get carried away with the subject matter, as he said, "When I talk about the revolution, the passion oozes out of me." He continued, by inoculating President Obama from the blame over decades of acrimonious relations as he said, "I have to ask President Obama for forgiveness. He is not responsible for the things which happened before his time." President Castro also appeared to exhibit genuine respect for his United States counterpart, as he declared: "In my opinion, President Obama is an honest man."

On the sidelines of the summit on April 11, 2015, President Obama and President Castro met for talks. It was the first face-to-face discussion between the leaders of the two countries in a half century. On the agenda for discussion were the myriad issues involved in the process of normalizing relations, from the re-opening of their respective embassies in Washington D.C. and Havana, to broadening economic and travel paths for the future, and also including human rights and freedom of the press. As noted by Cuban President Raul Castro: "Everything can be on the table."

During these talks, President Obama lauded the encounter with his Cuban counterpart, saying, "This is obviously a historic meeting." He acknowledged that difference remained between the two countries, but referred to President Castro as he said, "We have both concluded that we can disagree with a spirit of respect and civility." President Obama continued by explaining his rationale for pursuing re-engagement and rapprochement with Cuba. He said,

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"It was my belief it was time to try something new, that it was important for us to engage with Cuban government. And more importantly, with Cuban people."

For his part, President Castro also acknowledged there would be differences with the United States, but emphasized that the two countries have "agreed to disagree." President Castro emphasized that the imperative was to move forward in a productive manner with the Obama administration in the United States, as he said, "We are willing to make progress in the way the president [Obama] has described."

In a separate address at a civil society forum, President Obama heralded improved relations with Cuba saying, "As the United States begins a new chapter in our relationship with Cuba, we hope it will create an environment that improves the lives of the Cuban people... Not because it is imposed by us, the United States, but through the talent and ingenuity and aspirations, and the conversations among Cubans from all walks of life so they can decide what the best course is for their prosperity." President Obama added that the days of United States' influence, interference, neo-imperialism, and hegemony in the Americas was over, as he declared: "The days in which our agenda in this hemisphere so often presumed that the United States could meddle with impunity, those days are past."

Cuba removed from United States' list of state sponsors of terrorism

On April 14, 2015, in the immediate aftermath of the historic meeting between President Obama and President Castro in Panama, the Obama administration in the United States announced that it was removing Cuba from its list of state sponsors of terrorism. It should be noted that the United States has not, for some time, actually accused Cuba of terrorism. Nevertheless, the delisting procedure would be of practical benefit to Cuba, as it would no longer be officially cited in that notorious category of rogue nation states. It would also have the added benefit of moving Cuba in the direction of good standing with the wider global community.

Still to be determined was the matter of the economic sanctions regime. While President Obama had already used his executive action to loosen the trade embargo against Cuba, it would be up to the United States Congress to pass legislation to remove the bulk of the sanctions. While several leading Republican senators running for president have opposed the move, it was quite likely that a bipartisan group of senators would support the end to the sanctions regime against Cuba.

On May 29, 2015, the Obama administration in the United States officially removed Cuba from its list of state sponsors of terrorism. The move brought a formal end to the respective bans on economic aid, arms exports, "dual-use" military and civilian items; it also ended the United States practice of opposing loans by international financial institutions, such as the World Bank and the International Monetary Fund. The "de jure" end to these prohibitions would not translate into actual relaxations in practice since a wider economic embargo remained in place.

As intimated above, a large swath of Republicans in Congress were not in a hurry to end that embargo, meaning that the real value in Cuba being removed from the United States' list of state sponsors of terrorism was symbolic.

But even that symbolism had value as it solidified Cuba's re-integration into the full international community. Moreover, it augmented the process of rapprochement between the United States and Cuba.

For its part, the Castro regime in Cuba on May 31, 2015, applauded the move by the Obama administration in the United States.

Plans in the works to open embassies in Washington D.C. and Havana and fully restore diplomatic relations --

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At the end of June 2015, it was announced that plans were afoot for the United States and Cuba to open embassies in Havana and Washington D.C. respectively. Of note was the fact that there has been no United States embassy in Havana since the 1960s. Meanwhile, July 20, 2015, was the date set for the official restoration of U.S.-Cuban relations since ties were severed in 1961.

United States Envoy Jeffrey DeLaurentis delivered a letter from the Obama White House to Cuba's interim Foreign Minister Marcelino Medina, which relayed plans from the United States to open its embassy in Havana. President Barack Obama delivered an address from the White House Rose Garden, where he addressed the development, saying, "This is a historic step forward in our efforts to normalize relations with the Cuban government and people and begin a new chapter with our neighbors in the Americas. A year ago it might have seemed impossible that the United States would be once again raising our flag, the Stars and Stripes, over an embassy in Havana." He continued, "With this change, we will be able to substantially increase our contacts with the Cuban people," he said. "We will have more personnel at our embassy and our diplomats will have the ability to engage more broadly across the island."

Embassies open and flags raised in Washington D.C. and Havana

On July 20, 2015, Cuba formally re-opened its embassy and the Cuban flag was lifted aloft the embassy in the United States' capital.

It was the first time in more than 50 years that a Cuban flag was flying at the diplomatic mission in Washington D.C. Cuban Foreign Minister Bruno Rodriguez, who attended the momentous occasion, declared: "The historic events we are living today will only make sense with the removal of the economic, commercial and financial blockade, which causes so much deprivation and damage to our people, the return of occupied territory in Guantanamo, and respect for the sovereignty of Cuba."

It was fair to state that the re-opening of the Cuban embassy in the United States was a significant development in the process of formally restoring bilateral relations between the two countries. Another significant development was set to follow as Foreign Minister Bruno Rodriguez met with United States Secretary of State John Kerry at the State Department. It was the first time a Cuban foreign minister had visited Washington D.C. since the Cuban Revolution.

While the United States' embassy was set to re-open in Havana, the United States flag would not be raised until August 2015 when Secretary of State John Kerry would travel to Cuba to witness the ceremony. To that end, a formal flag-raising ceremony was set for Aug. 14, 2015.

On that day, Secretary of State John Kerry arrived at Jose Marti International Airport in the Cuban capital of Havana. He would be distinguished as the first American head of the State Department to visit Cuba in 70 years. The United States' top diplomat presided over the historic re-opening of the United States embassy in Havana, the playing of the United States national anthem, and the raising of the United States flag aloft the diplomatic compound.

In his speech, Secretary of State Kerry noted that it was a "historic day," while also calling for democratization in Cuba as he declared, "The people of Cuba would be best served by a genuine democracy, where people are free to choose their leaders." He added, "Cuba's future is for Cubans to shape."

The ceremony was also witnessed by the three United States Marines -- now Veterans -- who lowered the United States flag in 1961 but who were now back in Havana to be part of the remarkable shift in bilateral relations.

Recent developments in U.S.-Cuban rapprochement

In mid-September 2015, the Obama administration in the United States announced a slate of regulations that would ease travel, trade and investment restrictions with Cuba. While the new rules would not reverse the embargo levied by the United States Congress, the executive action would nonetheless serve the purpose of chipping away at the embargo, while demonstrating the Obama administration's commitment to improving its ties with a former Cold War enemy.

At the practical level, while United States citizens would still be barred from traveling to Cuba as tourists, these changes would open the door for some businesses to operate offices and expand financial activities in Cuba. As well, the changes would also do away with restrictions on the financial remittances to Cuba.

The government of the United States argued that the new regulations would spur business development in Cuba, while augmenting more economic and political freedoms there.

As noted by United States Treasury Secretary Jacob Lew in a statement: "By further easing these sanctions, the United States is helping to support the Cuban people in their effort to achieve the political and economic freedom necessary to build a democratic, prosperous, and stable Cuba." He added, "A stronger, more open U.S.-Cuba relationship has the potential to create economic opportunities for both Americans and Cubans alike."

Note that at the end of September 2015, on the sidelines of the United Nations General Assembly, United States President Barack Obama met with Cuban President Raul Castro. The meeting, depicted in videotaped footage, showed both Obama and Castro at ease with one another and sporting broad smiles.

Cuban Foreign Minister Bruno Rodriguez described the rare one-on-one meeting of the two leaders as "respectful and constructive." Meanwhile, White House spokesperson Josh Earnest said, "We continue to believe that deeper engagement and deeper people-to-people ties, deeper economic engagement between the United States and Cuba will have the effect of moving the government and the nation in a positive direction."

President Obama to make historic trip to Cuba:

In February 2016 it was announced that United States President Barack Obama would travel to Cuba in March 2016. The United States president made the announcement via the social media outlet, Twitter, as he said: "Next month, I'll travel to Cuba to advance our progress and efforts that can improve the lives of the Cuban people."

A formal statement from the White House went out after and read as follows: "This historic visit — the first by a sitting US president in nearly 90 years — is another demonstration of the president's commitment to chart a new course for US-Cuban relations and connect US and Cuban citizens through expanded travel, commerce, and access to information." According to the White House, First Lady Michelle Obama would accompany the president on the historic visit to Cuba.

The Cuban visit would be part of a regional trip to Latin America that would also include a stop in Argentina. Nevertheless, the Cuban endeavor could only be understood in historic context, given the fact that President Obama was the leader to achieve rapprochement with Cuba, and he would be the first sitting United States

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president to set foot on Cuban territory in almost a century. Indeed, the last sitting president to travel to the Caribbean Island was Calvin Coolidge in 1928.

Not surprisingly, Republicans criticized the proposed trip to Cuba, insisting that such a visit should not take place while Cuba remained officially Communist under the rule of the Castro regime. However, other observers have noted that President Obama's success in achieving rapprochement with Cuba would likely be regarded as one of the foreign policy highlights of his tenure, if not the apex of his presidency.

Perhaps cognizant of this reality and eager to protect this landmark legacy achievement, President Obama was keen to ensure his Cuba policy would not be upended by the president who would succeed him. In truth, should Hillary Clinton win the 2016 president election, there was little chance of such a move as Obama's former Secretary of State has telegraphed her intent to preserve the Obama legacy. But should a Republican succeed President Obama, it was highly likely that individual would seek to reverse the Cuba policy, given the Republican Party's general stance in opposition to rapprochement between the United States and Cuba. To that end, the Obama administration was looking to open up travel between the United States and Cuba, while also easing trade restrictions and facilitating greater United States investment in Cuba. These moves would essentially plant the seeds for business links that would be difficult to reverse under a hypothetical Republican successor.

Also of note was the restoration of direct flight agreements between the United States and Cuba, as well as the resumption of direct mail delivery to Cuba.

There were also several hotel chains that were interested in establishing footholds in Cuba. Significantly, Starwood Hotels applied to the United States government for a license and signed a deal to develop hotels in Cuba. The extent of these types of tourist development endeavors, outside of the Starwood Hotels deal, were yet to be determined.

Meanwhile Republicans continued to criticize the impending Cuba visit, railing against the president for giving, in their view, too many concessions to the Castro regime in Cuba. They were also opposed to the very notion of engagement with a tyrannical dictatorship. During an interview with CNN en Espanol, President Obama addressed this criticism, saying, "This is not a matter of providing concessions. This is a matter of us engaging directly with the Cuban people." As well, he continued to emphasize his position that engagement between Washington D.C. and Havana was more likely to facilitate transformation, rather than sticking with the same failed policy of isolation that has yielded no significant results until the restoration of bilateral ties between the two countries.

Alert:

On March 20, 2016, Air Force One touched down at Jose Marti Airport in Havana. President Obama's arrival on Cuban soil on that day was a historic moment as it was the first time since 1928 that an American president was on Cuban territory. It marked a very real benchmark in the international sphere, serving as a reminder that the Cold War was over. Perhaps underlining the significance of the historic visit to Cuba, President Obama was accompanied by First Lady Michelle Obama, their daughters Sasha and Malia, as well as the first lady's mother.

Upon landing in Cuban, President Obama said via the social media outlet, Twitter, "Que bolá Cuba? Just touched down here, looking forward to meeting and hearing directly from the Cuban people."

That direct engagement with the Cuban people was to be understood through the complicated and contradictory lens of Cuban political and social life. Ahead of President Obama's arrival in Cuba, several dissidents were arrested while protesting.

Clearly, political repression was not expunged because of normalized bilateral relations. On the other hand, the American president's arrival in Cuba was being nationally broadcast without objection from the Cuban Communist Party, and journalists on the ground in Cuba traveling with the president indicated robust and genuine interest by the Cuban people with regard to President Obama. There was a general feeling of disbelief that history was unfolding and they were participants in a landmark moment in global geopolitical life.

During President Obama's visit to Cuba, there were plans for a meeting with dissidents, as well as a meeting with Cardinal Jaime Ortega, who played a central role in the diplomatic talks in late 2014 that ultimately resulted in the re-engagement process. The schedule also included attendance at an exhibition baseball game between the Tampa Bay Rays and the Cuban National team, as well as a tour of notable cultural sites. Also on President Obama's agenda was what United States deputy national security adviser, Ben Rhodes, characterized as a "speech to the Cuban people" at Havana's legendary Gran Teatro, as well as a meeting with Cuban President Raul Castro, which would be followed by a media event and a state dinner.

Rhodes previewed President Obama's speech, saying that it "will be a very important moment in the president's trip, an opportunity for him to describe the course that we're on, to review the complicated history between our two countries ... but also to look forward to the future." He added, "We very much want to make the process of normalization irreversible."

In an unprecedented address at Havana's Gran Teatro on March 22, 2016, President Obama issued a passionate clarion call for democratization and economic transformation in Cuba.

The United States leader noted, "Liberty is the right of every man to be honest, to think and to speak without hypocrisy." President Obama then said, "I believe citizens should be free to speak their minds without fear. Voters should be able to choose their governments in free and democratic elections."

He added, "Not everybody agrees with me on this, not everybody agrees with the American people on this but I believe those human rights are universal. I believe they're the rights of the American people, the Cuban people and people around the world."

Although the United States leader's advocacy for free speech, the right to protest, and other political freedoms, as well as economic reforms likely did not comport perfectly with the notions of the Cuban government, it was nonetheless attended by Cuban President Raul Castro and nationally broadcast. President Obama's declaration that he came to Cuba to "bury the last remnant" of the Cold War and extend a "hand of friendship" was warmly received by the Cuban people.

The positive reception was not limited to President Obama's call for the United States Congress to lift the embargo, which he characterized as "an outdated burden on the Cuban people." Indeed, the following reference to the difficult and hostile United States-Cuban relationship was met by thunderous applause: "I know the history. But I have no wish to be trapped by it."

In a departure from his conservative predecessors who have favored a deep imprint of United States influence in the Western Hemisphere, and the exercise of United States hegemony, President Obama made it clear his country under his leadership had no desire to deploy neo-imperial control over Cuba. He said, "I've made it clear that the United States has neither the capacity nor the intention to impose change on Cuba. What changes come will depend upon the Cuban people. We will not impose our political or economic system on you. We recognize that every country, every people must chart its own course and shape its own model."

But the United States president took the opportunity to laud American values and the record of change in the United States as he declared," Now, there's still some tough fights. It isn't always pretty, the process of democracy. It's often frustrating. You can see that in the election going on back home. But just stop and consider this fact about the American campaign that's taking place right now. You had two Cuban Americans in the Republican party running against the legacy of a Black man who was president while arguing that they're the best person to beat the Democratic nominee, who will either be a woman or a democracy socialist. Who would have believed that back in 1959? That's a measure of our progress as a democracy."

Editor's Note:

The process restoration of diplomatic ties with Cuba would stand as a marquis achievement of the Obama presidency, reflective of Barack Obama's foreign policy philosophy, which has centered on principles of vigorous diplomatic engagement, internationalism, and multilateralism. Indeed, President Obama's policy of rapprochement with Cuba would likely be understood by his supporters as a landmark accomplishment during his tenure in office. Conservative critics of the president have held a very different view, as discussed above.

Special Report

Cuba's revolutionary leader Fidel Castro dies at 90

Fidel Castro — Cuba's revolutionary leader — died in the late hours of Nov. 25, 2016. President Raul Castro announced the death of his brother via state television, declaring, "The commander in chief of the Cuban revolution died at 22:29 hours this evening (Friday)." President Raul Castro, who took over as president when Fidel Castro stepped down for health reasons in 2008, said that Cuba would go into a period of mourning with a cremation of the body of Fidel Castro to follow.

World leaders paid tribute to Fidel Castro's legacy with the European Union's foreign affairs chief, Federica Mogherini, casting him as "a man of determination and an historical figure." She indicated that continued improved relations between the European bloc and Cuba were likely to ensue. As well, Pope Francis, the head of the world's Catholic Church and the head of state of the Holy See, noted that the death of Fidel Castro constituted "sad news."

Pope Francis said that he had expressed his condolences in a Spanish-language message to President Raul Castro as follows: "I express to you my sentiments of grief." Of note was the fact that Pope Francis was a leading figure in the process of rapprochement between Cuba and the Obama administration in the United States.

For his part, United States President Barack Obama offered his condolences to Fidel Castro's family via a formal statement and added that history would be the judge of Castro's impact. President Obama said, "At this time of Fidel Castro's passing, we extend a hand of friendship to the Cuban people. History will record and judge the enormous impact of this singular figure on the people and world around him." Incoming President-elect Donald Trump took a different approach in responding to the news of Fidel Castro's death. He promised to end the rapprochement accord with Cuba, if a better deal could not be made.

It should be noted that since 2006, presidential power in Cuba had been transferred from Fidel Castro to Raul Castro due to the former's health complications.

Then, in Feb. 2008, Fidel Castro announced that he would not seek re-election and would be officially stepping down as Cuba's leader after five decades in power.

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In his announcement, which was published in **Cuban** newspapers, Fidel Castro acknowledged that his physical ailments would prevent him from being an active and engaged leader. To that end, he wrote, "It would be a betrayal to my conscience to accept a responsibility requiring more mobility and dedication than I am physically able to offer. This I say devoid of all drama."

Less than a week after Fidel Castro's announcement, Cuba's National Assembly unanimously selected Raul Castro — his brother — to be the new president. The vote by the members in the National Assembly formalized the de facto role Raul Castro had been playing for two years. President Raul Castro named hardliner, Machado Ventura, to be Vice President.

Fidel Castro held the reins of power in Cuba from the time he ousted the country's right-wing leader, Fulgencio Batista, in 1959 until 2008. Thus, in 2008 when he stepped down from power, Castro had been the longest-serving head of government in the world. Castro prevailed, even in the face of several assassination attempts and a long-standing embargo by the United States, which was intended to effect his removal from office. His latest health problems took him out of the public spotlight, however, his legacy and influence continued through proxy leadership via his brother, Raul Castro.

Note that the most recent presidential election took place in 2013 with a vote from among the parliament. Typically, presidents are elected by the National Assembly for a five-year term. The last election was held on Feb. 24, 2013 (next to be held in 2018). The election result gave victory to Raul Castro with 100% of the vote share against Miguel Diaz-Canel Bermudez.

Returning to the issue of the death of Fidel Castro in 2016, note that the **Cuban** revolutionary leader's ashes were interred at the start of December 2016 during a private ceremony that was held at Santa Ifigenia Cemetery in the city of Santiago.

With the death of Cuba's revolutionary leader, Fidel Castro, in November 2016, Cuba's path forward was being viewed with uncertainty. Would the process of rapprochement with the West, and particularly, with the United States via the Obama administration, prevail? Or would the hardline incoming Trump administration move Cuba towards a policy of retreat? The answers to these questions were yet to be determined.

Special Note on Hurricane Irma

Early September 2017 was marked by the wrath of monster Hurricane Irma, which decimated several islands of the Leeward Caribbean before raging across the state of Florida in the United States. Irma had the dubious distinction of being the most powerful Atlantic storm in a decade.

As a Category 5 hurricane, Irma slammed into the island of Barbuda - part of the two-island state of Antigua-Barbuda -- with maximum sustained winds of 185 miles per hour. But the massive storm's wide expanse of external bands hit neighboring islands such as St. Martin/St. Maarten and St. Barthelemy in the Netherlands and French Antilles, Anguilla in the British Virgin Islands, Turks and Caicos Islands, and the United States territories of the Virgin Islands and

Puerto Rico with destructive force. The storm's path continued on across the northern coasts of Cuba, across portions of the Bahamas, and then sweeping over the Florida Keys with maximum sustained winds of 130 miles per hour, before covering the rest of the state with dangerous floods and winds.

In the Caribbean, dozens of people were killed but no place suffered worse destruction than Barbuda. According to Prime Minister Gaston Browne of Antigua and Barbuda said Irma had wreaked "absolute devastation" on Barbuda, which was now "barely habitable" with 95 percent of the island's infrastructure completely destroyed.

Up to 90 percent of St. Martin's infrastructure had also been utterly decimated, essentially destroying the French/Dutch territory's tourism industry.

Cuba's north coast, which was home to much of its burgeoning tourism industry, had now suffered a massive setback in the already-struggling Communist country. Particularly hard-hit

Havana, Matanzas, Camagüey and Ciego de Ávila. Ten people were confirmed to have been killed in Cuba alone with authorities noting they had not evacuated to shelters, as instructed to do so.

Across the Leeward Caribbean, island nations and territories were being faced with dozens of deaths widespread damage and destruction to infrastructure, as well as a humanitarian crisis.

Prime Minister Theresa May of the United Kingdom pledged 32 million in British pounds for recovery assistance in the Caribbean. The Dutch monarch King Willem-Alexander, visited Netherlands Antilles affected by Irma, including the Dutch side of St Maarten to show solidarity with the people. Dutch Prime Minister Mark Rutte promised an intensified security presence in affected Dutch territories to ensure order, and noted that security forces had been authorized to function with a "firm hand." French President Emmanuel Macron was criticized for the lateness of his response to St. Martin and St. Barthelemy, but was also expected to make his way to the region to survey the damage and offer assistance for French Caribbean territories' recovery and rebuilding efforts.

Independent Caribbean island nations such as Cuba and Antigua-Barbuda would have a more difficult time on their limited resources to recover from Irma's wrath. In Barbuda more than 1,300 Barbadians were in shelters in Antigua with no suggestion of when they might return home. Assistance was coming from regional neighbors such as Jamaica, St Lucia, and Trinidad and promised assistance while a team from the Caribbean Disaster Emergency Management Agency (CDEMA) was on the ground in Barbuda carrying out an assessment. A Go Fund Me fund had been established to try to rescue animals left to roam free in Barbuda in the aftermath of the storm.

End of the Castro era as Raúl Castro hands over power to Miguel Díaz-Canel

On April 18, 2018, with **Cuban** President Raul Castro set to retire from office, the **Cuban** parliament, controlled by the Communist Party, proposed Vice President Miguel Diaz-Canel as his replacement.

The National Assembly ratified the proposal, and a long period of applause and ovation from members of parliament followed. Diaz-Canel -- a stalwart of the Castro brothers who had to this point ruled Cuba -- was sworn into power as the country's new president on April 19, 2018.

The transition of power from Castro to Diaz-Canel was historic as it brought a close to the Castro regime that has led Cuba since the 1959 revolution that brought Fidel Castro to power.

Immediately indicating that Cuba would be on the path of continuity and not major change, Diaz-Canel in his inaugural address asserted that there was "no room in Cuba for those who strive for the restoration of capitalism."

Diaz-Canel said that his aim was "to ensure the continuity of the **Cuban** revolution at a key historic moment" and added "the revolution continues its course."

In July 2018, that path of continuity was illustrated as President Diaz-Canel named a new cabinet populated by Castro-era political veterans. In fact, most of former President Raul Castro's government remained in place, with the exception of the portfolio for economic reform. The new cabinet was ratified by the National Assembly.

But amidst the seeming climate of continuity, the country also set in motion a path toward constitutional reform. At issue were changes to Cuba's 1976 constitution, which would include some reforms of government, the judiciary,

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and the economy. Of note would be the creation of the post of prime minister; in this way, the president would be the head of state and the prime minister would be the head of government. As well, there would be a presumption of innocence in legal proceedings -- a new element in the judicial system. While the Communist state would remain in tact, the new constitution would recognize the free market and private property as emerging aspects of Cuban life. Finally, it would officially enshrine the principle of gender equality and provide for same sex marriage.

As noted by Homero Acosta, the secretary of the Council of State charged with advancing the constitutional reforms, "We are before a total reform within the framework established by the principles of socialism."

The new charter would have to be ratification via a national referendum later in 2018, and then pending national sanctioning, it would be returned to the National Assembly for final approval.

Editor's Note:

Cuba was the last major Spanish colony to gain independence, following a 50-year struggle begun in 1850. United States intervention during the Spanish-American War in 1898 assisted the Cubans in overthrowing Spanish rule, and the Treaty of Paris established Cuban independence from the United States in 1902.

After independence, Cuba was often ruled by military figures who obtained or remained in power by force. In 1959, Fidel Castro led a rebel army to victory, ousting the United States-backed President Fulgencio Batista from power, confiscating private property, and declaring Cuba to be a socialist state in 1961.

Castro ruled the country for nearly five decades until he stepped down in February 2008 when his younger brother Raul Castro took over as president. The relationship between Cuba and the United States froze in 1959 and by 1960, the United States had imposed a harsh sanctions regime on Cuba that no United State president was interested in changing for decades to follow.

The year 1962 was marked by the Cuban missile crisis and reminded the world that the Cold War was in full force.

In the next three decades, Cuba's economy was characterized by heavy dependence on Soviet assistance, with the Soviet bloc countries providing guaranteed export markets for Cuba's main exports -- sugar and nickel.

With the disappearance of Soviet aid following the collapse of the Soviet Union, government controls on the economy were relaxed in the 1990s, and major structural changes have expanded the role of the markets. Since the mid-1990s, tourism has surpassed sugar as the primary source of foreign exchange, and in recent years Cuba's economic growth has accelerated, owing to new export markets and sources of external finance.

In the late 2000, Venezuela provided Cuba oil on preferential terms; however, in recent years, Venezuela has been beset by its own economic crisis made worse by the slumping price of oil.

In late 2014, United States President Obama announced that his government would seek to normalize ties with Cuba, and by the spring of 2015, the two countries were on a historic journey aimed at ending decades of antipathy and acrimonious relations. During the process of rapprochement, Cuba agreed to release scores of dissidents while the United States removed Cuba from its list of state sponsors of terrorism.

By August 2015, the United States and Cuba formalized their ties as embassies were opened in Washington D.C. and Havana, as the Cuban flag was flying for first time in 50 years at embassy in Washington D.C.; and as Secretary of State Kerry traveled to Cuba to witness the raising of U.S. flag at the embassy in Havana. These landmark moves heralded a historic transformation in Cuba's modern history.

It was to be seen if the process of rapprochement between the United States and Cuba would prevail, given the death of Fidel Castro in 2016, and the incoming hardline Republican administration of Donald Trump in the United States.

Note that 2018 saw the end of Castro leadership in Cuba as Raul Castro stepped down from power, making way for Miguel Diaz-Canel as his replacement.

-- August 2018

Written by Dr. Denise Youngblood Coleman, Editor in Chief, CountryWatch.com. See Bibliography for research sources used in all Country Reviews. Supplementary sources used in this section include: Cuba in Transition, Vol. 10, Proceedings of the 10th Annual Meeting of the Association for the Study of the **Cuban** Economy; the Washington Post; "ITC Releases Report of U.S. Economic Sanctions in Cuba" Human Rights Watch.

Classification

Language: ENGLISH

Publication-Type: Web Publication

Journal Code: 1652

Subject: INTERNATIONAL RELATIONS & NATIONAL SECURITY (76%); BUSINESS NEWS (76%); ECONOMY & ECONOMIC INDICATORS (76%); EMERGING MARKETS (73%); ECONOMIC POLICY (71%); ENERGY SHORTAGES (68%); ISLANDS & REEFS (67%); LIVING CONDITIONS (67%); CURRENCIES (60%)

Industry: TOURISM (89%); LODGING (88%); ENERGY & UTILITIES (73%); RESORTS (69%); HOTELS & MOTELS (68%); ENERGY SHORTAGES (68%); CURRENCIES (60%)

Geographic: CUBA (97%); UNITED STATES (94%); CANADA (79%); CARIBBEAN ISLANDS (79%); RUSSIAN FEDERATION (79%)

Load-Date: September 2, 2019