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The Case for not liberalizing travel to Cuba

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The Obama administration undoubtedly will soon begin a review of Latin American policy and within that process will have to make some decisions about what to do with the thorny Cuba issue. What works and should remain policy, and what has failed and needs to be replaced? What is our national interest and what is achievable? What are the prospects that dialogue and engagement will achieve our objectives? In the case of Cuba, is there any evidence that the Castro brothers are prepared to seriously discuss what we are interested in and to make the kind of changes in the political and economic arena for which most Americans and Cubans yearn? Improving relations with Cuba should not be a goal. That will come about when we see proof the Castros have decided to put Cubans on a democratic path.

We must be careful in this review of Cuba policy not to be impatient, not to change our policy just for change's sake, and keep in the forefront of our discussions what's best for the Cuban people and not just what's best for us. The Cuban people have no voice and are not represented by the regime, which has never allowed a free vote. Every American President in recent years has made the Cuban people's human rights and basic freedoms a cornerstone of our policy, and President Obama, I am sure, will do the same. The question is whether anything we can do will promote greater freedoms in Cuba while the Castro brothers live. Unfortunately, the answer may be: no, given the strength of the security apparatus in Cuba and the Castro's adamant refusal to improve relations in a way that we can accept with dignity and in conformance with our democratic principles. But we must be prepared to accept that realization as we have our policy debates.

And the debate on Cuba has commenced again in earnest. Once again we have begun to hear that more trade and travel with Cuba will bring greater freedom to Cubans and that the more we engage with the Cuban regime, the greater the likelihood democracy will flourish there. Some urge outright abandonment of what remains of the embargo, but most opponents are focusing on ending travel restrictions as the first step.

We typically hear four arguments for liberalizing travel and trade with Cuba. The first assertion is that flooding Cuba with American tourists will instill among Cubans a yearning for democracy. Secondly, tourist spending, it is argued, will help average Cubans by improving their living standards or wages. Third, some argue that our policy of isolating the regime has failed, so we should try something different and they hold the belief that engagement will promote positive change. Finally, libertarians will assert Americans have a Constitutional right to go wherever they choose, including Cuba.

These arguments are dead wrong and fundamentally reflect our inability to understand what it's like to live in a totalitarian society where all aspects of peoples' lives are controlled and where fear of state security is pervasive. As most Americans have never experienced totalitarianism, they make assumptions about what can be achieved in such a state that are not grounded in reality.

Impact of Tourism

Let's examine the four arguments one by one, starting with the "Let's flood them with tourists" proposal. Why won't this work to bring democracy to Cuba? Fundamentally because the Cuban authorities strictly limit and harshly penalize the interaction of ordinary Cubans with foreigners. The Law 80 of 1999 makes it a crime to take publications from foreigners and a 2004 Ministry of Tourism internal memo to hotel workers prohibits them from interacting with foreigners outside the workplace or from accepting gifts. And about the only Cubans tourists will meet are hotel workers.

Almost all tourists to Cuba stay in four or five star hotels. These 103 hotels catering to foreign tourists are located predominantly in isolated areas where ordinary Cubans are denied access. About 67% of the tourist hotels are located in the remote Cays like Cayo Coco or in Varadero. Castro has allocated only 18.6% of his tourist hotel rooms to Havana and vicinity. There are only 5632 rooms for some 10,000 tourists in Havana, a city of 2.1 million plus. That works out to one tourist per 210 Cubans. Tourists are diluted in this sea of ordinary Cubans, and can make no meaningful impact on society even if they wanted to or were permitted access to Cubans.

Even though Raul Castro recently "allowed" Cubans at last to frequent previously off-limit tourist hotels, this is a cosmetic measure designed to convince foreigners that Cuba is liberalizing. In fact, it is not. The regime charges average Cubans the highest rack rate to stay in tourist hotels which are expensive to begin with, and a night's stay would require an average Cuban's salary for a year. So a foreigner will rarely encounter a regular Cuban in his or her hotel.

The vast majority of foreign tourists spend most of their time in all-inclusive hotels where regime-sponsored entertainment is brought in to amuse them. If they leave their isolated enclaves, well guided tours to Potemkin villages where the guides control your experience and retain their jobs by hoeing the regime line if asked inconvenient questions by curious tourists. The Cubans the tourists are permitted to see and question are trained to say the right thing and spontaneously hail Fidel and his regime and joyously sing Guantanamo to show the foreigner how they enjoy life without freedom. Castro has put in place a tourist apartheid system that monopolizes tourism's benefits for the state while minimizing the potentially deleterious impact of rich, free tourists mingling among poor, oppressed Cubans.

There's another problem with the Flood argument. Few Americans at least speak Spanish well enough to hold a conversation on democracy or anything else with the average Cuban, who also rarely speaks English. The fact is that tourists go to Cuba for rum, sun, cigars, song and sex. That is what Cuban government recruiting ads subliminally promise. Tourists don't go to Cuba

to spread democracy. The rare, inquisitive foreign tourist who speaks Spanish sufficiently and who encounters somehow a Cuban to proselytize will notice the attention the conversation attracts from nearby police. The unlucky Cuban will quickly get a visit from the cop and be asked to show ID and explain what the conversation entailed. He will be warned from talking with foreigners in the future. Most likely the Cuban will not be interested in the foreigner's views of politics but will solicit money, toiletries or sex or be asked if he can help get the person or a relative out of the island, perhaps through marriage.

At any rate, most Cubans know well what democracy and freedom are from their relatives abroad, from phone calls with them, smuggled-in literature and surreptitious listening to foreign radio broadcasts and from contact with on-island diplomatic missions like USINT. They don't need to be convinced to love or understand democracy. What they lack is a way to influence regime behavior. The system does not solicit their views or tolerate dissent and harshly punishes the few that stand up for democracy. Their dreams for a better life can only be realized by emigrating or becoming part of the elite, by conforming. Some two million have chosen to flee rather than conform, and have chosen to live under democracy. The vast majority, especially the youth, no longer trust the so-called revolution to improve their lives. In the late 1990s, even before the regime opened up to controlled tourism, some 500,000 families in one month signed up for the "Bombo" lottery at USINT for a chance to leave Cuba.

Tourism and trade have not brought down a totalitarian regime anywhere in history. In Eastern Europe communism collapsed a decade after tourism peaked. No study of Eastern Europe or the USSR alleges that tourism, investment or trade had anything to do with the end of communism. Lech Walesa and Vaclav Havel both have said that tourism and trade played a negligible part in the downfall of communism—Radio Free Europe, Radio Liberty and the steadfast commitment of the Reagan administration played the essential role. It provided a voice at international for a for the victim of communism and supplied dissidents with short-wave radios, supplies, books, printers and funds that they needed in their fight for freedom. Tourism did not bring freedom to Pinochet's Chile, Batista's Cuba, or to Duvalier's Haiti. In South Africa, the tourist ban did play a key role in convincing the apartheid government that its practices were held in world contempt. Today Burma's imprisoned leader of the opposition asks the world not to travel as tourists to her country.

Dictators refuse to let tourism do its alleged subversive work. They are not stupid. If dictators like Castro thought they could not control tourism, they simply wouldn't allow tourists in. And, by the way, the tourists who are allowed in generally need visas, are screened against huge state security data base and are monitored and often videoed while on the island. If they misbehave they are expelled or never allowed in again.

In the last decade alone, over 15 million tourists from democracies have visited the island, including several hundred thousand Americans who snuck in or were given an OFAC license. So, where's the beef, so to speak? Cuba has not democratized or even liberalized, in fact, it's gone backwards. The wily Fidel captured the economic benefits of tourism during the Special Period when he was floundering, controlled it, and now that those billions have helped him recover, he has cracked down and rescinded his liberalizing steps as he always does when things

get better. Now that he has Sugar Daddy Chavez supporting him, he need not risk the regime by allowing economic or political half-step freedoms. The case can be made then that travel has hardened the regime, increased its staying power rather than opened up the island in any way.

Well, critics will argue, Americans are different from other tourists. We are special. This implies that we have some magic democratic pixie dust that will rub off on foreigners and that our bathing suited guests have some unusual burning desire to teach democracy while on vacation. NOT! If tourism had any value as a catalyst for democracy it would be the polyglot Europeans who'd have a better chance at engaging Cubans. Yet there is absolutely no evidence of any liberalizing impact of their stays or imprint of their footprints on the regime's behavior. It would be more accurate to attribute a strengthening of the state security apparatus to their expenditures since the Cuban military owns the hotels they stay in and gets first crack at the cash flow.

Cuban-American Travel

What about Cuban American travel? Wouldn't more of that make an impact? They speak Spanish; have the trust of their relatives, and when they go back as hundreds of thousands have in recent years, they show their relatives what freedom and democracy allow. They may well have been a key factor in spreading a desire for freedom and democracy on the island, but the fact is that nothing has come of this. My experience in Cuba is that returning Cuban Americans are very cautious in what they bring with them and what they do and say while on island. They do not want to jeopardize their chances of returning by carrying anything to dissidents or by engaging in prohibited behavior. Cuba treats Cuban Americans as Cuban citizens. It does not recognize dual citizenship. So a Cuban American who gets into trouble will be denied access to USINT and is on his/her own. So they stay out of trouble.

There may well be a humanitarian argument for more émigré travel, which I support on that ground alone. But I challenge anyone to show how émigré travel has led to anything positive on the freedom front. The simple fact is that the regime is determined to and capable of preventing any tourist flood from undercutting its control. If suddenly ordinary bikini wearing Americans were allowed to flood Cuba, Fidel or Raul would put an end to Cuban American travel, which is potentially more subversive. Those who advocate travel as a liberalizing influence would be better off urging Fidel to allow ordinary Cubans to have the visas he denies them to travel to the US when USINT approves their travel. In the US, ordinary Cubans could mingle with Americans and would have none of the restrictions such interaction faces in Cuba.

A final thought on the let's flood them proposal---even if we wanted to flood Cuba, there would be no room at the inns. When tourists want to go to Cuba, in our winter and during vacations, the island's 30,338 4-5 star hotel rooms are booked solid with docile Canadians and Europeans. And would Fidel oust them to make room for Americans? Would he want again to be dependent on fickle Americans in this critical industry? I doubt it. Castro will never allow development of an unhealthy dependence on US tourism and will limit the numbers allowed in. Even if we liberalize, he won't. It stands to logic that if he thought he couldn't control tourism's effects on society, he wouldn't allow them in. And if any US President really thought US tourism was the

magic key to promoting democracy in Cuba, he would have been all for it. He would have used that tool to trick the naïve Castro into undermining his regime.

Is Tourism Helping the Cubans?

Ok, now to the argument that tourist expenditures will trickle down to the average Cuban Jose, promoting capitalism, free enterprise and better standards of living for Cubans? Well again, 15 million Europeans have spent tens of billions of dollars there, but the benefits go almost exclusively to the state. Poor Jose has seen none of it. That's because all Cuban economic life is controlled by the state for the state, not its citizens. Castro is not interested in seeing Cubans live better. The poorer they all are, and the more equally they live in poverty, scrambling to make ends meet daily, the less likely they will engage in subversive activities. So on purpose, by design, the regime prevents seepage or trickle down from tourist expenditures to enrich some Cubans at the expense of others.

Tourists stay at all-inclusive hotels by and large. No tips are encouraged or permitted. Tips do wind up in the pockets of tourism workers in urban settings, but that does not amount to much. In Cuba, the state owns the hotels, bars, restaurants, clubs, cigar and rum shops and souvenir stands. Artists can sell their art but must pay the state exorbitant fees approaching \$200 a month for permits. They make little money. Tourists can buy very little from average Cubans except sex, which is a main draw in some countries. A recent Johns Hopkins report on child prostitution directly tied its increase in Cuba to increased tourism, and there are no NGOs in Cuba to monitor and express outrage at the practice and the blind eye of the authorities.

Hotel workers get to keep very little of what a tourist spends on his/her stay. Joint venture partners with Cuba must pay the state a fixed amount per hotel worker. The worker gets something like 5% (about \$16 a month) of what the company pays for his/her labor to the state. The hotel workers cannot unionize, complain or fight back at this any more than the average Cuban. Hundreds relish the chance at their jobs given the high unemployment in Cuba.

As mentioned earlier, the Cuban military controls the tourism industry and most productive enterprises in Cuba through firms like Gaviota and Cubanacan. The hard currency runs through their hands for purposes they alone choose. Back in February 2003 Castro closed or severely restricted micro businesses when he learned Chavez would bankroll the regime. The few paladars or semi-private restaurants catering to foreigners that remain open must buy everything from the state and must pay under-the-table bribes to all sorts of inspectors to remain open, unless they are secretly owned by elites. They are limited to seating for 12 people or so. No great trickle down here. The regime will never allow private room and board operators to siphon off their revenues. These few bed and breakfast operators are strictly controlled and many are fronts for sex workers to bring their clients.

Should the U.S. Try a Different Policy?

The third argument for a change in travel policy reflects exasperation at the failure of any of our policies to induce Castro, the world's most successful and enduring tyrant, to morph into a democrat. So the cry rings out—"let's just try something different!" This is indicative as a

people and culture for fast results and reflects our belief that we are a special people. If we try it, it will work because somehow we are different from all those other democrats around the world. We know better.

The fact is that it takes two to tango, and Fidel and Raul have made it crystal clear that they want and need us as an enemy. They have all the friends they need. Their profound enmity towards the US is genuine, calculated and will never end regardless of what we do or say. As Fidel told companion Celia Sanchez before taking power, “When this war is over, I’ll start a longer and bigger war of my own, the war I’m going to fight against them. I realize that will be my true destiny.” It’s clear he always intended to have an adversarial relationship with the US. He said “a revolution that does not have an enemy in front of it runs the risk of falling asleep.”

Fidel and Raul have had many chances to engage with us. USINT is there and available if they want to talk. But they refuse to engage with us or let us dialogue on any topic with anyone in the regime. They hinder contacts with ordinary Cubans and send them to jail for long sentences on trumped-up charges. So it’s not a lack of channels of communication that’s a problem. They simply don’t want to talk, period.

What would be “new” policy for us has already been tried and is policy in just about every country in the world. And there has been no positive impact on human or other fundamental rights in Cuba as a result. Everyone but us talks, engages, invests, travels and trades freely with the regime, giving it the wherewithal to survive with nothing in return except profits for their companies and pleasure for their tourists. The United States allows hundreds of thousands of Cuban Americans to take goods and cash into Cuba. We sell Cuba a good percentage of its food and allow them to buy medicines if they choose (they don’t). Again, what impact has this had on the regime? Have they released political prisoners, allowed free elections, given labor rights, allowed families to start businesses, Cubans the right to travel freely and live where they want? No. Yet we focus on our right to travel to Cuba. How many of those who advocate this have spoken ever about Cubans rights to travel, trade, invest, prosper. None.

What Should be Done?

Lifting the travel ban now will amount to giving away future leverage for nothing in return. We should hold this in reserve until the demise of the brothers. An end to the travel ban should be used as leverage, as a carrot, in support of those in a future transitional regime who will have a voice in whether Cuba goes towards more or less freedoms. The military owners of hotels will eventually want to privatize those hotels in their own name. They will recognize that a violent outcome of a post-Castro government will end tourism. A Tiananmen Square scenario would be disastrous for their interests. They may end up on the side of transition rather than succession someday and the reward of a stream of US tourists could well prove decisive.

So, sorry to say, nobodies’ policies have been able to bring democracy, prosperity or hope to the oppressed Cuban people. And changing ours now to allow unlimited tourism won’t have any positive impact except to discourage the opposition on the island and undermine the small

Caribbean democracies whose economies depend almost entirely on US tourism and would be priced out of business by operators in Cuba with big labor and wage advantages.

I think we need to focus more of our policy, think on how to support the Cuban people and its peaceful, democratic and courageous opposition. What more can we do to help them given the obstacles? How can we prepare them and civil society to play a role once a transition is underway? We should discuss how to help USINT support dissidents. We should insist on reciprocity between USINT and CUBINT. The playing field is not level, and the Cubans can mingle with Americans and operate largely unfettered while our folks are harassed and hindered in Cuba. Our people cannot participate in the battle of ideas, yet Cuban's can in the US.

Let's think less of how our corporations can make money off of sales to Cuba (most of which are resold in dollar stores to support the regime or go to the tourism sector) and less about our alleged rights as Americans to go there no matter what to pursue pleasure and adventure. Regarding those so-called rights of travel, the Supreme Court has ruled that Americans do not have a Constitutional right to go where they want if the government has a policy reason not to allow that travel.

Before we normalize relations with Cuba, the regime must engage in dialogue with its own citizens. We can't normalize with a totalitarian regime or cast aside our longstanding focus on human rights in Cuba in a quest to "do something different" or in our haste to end the Cuban problem as a foreign policy issue. As we debate what our future Cuba policy should be, let's not cease our support for dissidents who want to have a say in what's best for the Cuban people. Many of those engage in our policy debate have no interest whatsoever in human rights in Cuba and have done or said nothing to advance those interests. They would willingly sacrifice Cubans rights for our interests, private or corporate.

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Note: Ambassador Huddleston did not prepare written remarks for the presentation. Ambassador Rocha's remarks are off –record.