

# Cuba embargo is counterproductive

*December 15, 2003, Minneapolis-St.Paul Business Journal  
By Cynthia Thomas*

Across the United States, there is increasing debate over the most effective way to move Cuba, a communist country, toward embracing basic freedoms we cherish. With China, Russia and Vietnam, economic and political engagement by U.S. citizens has led to positive results. President Bush has publicly acknowledged that trade is a lever for democratic reform in communist countries such as China.

In contrast, our isolationist approach with Cuba, termed an embargo, has been on autopilot for over four decades, with nothing positive to show for its duration through eight U.S. presidents.

Recognizing the failures of the Cuba embargo, U.S. Senator Norm Coleman (R-MN) called on the United States to reopen trade and travel with Cuba during his 2002 political campaign. One year later, Senator Coleman reversed his position, citing that this was not the right time to engage Cuba. Senator Coleman pointed to the March 2003 arrests of about 75 Cuban citizens by their government as justifying his reversal.

The warmth of the average Cuban you meet while walking the streets or visiting a church touches virtually everyone traveling to Cuba. It is not a surprise that the families of those arrested in March touched the heart of Senator Coleman.

Born during the Cold War era, the 43-year-old U.S. embargo against Cuba was designed to address a very different world. It was suppose to transform Cuba through isolation, end Fidel Castro's control over Cuba, and establish basic civil and human rights for Cuban citizens. The outdated embargo has failed to achieve any of these goals.

The U.S. embargo has done more to isolate the United States than Cuba. In fact, the international community does not even recognize the U.S. embargo. For example, foreign companies are actively investing in Cuba. Cuba has active trading relations with about 700 companies from 60 countries representing about

\$5 billion in sales. Canada is Cuba's second largest investor, with Spain holding the largest position. The U.S. unilateral embargo has failed to achieve its object of isolating Cuba.

Second, the U.S. embargo has failed to end Fidel Castro's control in Cuba. In fact, the embargo has actually kept Fidel in power by giving him a scapegoat for all of his failed policies. You only need to travel to Cuba to realize that Cubans regularly blame the U.S. embargo rather than the failures of communism for their economic hardships.

Third, the majority of Cuban dissidents (even some dissidents currently imprisoned), including internationally-recognized Oswaldo Paya (leading a peaceful democracy movement within Cuba), and Elizardo Sanchez (president of the Independent Cuban Commission on Human Rights and National Reconciliation in Havana) have called for an end to the embargo.

Amnesty International and Human Rights Watch have recently added their voices to those calling for the end of the U.S. embargo. Both organizations have pointed out that the punitive embargo creates indiscriminate hardships on the Cuban people and impedes democratic change.

While having no desired impact on Cuba, our embargo is having significant, negative consequences within the United States. The embargo is costing U.S. businesses at least \$2 billion a year in exports to Cuba. Lifting the Cuba travel restriction could eventually expand annual economic output in the United States by at least \$1.2 billion, creating between 17,000 and 23,000 new U.S. jobs.

Instead of clinging to failed policies of the past, Senator Coleman and Congress need to move toward a forward-looking policy of engagement with Cuba, beginning with lifting the travel restrictions.

The freedom to travel is critically linked with our freedoms of assembly, association and speech. Former Supreme Court Justice William Douglas said "freedom of movement is the very essence of our free society, setting us apart...[I]t often makes all other rights meaningful." Travel allows us to explore, hear new ideas, and enable other cultures to understand who we are as a country.

Average Americans are this country's strongest ambassadors.

It is time for Congress to admit that its Cuba embargo and the travel restrictions on U.S. citizens are counterproductive. Congress needs to immediately pass the appropriate legislation and bring the travel restrictions to an end, replacing an isolation policy with a policy of engagement.

If we truly want freedom to spread, then we need it at home first.

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