

The Politics of the U.S. Trade Embargo of Cuba, 1959-1977

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Abstract: This article argues that the economic sanctions against Cuba do not serve US interests and thus should be discontinued. Both Presidents Eisenhower and Kennedy viewed Castro as a significant communist threat to the US. They imposed strict economic sanctions against his regime, hoping that Cuba's ties with the USSR would weaken and that the Castro regime would eventually collapse under economic strain. To the vexation of US officials, the opposite occurred as Cuba was pushed directly into the USSR's political and economic orbit, as the Soviets came to Cuba's aid to soften the impact of the sanctions. Moreover, the economic sanctions strengthened the resolve of the Cuban people to stand up to America, their imperialist aggressor. While attempts were made in the mid 1970's to lift the embargo, US officials felt that doing so would be too apparent of a mea culpa and thus would harm the US's image as an avid champion of democracy and capitalism. Although lifting the embargo would symbolize the end of US hegemony in the Western hemisphere, America has much to gain from doing so.

Techniques of economic reward and punishment have played a key role in the politics of Cuban-American relations since the early part of the twentieth century.¹ Once Cuba was separated from Spanish colonial rule, the interests of the United States gradually developed into a "special relationship" where Cuban political and economic life were tied very closely to the American system. This close relationship was a partial contributor to the Castro revolution that began in 1959 with the overthrow of Fulgencio Batista. The closest links were clearly in the areas of trade and investment. As Blasier points out, prior to the Cuban Revolution:

The United States brought about two-thirds of Cuba's exports and paid, under the quota system, large premiums, sometimes approaching nearly twice the world-market price for Cuban sugar. In exchange, Cuba offered the United States tariff preferences, which was only one of several reasons why the United States sold Cuba nearly 70 percent of its imports. United States interests controlled a declining, but still large, percentage (about 40 percent) of raw sugar production, 90 percent of telephone and electric services, and 50 percent of public service railroads. In addition, U.S. banks had about 25 percent of all bank deposits in the nation.²

Thus, the sweet sugar quota and the deeply entrenched economic interests of the United States set the stage for the instruments of foreign policy that would be employed to respond to Castro's revolution as it began to take shape after 1959. Although certainly other instruments (unilateral and multilateral) of foreign policy were devised and implemented to strangle the Cuban economy

¹ For an excellent treatment of the economic instruments of foreign policy, see K.J. Holsti, *International Politics: A Framework for Analysis* (Englewood Cliffs, NJ.: Prentice-Hall, 1967), pp. 284-292.

² Cole Blasier, "The Elimination of United States Influence," *Revolutionary Change in Cuba* ed. Carmelo Mesa-Lago (Pittsburgh: University of Pittsburgh Press, 1971), p. 54.

and thereby discredit the Cuban Revolution, the trade embargo formed the core of retaliatory action toward Cuba from 1960 to the present day. The purpose of this paper will be to examine the rationale and effectiveness of a policy of economic coercion that has been in operation for almost twenty years.

The length of time that the United States has sought to discredit the Castro regime and the ineffectiveness of the policy of economic denial would seem to point to underlying motives that go beyond the mere threat to billions of dollars of U.S. private investment. Nevertheless, six American presidents have treated Castro's Revolution with the same suspicion, ideological resentment, and fear even though the politics of hostility between Cuba and the United States has been toned down considerably. Even the American press has more recently shown a more favorable image of Fidel Castro and the Cuban Revolution.³ The underlying hypothesis of this paper is that American foreign policy objectives in dealing with Fidel Castro were essentially political and not economic. That is, the economic instruments of foreign policy designed to choke the Cuban economy were intended to meet specific political-security objectives rather than strictly economic motives. Thus, the Cuban trade embargo was designed and implemented by the United States to weaken the Castro regime, contain the spread of Castroism, and loosen the ties with the Soviet Union.⁴

Motivations Underlying the Implementation of Economic Sanctions

Eisenhower: From "Watchful Waiting" to Retaliation

One of the mysteries of Cuban-American relations shortly after Castro came to power is the assumption that severe economic sanctions would bring about the downfall of Castro and the end to the Cuban Revolution. The discussions within the foreign policy elite clearly reveal the underlying assumption that once the United States stopped buying Cuban sugar, the Cuban economy would collapse, the Russian would not take up the slack, and the Caribbean would quickly return to the hegemonic fold of the United States.

Between January 1959 and March of 1960, the Cuban policy of the United States was clearly one of forbearance to the changes taking place within Cuba and Fidel Castro's attacks on the United States (see Figure 1). As Slater points out⁵:

Although relations between the Eisenhower administration and Castro were bad to begin with and became continually worse throughout 1959, the administration was unwilling to take the sort of drastic action that would have been necessary to overthrow Castro—action that was demanded in an increasingly strident manner in the United States and by a number of Latin American governments.... There is even evidence that the United States sought to gain Castro's friendship by offering him substantial economic assistance.

³ John C. Pollock and Eileen M. Cohen, "Political Reporting on Revolution: Cuba in Cross-National Perspective," June 1976 (mimeo).

⁴ Lynn Darrell Bender, *The Politics of Hostility: Castro's Revolution and United States Policy* (Hato Rey, Puerto Rico: Inter-American University Press, 1975), p. 35.

⁵ Jerome Slater, *The OAS and the United States Foreign Policy* (Columbus, Ohio: Ohio State University Press, 1967), pp. 136-137.

The turning point in the policy of forbearance or “watchful waiting” occurred in February 1960 when the Russians and Cubans signed a trade pact in which Soviet oil would be exchanged for large amounts of Cuban sugar.

This key economic exchange and ideological linkage set in motion the nature of the U.S. response. In Eisenhower’s words, “The possibility that Cuba’s government might definitely become a Communist satellite, though still discounted by most of my advisors, was disturbing. I remarked that if the Soviet Union had the temerity to make a mutual security treaty with Cuba, we would have a situation that the United States could not tolerate.”⁶

Eisenhower’s motives for retaliation centered on Castro’s ideology and his possible friendship with the Soviet Union: was he or wasn’t he a Communist? When the American Society of Newspaper Editors invited Castro to come to Washington to speak at the National Press Club on April 17, 1959, Eisenhower refused to see him on grounds of Castro’s policies and his leftist ideology. For example, President Eisenhower notes in his memoirs that:

Having personally become highly suspicious that Castro was a Communist and deeply disgusted at his murderous persecution of his former opponents, I inquired whether we could not refuse him a visa. Advised that under the circumstances this would be unwise, I nevertheless refused to see him.⁷

The task of talking to Castro was given to Vice-President Richard M. Nixon who reached the conclusion, after his three-hour talk with Castro, that there was little doubt as to what should be done. According to Nixon, “I was convinced that Castro was either incredibly naïve about Communism or under Communist discipline and that we would have to treat him and deal with him accordingly—under no further illusions about ‘fiery rebels’ in the ‘tradition of Bolivar.’”⁸ It was almost one year later, however, before Eisenhower decided to act by ordering the Central Intelligence Agency to begin its training of Cuban exiles in Guatemala for an eventual invasion of Cuba.⁹ Vice-President Nixon’s position had finally prevailed although Eisenhower never revealed his specific motives for initiating the CIA plan during the spring of 1960. In late 1960, during the presidential contest between Nixon and Kennedy, Nixon expressed his lack of forbearance concerning the developments in Cuba: “I said the time for patience was over, that we must move vigorously—if possible, in full association with our sister American republics—to eradicate this ‘cancer’ in our own hemisphere and to prevent further Soviet penetration.”¹⁰

⁶ Dwight D. Eisenhower, *Waging Peace, 1956-1961* (New York: Doubleday, 1965), p. 534.

⁷ *Idib.*, p. 532.

⁸ Richard M. Nixon, *Six Crises* (New York: Doubleday, 1962), p. 352.

⁹ Eisenhower, *op. cit.*, p. 533.

¹⁰ Nixon, *op. cit.*, p. 352.

**Figure 1. The Dynamics of Economic and Political Hostility:
U.S.-Cuban Relations, 1959-1962**

Cuban Policy Decision	U.S. Counter	Cuban Retaliation
Castro visits the U.S. and meets with Vice-Pres. Nixon (April, 1959)	Nixon memo of visit says that Castro is either "incredibly naive about Communism or under Communist discipline" (April, 1959)	
Agrarian Reform Law Promulgated (May, 1959)	State Department protests seizure of U.S. Property without compensation (May, 1959)	
Trade Agreement with U.S.S.R. (Feb., 1960)		
Castro blames U.S. for explosion of cargo vessel <i>La Coubre</i> in Havana harbor (March, 1960)	Castro's accusations termed "irresponsible" by State Dept. Gen. Eisenhower authorizes training of Cuban exile force in Guatemala (March, 1960)	
First shipment of Soviet crude oil arrives for refining in American-owned companies (May, 1960)	U.S. Government pressures American-owned oil companies to refuse to refine the "Red" petroleum (May, 1960)	Castro seizes and nationalizes American-owned oil companies (May, 1960)
	Sugar quota is suspended for remainder of year (July, 1960)	American sugar mills seized and nationalized (Aug., 1960); Castro nationalizes remainder of U.C.-owned properties (October, 1960)
	Meeting of OAS in San José, Costa Rica condemns intervention by extracontinental force as endangering American solidarity (Aug. 1960)	Cuba walks out of OAS meetings (Aug., 1960)
	U.S. embargo of exports to Cuba (October, 1960)	
Castro requests that U.S. Embassy staff be reduced to 11 members claiming that spies exist (Jan. 1961)	Eisenhower severs diplomatic relations saying he has had enough (Jan. 1961)	Raul Roa delivers charges against U.S. before UN Security Council of economic aggression and imminent military attack (Jan. 1961)
Castro announces his conversion to Marxism-Leninism in speech (Dec., 1961)	Bay of Pigs invasion (April, 1961) Castro is excluded from OAS (Jan., 1962)	Erection of Soviet missiles in Cuba (Summer, 1962)
	Embargo imposed by U.S. & OAS (Feb., March, 1962)	Castro's <i>Second Declaration of Havana</i> coins phrase "The duty of every revolutionary is to make revolution."

During June of 1960 the House Agricultural Committee took up the highly volatile issue of the expiring Sugar Act of 1948. The debates that ensued reveal that the Cuban policy of the United States was clearly moving into a new stage of retaliation and hostility toward the Castro government. The Cuban-Soviet trade pact, the refusal of U.S. companies to refine the “Red” oil from the Soviet Union, and the confiscation of U.S. property, all prompted the members of the Committee to support some form of economic strangulation of Cuba. Congressman Rivers: “Think of what is happening—Castro’s Communism—both must be destroyed. . . . Let us take a little of the Rivers’ venom and stiffen up their backbone. They need to know what the people of this nation think. The policy-makers are out of step with the people of America. American feeling has nobody to tell Castro how we feel. God save America.”¹¹ Congressman Rogers argued that it was past time to do something about the deteriorating Cuban situation. According to Rogers,

the national interest dictates that the Cuban quota should be cut and I hope that the President will exercise the authority which he requested and which is provided in this bill. If we are leaders of the free world, we cannot sit idly by exercising patience and forbearance in the face of threats made by a Communist puppet. Castro has delivered the challenge—I say, let us call his bluff.¹²

Congressman Haley’s attacks centered on the assumption that Castro could be destroyed by cutting off his sugar purchases.

I am glad that the Congress has finally decided to do something . . . about Fidel Castro’s Cuba. I said a few weeks ago that I thought the time had come to deal with Castro by hitting him where it hurts: In the pocketbook. The President’s proposal that he control sugar quotas would open the door to doing that.¹³

And Congressman McDowell reiterated the assumption that the Cuban economy would not withstand a sharp reduction in the favorable quota:

Without the continuing purchase of the 3 million tons which is taken up by the American market, the Cuban economy will flounder.¹⁴

Congressman Dixon urged that the President be given the authority to protect the United States against “a communist menace at our very doorstep.”¹⁵

Kennedy: Ideological Resentment and Retaliation

John F. Kennedy’s position vis-à-vis Cuba began to take shape during the presidential campaign of 1960. The Key question came down to whether Castro was a Communist and the ideological-security threat envisioned by a Cuban-Soviet alliance. At first, Castro clearly aligned Cuba with the West in the Cold War where democratic reforms and respect for foreign

¹¹ U.S. Congress, House, *Congressional Record*, 86th Cong., 2nd session, 1960, Part 11, p. 15228

¹² *Ibid.*, p. 15230.

¹³ *Ibid.*

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 15232

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 15243

investment would be insured.¹⁶ At the time, however, it was by no means easy to ascertain the nature and direction of the Cuban Revolution although Castro became increasingly annoyed at the overriding ideological resentment building up in the United States. As Thomas points out,

. . . the constant and obsessive concern of North American, public and private, with the single question of Communism irritated Castro and indeed others in his entourage: it was as if the U.S. did not care what Cuba was, provided that it was not Communist.¹⁷

Kennedy's approach to Castro was to essentially carry out the policies that had evolved during the end of the Eisenhower administration. His concern and motives were clearly more political than economic when he declared at a press conference in late January 1961 that:

What we are . . . concerned about is when these movements [Cuban Revolution] are seized by external forces and directed not to the improving of the welfare of the people involved, but toward imposing an ideology which is alien to this hemisphere.¹⁸

The same argument was reiterated after the Bay of Pigs fiasco when President Kennedy again spoke of the "menace of external Communist intervention and domination in Cuba." In speaking of the need to preserve freedom, Kennedy stated that:

The American people are not complacent about Iron Curtain tanks and planes less than ninety miles from our shores. But a nation of Cuba's size is less a threat to our survival than it is a base for subverting the survival of other free nations throughout the hemisphere.¹⁹

Thus we see how the ideological theme of anti-communism is intertwined with the policy of economic strangulation of Cuba. What Castro had done, according to Lester Langley, to make his regime so reprehensible was "his open denial of the Jacksonian credos of democracy, capitalism, and progress."²⁰ By 1964, the United States had convinced the Organization of American States to end trade relations and diplomatic contacts with Cuba.²¹ Nevertheless, the action taken by the O.A.S. was more a symbolic form of cooperation with the United States than an effective way of weakening the Cuban Revolution economically.²²

The retaliatory policies of the Eisenhower-Kennedy years including the elimination of the sugar quota reveal that the primary motive was political rather than economic. As Professor Blasier points out;

. . . perhaps the decisive motivation was not primarily that Castro threatened U.S. private interests and the traditional Cuban political structure, but that Castro was becoming a

¹⁶ Hugh Thomas, *Cuba: The Pursuit of Freedom* (New York: Harper and Row, 1971), p. 1211.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*

¹⁸ John W. Gardner, ed. *To Turn the Tide* (New York: Harper and Row, 1962), p. 42.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, pp. 45-46

²⁰ Lester D. Langley, *The Cuban Policy of the United States* (New York: Wiley, 1986), p. 187.

²¹ Anna P. Schreiber, "Economic Coercion as an Instrument of Foreign Policy: U.S. Economic Measures Against Cuba and the Dominican Republic" *World Politics* (25 April, 1973), p. 389.

²² *Ibid.*

channel for the introduction of Soviet political and military influence into the Western Hemisphere.²³

The hostility generated by the early containment policy to stop Castro was eventually to become a self-perpetuating set of responses by both countries, thus making the return to a policy of “peaceful coexistence” almost impossible.

Why Didn't the Economic Sanctions Work Against the Castro Regime?

The irony of the policy of economic denial against the Cuban economy was that no one seemed to question its consequences and the simple fact that the trade embargo produced the exact circumstances that it was supposed to eliminate. For example, as Blasier points out, “the cut in the sugar quota literally put Castro at the Communists’ mercy, and logically led to the radicalization of the Cuban Revolution. . . .”²⁴ He goes on to point out that:

What is puzzling, and disturbing, is that there is little or no evidence that leaders in the Department of State or in the Congress seemed to have been aware that their own actions would lead precisely to the circumstances they claimed they were trying to avoid.²⁵

How do we explain this shortsightedness and the fact that the economic sanctions against Cuba did not bring about their intended effects? What went wrong with the major assumptions built into U.S. policy of containment of Cuba?

As Professor Bender points out, the policy of containing Cuba had four major components or goals: 1) weaken the Castro regime politically, 2) discredit the Cuban economic model, 3) contain the spread of Castroism, and 4) weaken the ties with the Soviet Union.²⁶ The attempt to strangle the Cuban economy with a trade embargo strengthened rather than weakened the Castro regime. The economic blockade had a positive psychological effect on the Cuban people, mobilizing their energies to withstand the hardships that the embargo imposed on Cuba. The famous *New York Times* journalist who covered Cuba during the early years of the Revolution, Herbert Matthews, argues that “The psychological effect of economic warfare on a proud and nationalistic people is to draw them together against the power or powers seeking to harm them.”²⁷ And Professor Horowitz points out that “The simple psychological fact that people under external pressure may react by greater effort, by greater sacrifice, apparently does not penetrate the Latin American desks in the State Department.”²⁸ However, Professor Horowitz neglects to point out that there were dissenting voices: former Ambassador Philip Bonsal maintained that the United States should never have reversed its pledge of nonintervention in the internal politics of Cuba.²⁹ The trade embargo served to reaffirm the legacies of American intervention in Cuban affairs; in the minds of the Cuban leaders, the trade embargo was a

²³ Blasier, *op. cit.*, p. 68.

²⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 76.

²⁵ *Ibid.*

²⁶ Bender, *op. cit.*, p. 35.

²⁷ Herbert L. Matthews, *Fidel Castro* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1969), p. 238.

²⁸ Irving Louis Horowitz, “United States-Cuban Relations” *Transaction* (April, 1969), p. 43.

²⁹ Philip W. Bonsal, “Cuba, Castro and the United States” *Foreign Affairs* 45 (January, 1967), p. 271.

“Godsend” because it helped to keep alive in Cuba the traditional image of America as an imperialist aggressor.³⁰

The efforts to discredit the Cuban economic model were successful in that the trade embargo generated severe strain in the early years of the Cuban Revolution. Castro has clearly acknowledged the strains that the embargo created in the first four years of the Revolution. As Mankiewicz and Jones illustrate in their recent interview with Castro, the costs of sea transportation increased because trade was no longer just 90 miles away, access to American technology and patents was cut off, loans could not be obtained, and trade with other countries was curtailed because many countries feared U.S. retaliation.³¹

Despite the problems of poor planning, bureaucratic ineptitude, and the failure of moral incentives, the Cuban economic model has survived with the assistance of large doses of Soviet aid and trade with both Communist and non-communist nations. For example, Cuba now trades with most of the countries of Latin America, Europe, Japan, Canada, in addition to the Soviet bloc trading partners.³² In 1974, exports to non-communist countries were over \$500 million and imports exceeded \$400 million.³³

The element of the containment policy associated with the “export of Revolution” and the containment of Castroism was based on the notion that the Cuban Revolution was exportable and would soon spread to the rest of Latin America. Again, the United States expected the worst from the Cuban Revolution, failing to recognize that Cuba possessed a different set of conditions which brought about the rise of Fidel Castro. One can argue that Castroism was successfully contained but the failure of the Revolution to spread had more to do with the “nonreceptivity of the Latin masses” than the efforts to strangle the Castro forces by trade embargoes and ideological ostracism.³⁴ And Che Guevara’s efforts to bring Revolution to Bolivia only served to highlight the inapplicability of the Cuban model to other parts of Latin America.³⁵

Perhaps the most unsound assumption of the policy of Cuban containment was the objective designed to weaken ties with the Soviet Union and thereby drive the Russians out of the U.S. “sphere of influence.” The gradual reduction of the U.S. sugar quota and the efforts to “hit Castro in the pocketbook” by choking the economy only served to push Cuba into the economic and political orbit of the Soviet Union. What is interesting to note in the Russian acceptance of Cuban trade is that without the recent internal changes in the Soviet Union beginning in 1955 the Cubans would indeed have had no where to turn. But Nikita Khrushchev replaced Stalin and his foreign policy quickly expanded the “sphere of influence” of the Soviet Union. Moreover, the ability to export a surplus of oil did not materialize until after 1958. Thus, the coincidence of the dynamics of change in the Soviet Union served to open doors for the Cuban-Soviet link which could not have happened if Castro had been successful when he

³⁰ Philip W. Bonsal, *Cuba, Castro and the United States* (Pittsburgh: University of Pittsburgh Press, 1971), p. 166.

³¹ Frank Mankiewicz and Kirby Jones, *With Fidel: A Portrait of Castro and Cuba* (New York: Ballantine Books, 1975), pp. 114-116.

³² U.S. Congress, House, Committee on International Relations, *U.S. Trade Embargo of Cuba*, 94th Cong., 1st Session, (Washington, D.C.: U.S. Government Printing Office, 1976), p. 74.

³³ *Ibid.*

³⁴ Edward J. Williams, *The Political Themes of Inter-American Relations* (Belmont, Calif.: Wadsworth, 1971), p. 60.

³⁵ Bender argues that, “If ‘Che’ Guevara’s heroic Bolivian folly in 1967 proved anything, it was certainly that the ‘objective’ conditions for revolution in Latin America are simply not yet present.” Bender, *op. cit.*, p. 36.

stormed the Moncada Army Barracks in 1953.³⁶ Perhaps a different American president and a higher tolerance for foreign ideologies would have seen a different set of responses to the Cuban Revolution between 1959-1962.

The continuation of the trade embargo despite its ineffectiveness reflects the often-contradictory nature of United States policy towards Latin America. With the case of Cuba we see a policy of “pan-Americanism” occurring simultaneously with a thrust of big-stick interventionism in the name of anti-communism. According to Williams, “This dualism. . . has made a vacillating, unpredictable mess of U.S. policy.”³⁷ And while we continue to choke the Cuban economy with a trade embargo, at the same time we continue to trade with other communist countries such as the Soviet Union and China. When the U.S. continues trading with Iran and South Korea despite serious violations of human rights and then uses the human rights issue as a reason for continuing the embargo against Cuba, the befuddling dualism in our foreign policy is highlighted.

The trade embargo against Cuba has been perpetuated, despite its anachronistic assumptions and effects, because of the continued belief in what Abraham Lowenthal calls the “hegemonic presumption.”³⁸ This concept, a carryover from “White Man’s Burden” and the Monroe Doctrine, refers to the belief that the Western Hemisphere is part of the U.S. sphere of influence. If the trade embargo were suddenly lifted, it would be an admittance to policy makers in the United States that influence and hegemony has waned.³⁹

Reducing the Politics of Hostility: Efforts to Revive the United States-Cuban Trade Relationship

Over the past five years there have been efforts both in Cuba and the United States to work toward a removal of the trade embargo. When asked about the recent improvement in relations between the United States and Cuba, Fidel Castro placed the economic blockade (Castro’s term for the trade embargo) at the forefront of obstacles to a rapprochement between the two countries:

I think that any step...must first be taken by the United States. Because the major, fundamental problem is the economic blockade. It was a decision taken by the United States, which it has maintained, for the purpose of preventing the economic development in Cuba and choking the Revolution. To tell you the truth, it has been a hard struggle, the fight against the blockade, but we have survived. The Revolution was not asphyxiated, ... and we believe that nothing can prevent our country from maintaining this level of development in future years.⁴⁰

Beginning in 1973, efforts have been taken by both the United States and Cuba to revive the United States-Cuban trade relationship while at the same time returning to a more harmonious

³⁶ In 1953, Castro made a vain attempt to assault the Moncada Army Barracks to spark an uprising against the Cuban dictator, Fulgencio Batista. See Edward Gonzalez, *Cuba Under Castro: The Limits of Charisma* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1974), pp. 79-110.

³⁷ Williams, *op. cit.*, p. 56.

³⁸ Abraham F. Lowenthal, “The United States and Latin America: Ending the Hegemonic Presumption” *Foreign Affairs* 55 (1976), pp. 199-213.

³⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 206.

⁴⁰ Mankiewicz and Jones, *op. cit.*, p. 113.

pattern of political relationships (see Figure 2). Perhaps the major turning point was the “memorandum of understanding” to curb hijacking of ships and aircraft between the two nations signed in February of 1973. The success of this initiative was followed by a visit to Havana by Senators Javits, Pell, and McGovern. After his visit to Havana, Senator McGovern reported that Castro “had made it clear that he would be willing to begin the thaw if the United States took the first step by removing its embargo on the shipment of food and drugs to Cuba.”⁴¹

The change in attitude among members of the U.S. Congress is rooted in major foreign policy changes with other Communist foes such as the Soviet Union and China initiated during the Nixon Administration. The growing feeling among members of the U.S. Congress is that to maintain a cold war relationship with Cuba while “warming up” through détente with the Soviet Union and China is foolish and detrimental to American foreign policy.

The first serious effort to remove the anachronistic policy of trade restrictions with Cuba occurred in May, 1975 when the Bingham Resolution (H.R. 6382) was introduced to repeal various statutes on the trade restrictions. The Bingham Resolution would have the effect of “withdrawing specific Congressional authority under...the Foreign Assistance Act of 1961 and various executive regulations for a complete and total embargo of Cuba.”⁴² This piece of legislation was quickly countered by anti-Cuban members of Congress who opposed a relaxation of trade restrictions on Cuba on essentially ideological grounds. For example, two Florida Congressmen, Clause Pepper and Bill Chapper, Jr., sponsored a bill to continue the trade embargo against Cuba.

The debates that ensued were surprisingly similar to those sparked by the initial hostility to Castro and the Cuban Revolution. That is, the motivations for altering the Cuban policy of the United States focused heavily on political rationale rather than the costs and benefits of the present policy of economic strangulation. In speaking against any sort of détente with Cuba, Dr. Jorge Mas Canosa, a prominent Cuban-American, said that to resume trade with Cuba would be to legitimize the Cuban confiscation of American property thereby encouraging other countries to respond in the same manner. While addressing the joint hearings of the House International Relations Sub-committee on International Trade and the Sub-committee of International Organizations, Dr. Mas set forth three basic reasons why the United States should not resume trade and diplomatic relations with Cuba:

1. It will be a violation of treaties and resolutions approved by the Organization of American States as well as of Public Law 87-733 of 1962.⁴³

2. It will be a decisive blow to the cause of Democracy in the Western Hemisphere, as United States surrenders to the Castro regime the traditional principles on which this nation was founded.

⁴¹ U.S. Congress, House, *Congressional Record*, 21, 94th Cong. 1st session, June 20, 1975, p. H5911.

⁴² *Ibid.*

⁴³ “The OAS in January 1962 adopted a series of resolutions expelling Cuba from the Organization because of its Marxist-Leninist government. In July, 1964, it adopted resolution condemning Cuba for ‘acts of aggression’ against Venezuela and directing OAS members to suspend diplomatic and trade relations except for humanitarian shipments of medicine and food.” (from *Congressional Quarterly*, May 17, 1975, p. 1015) Public Law 87-733, approved on October 3, 1962 by the U.S. Congress, stated that the “United States was determined to prevent ‘by whatever means necessary, including the use of arms,’ Cuban aggression and its buildup of a military force that would endanger the security of the United States.” (from *Congressional Quarterly*, May 17, 1975, p. 1015).

Figure 2. Towards a New Relationship: From Containment to Limited Normalization, 1973-1977

Date	United States Action	Cuban Response
Feb., 1973	Cuba and the U.S. sign a five-year "memorandum of understanding" to curb hijacking of ships & aircraft between the two nations (a bilateral decision)	Cuban adherence to the agreement contributes to a considerable reduction in the number of airline hijackings to Cuba.
April, 1974	Javits-Pell mission to Havana pursuant to their amendment calling for a review of U.S. policy toward Cuba. Javits-Pell Amendment passes in Senate.	Castro states that the trade "blockade" (embargo) must be lifted before normalization negotiations can begin.
Aug., 1974		
May, 1975	Bingham Resolution (H.R. 6382) introduced in House to lift the trade embargo.	Castro indicates that he would consider bilateral talks if the U.S. partially lifts the embargo allowing food and medicine.
May, 1975	McGovern visit to Cuba indicates that "a very significant change" in Cuba's position has taken place.	
May, 1975	Ford Administration states that no action will be taken on the embargo of Cuba until OAS sanctions are lifted.	
July, 1975	OAS lifts economic and political sanctions imposed in 1964 making way for further U.S.-Cuban negotiations.	Castro government returns \$2 million to Southern Airways from earlier hijacking-ransom. Castro sends approx. 15,000 Cuban troops to fight on side of MPLA in Angola. Troops remain in Angola after MPLA victory.
Aug., 1975	U.S. relaxes embargo on trade with Cuba by permitting foreign subsidiaries of American firms to export goods to Cuba.	
Oct.-Dec., 1975		
April, 1976	U.S. elections and Castro's success in Angola lead the U.S. to revert to past policies toward Cuba. Sec. of State, Kissinger declares that normalization of relations cannot continue while Cuban forces are in Angola.	
Feb., 1977	Carter Administration declares willingness to discuss a normalization of relations <i>with</i> Cuban troops in Angola.	Havana and Washington sign a fishery agreement and a provisional maritime boundary agreement. Castro responds by establishing similar forms of diplomatic communication with the U.S. Castro allows 54 Americans and their families to leave Cuba for the U.S.
March, 1977	Carter Administration lifts 17-year ban on travel to Cuba.	
April, 1977	Asst. Sec. of State for Latin American Affairs, Terence Todman, visits Cuba to discuss fishing and Maritime rights	
Sept., 1977	"Interest Sections" established for purposes of quasi-diplomatic communication.	
Sept., 1977		

3. It will be a violation of all moral principles by resuming relations with a regime labeled properly by the International Commission of Jurists as the most “cruel, inhuman, and degrading known to America.”⁴⁴

The motivations stated by Dr. Mas and supported by many members of the U.S. Congress serve to illustrate that the refusal to lift the trade embargo is still more of a political issue for the opponents of détente with Cuba. The key problem, according to the pro-embargo forces in Congress, is the fact that the United States’ “sphere of influence” has been penetrated by the Soviet Union. For example, Senator Buckley urged that before the U.S. resumed trade with Cuba, Castro’s regime should renounce its alliance with the U.S.S.R., “order the withdraw of Soviet military and intelligence operatives and deny the use of Cuban territorial waters and basing facilities to the Soviet navy...”⁴⁵ Congressman Pell feels that to recognize Cuba and to open up trade would only frustrate the goal of Cuban exiles who wish to return to a free and democratic Cuba.⁴⁶

The proponents of lifting the trade embargo and beginning a détente with Cuba claim that the embargo is out of date, ineffectual, and harmful to our relations with other countries in the hemisphere.⁴⁷ Congressman Harrington, for example, proposed a bill in February, 1975 that would end economic sanctions against Cuba. His motivations were clearly to “bring relations with Cuba more in line with...recent efforts toward rapprochement with...the People’s Republic of China and the Soviet Union.”⁴⁸ It had become clear to Congressman Harrington that the original intention of these sanctions—to weaken the Castro regime and purge the island of Communist influence—had not worked since Communist influence is greater and Castro’s regime is stronger today than when the policy of “strangulation” began. In addition, it can be argued that the United States—by continuing to ostracize Cuba—has damaged its reputation in Latin America because it has chosen to ignore the Latin American trend toward the opening of trade and diplomatic relations with Cuba.

While little progress toward a rapprochement with Cuba took place while Richard Nixon was president, the Ford Administration adopted a policy of limited hostility toward the Castro regime by leaving the decision of hemispheric relations with Cuba in the hands of the Organization of American States. While speaking before a reception of O.A.S. delegates on May 10, 1975, President Ford stated that “We recognize that every state has the right to adopt its own system of government and its own economic and social organization.: Secretary of State Kissinger’s position was more cautious in a speech given in Houston on March 1, 1975: “If the O.A.S. sanctions are eventually repealed, the United States will consider changes in its bilateral relations with Cuba.” In effect, Kissinger was arguing that the perpetual antagonisms between the United States and Cuba were senseless and that the United States would simply follow in the footsteps of the other countries of the Western Hemisphere. In other words, the United States would respond but not lead or initiate a reduction in the politics of hostility.⁴⁹

⁴⁴ U.S. Congress, House, *Congressional Record*, 21, 94th Cong. 1st session, May 22, 1975, p. 44868.

⁴⁵ *Congressional Quarterly*, 33 (May 17, 1975), p. 1014.

⁴⁶ *Ibid.*

⁴⁷ U.S. Congress, House, Extensions of remarks, Congressman Michael Harrington speaking for his resolution to repeal P.L. 87-733 and for his bill to end economic sanctions on Cuba, *Congressional Record* 21, 94th Cong., 1st session, February 10, 1975, p. E508.

⁴⁸ *Ibid.*

⁴⁹ *Congressional Quarterly*, 33 (May 17, 1975), p. 1015.

In July of 1975 the Organization of American States met in Costa Rica where the member nations, with the acquiescence of the United States, voted to “remove sanctions imposed against Cuba in 1964 and to allow freedom of action on trade matters to member nations.”⁵⁰ The next month the U.S. State Department announced that the ban on foreign subsidiaries of American companies exporting to Cuba would be lifted. However, there would still be no direct trade between the United States and Cuba. In order to conform to the actions of the Latin American countries, the State Department also announced two further steps to facilitate the new policy: 1) An end to the prohibition on aid to nations that permit their ships or aircraft to carry goods to or from Cuba; and 2) the initiation of steps to modify regulations that deny docking and refueling in the United States to ships of other nations that trade with Cuba.⁵¹ These moves were clearly motivated by several Argentine firms (subsidiaries of American companies) that had been granted licenses to ship goods to Cuba after threatening to nationalize the companies if authorization was not forthcoming. Castro’s response to these U.S. initiatives was positive in that nearly \$2 million was returned to Southern Airways from an earlier hijacking and ransom escapade.

Although the efforts to normalize relations between the United States and Cuba reached an optimistic high by the summer of 1975, they were quickly reversed by the sending of close to 15,000 Cuban troops to fight on the side of the MPLA (Popular Movement for the Liberation of Angola) in Angola. The position of the United States government was that no further steps could be taken while Cuban troops were stationed in Angola. This was further complicated by the Republican battle between President Ford and Ronald Reagan for the convention nomination in 1976 and Castro’s continual support for the independistas (those in favor of independence) in Puerto Rico. Thus, election year politics served to place the Cuban policy of the United States in a type of “deep freeze” until a new administration was inaugurated in early 1977.

The Carter Administration was immediately confronted with the task of developing a strategy for dealing with two issues of major importance in U.S.-Latin American relations: 1) a new treaty with Panama concerning the operation and defense of the Panama Canal, and 2) the normalization of relations with Cuba. President Carter clearly put the Panama issue at the top of his Latin America agenda so that U.S.-Cuban relations have only changed slightly while the trade embargo continues as key obstacle to a full normalization of relations. Nevertheless, the first six months of the Carter Administration have brought a lifting of the seventeen-year ban on travel to Cuba, and the first visit to Cuba by a high ranking government official (the Assistant Secretary of State for Latin American Affairs, Terence Todman) since President Eisenhower severed relations in early 1961.

The strains of shifting the Cuban policy of the United States over the past four years demonstrates the essentially bureaucratic nature of American foreign policy toward the Latin American nations. That is, if the trade embargo is lifted completely and a pattern of normal trade is resumed between the U.S. and Cuba, new working relationships between the foreign policy machinery and the Cuban government would have to be worked out. There is no doubt that Cuba, Castro, and the Cuban Revolution are considerably different from what existed in 1959. Cuba’s industries and banks have been nationalized, farms collectivized, and an entire generation of Cubans have only had the opportunity to experience the kind of government and society that now exists. The crux of the problem of normalization is that bilateral relations will never become “normal” again due to the changes within Cuba due to the Revolution and the changing political

⁵⁰ “U.S. Relaxes Ban Against Trading with the Cubans,” *New York Times* (August 22, 1975), p. 1.

⁵¹ *Ibid.*, p.3.

realities between the United States and the rest of the world. The United States will have to adjust to a “normalization” of relationships in which Americans will no longer be able to dominate the Cuban economy through investment, political pressure, and luxurious trade policies.⁵² Major bureaucratic and political hurdles remain before the trade embargo can be terminated and a new trade relationship established. Even though the President of the United States has a large say in what the Cuban policy of the United States will be, other bureaucratic entities such as the Departments of Treasury, Agriculture, and Commerce are legally involved in any future efforts to reverse the policy established under Eisenhower and Kennedy.⁵³

The Costs of Continuing the Trade Embargo Against Cuba

The trade embargo against Cuba has cost the United States approximately \$7 billion dollars in trade.⁵⁴ The slack in the Cuban economy created by the embargo in the early 1960's was quickly taken up by the Soviets and later by other countries such as France, Canada, and Japan. In short, the United States embargoed itself while attempting to “punish” Cuba for its ideological deviance.⁵⁵ Cuba has demonstrated that it has the will to exist close to the United States while developing an economic and political system different from those in the Western Hemisphere. For better or for worse, Fidel Castro intends to forge ahead with the goals of the Revolution while at the same time coexisting with other nations of the world. As Castro insists;

Cuba must move forward with its program of nation building. We cannot afford to divert our energies and resources to wars or disputes with our neighbors. Instead, we must coexist with those countries whose government and economic system differs from ours.⁵⁶

So despite the legacy of U.S. hostility to the Cuban Revolution and the difficulties of shifting to a normalization of trade between the two countries, a continuation of the embargo will continue to mean lost jobs and revenue for the United States treasury and its citizenry.

The trade embargo against Cuba also reflects political and humanitarian costs that are often neglected in assessing the impact of 18 years of economic denial. For example, issues such as food exportation and health care tend to become political “pawns” in the politics of the current trade embargo. When the embargo was first enacted the shipment of foodstuffs and medicines were permitted; however, the shipments were stopped after a few months due to harassment by American workers.⁵⁷ An American physician who visited Cuba recently acknowledged that he saw no medical goods of recent origin while on the island.⁵⁸ The trade embargo has prevented the flow of medical and scientific information to Cuba so that medical research is sorely out of date, particularly in the treatment of cancer, heart ailments, and respiratory illnesses. The

⁵² *U.S. Trade Embargo of Cuba, op. cit.*, p. 266.

⁵³ Jorge L. Dominguez, “U.S. Policy Toward Cuba: A Discussion of Options,” *The Americas in a Changing World* (New York: Quadrangle, 1975), pp. 117-127.

⁵⁴ *U.S. Trade Embargo of Cuba, op. cit.*, p. 207.

⁵⁵ “The paramount question is whether the United States will take one step forward and lift its embargo of Cuba or take two steps backward and be embargoing itself by being one of the few countries not trading with Cuba.” *Ibid.*, p.80.

⁵⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 269.

⁵⁷ Edward Boorstein, *The Economic Transformation of Cuba* (New York: Monthly Review Press, 1968), p. 32.

⁵⁸ *U.S. Trade Embargo on Cuba, op. cit.*, p. 233.

humanitarian aspects of this policy are captured by a statement made by Dr. H. Jack Geiger, after inspecting Cuban medical advances:

In peacetime circumstances, an embargo that restricts the flow of medical and scientific books and journals, and the free exchange of scientific and medical information and knowledge, is a contravention of every principle of scientific and academic freedom—the very freedoms whose abrogation we are so quick to deplore in selection other nations. It politicizes science and medical research, and puts us in a position of withholding such knowledge for political reasons. And it interferes with the further free development of medical and biological knowledge, which is, or should be, an international human activity above national political considerations.⁵⁹

The embargo as it now stands works to the detriment of the United States to both solve its domestic economic problems and emphasize a policy of human rights in international affairs. It is not unreasonable to foresee a more humane treatment of political prisoners in Cuba with a more “normal” pattern of political and economic relationships between the United States and Cuba. At least ending the trade embargo and establishing diplomatic relations would give the United States a voice in any future discussion of human rights violations in Cuba.⁶⁰

The removal of the trade embargo could also be of benefit to the United States in its balance of payments and in employment with the export sector of American manufacturing. According to the Department of Commerce, Cuba has shown an interest in importing such manufactured items as video and food processing equipment, automotive vehicles, and air conditioning equipment. The United States could stand to benefit from the Cuban export of sugar cane, cigars, rum, fish, citrus products, and nickel. Although the Soviet Union buys a large share of the annual Cuban sugar crop, Cuba exported only 15% of its cigars to the Soviet Union in 1972 and roughly one-third of its citrus crop in the same year.⁶¹ Fidel Castro has had to pay dearly for the rapid transformation of Cuba from a capitalist, market economy to a centrally planned, socialist economy but the U.S. trade embargo has not prevented the Cuban Revolution from marching forward so that the “blockade” remains basically a symbol of past hostilities. What is needed at this juncture is a sense of perspective and realism concerning a policy that is not only anachronistic but doomed to extinction. A new Cuban policy is needed in order to forge ahead with solving problems in both the United States and Cuba. The seventeen-year embargo has in many ways assisted the Cubans in their economic transformation because it has been a catalyst for reducing the high level of dependency on the United States and creating a heightened sense of national identity. This notion summed up well by Robin Blackburn who stresses that “The greatest achievement of the Cuban Revolution is the economic field is that Cubans now make their own mistakes.”⁶²

⁵⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 238.

⁶⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 125. For Castro’s views on President Carter’s “human rights” policy, see B.C. Bradlee, “Don’t Talk to Castro About Human Rights,” *Washington Post* (March 6, 1977), p. C-2.

⁶¹ U.S. Department of Commerce, *United States Commercial Relations with Cuba: A Survey* (Washington, D.C.: Government Printing Office, 1975), p. 27.

⁶² Robin Blackburn, “The Economics of the Cuban Revolution,” *Latin America and the Caribbean: A Handbook*, ed. Claudio Velez (New York: Praeger, 1968), p. 622.

Concluding Remarks

In reviewing the politics of the trade embargo against Cuba for the past seventeen years, it becomes clear that the objectives of the early policy of economic denial have proved to be either counter-productive or have failed. As such, the continuation of the essential parts of the policy of containment of Castro's Revolution only serves to reinforce the underlying principle of the efforts to strangle the Cuban economy; namely, to punish Cuba for its anti-United States belligerency. The fact that Castro is still alive, despite CIA efforts to assassinate him, and the Revolution continues, is only a bitter reminder to those architects of the early efforts to undermine the Castro regime. What has been created is a set of self-perpetuating hostilities based more on ideological rigidity and resentment than the realities of the decline of the United States domination in Latin America. This is summed up nicely in the conclusion presented by Anna P. Schreiber in her study of U.S. economic sanctions against Cuba.⁶³

Although economic coercion would thus appear not to serve many U.S. interests, it was applied because it met public demands for action against Castro. The government, reflecting the demands of an enraged public, was unwilling to allow Castro to benefit in any way from U.S. trade. The policy was a punitive reprisal against actions interpreted as being contrary to U.S. interests. In addition, economic coercion was applied and maintained as a symbolic affirmation of the U.S. belief in its right to maintain a position of pre-eminent influence in Latin America. It was a declaration of U.S. opposition to the spread of revolution and Communist influence in an area deemed to be within its 'sphere of influence.' For more than a decade, successive U.S. Administrations have felt that such a symbolic statement needed to be made in a forceful, concrete fashion. With the passage of time, goals and attitudes may well evolve and U.S. policy-makers may finally decide that the utility of economic coercion as a symbol has decreased.

The Cuban policy of the United States between 1959 and 1977 may well represent the turning point in what has been called "a special relationship" or "sphere of influence" in the Latin American area. Cuba has clearly demonstrated its ability to challenge the hegemony and domination of the Latin American area by the U.S. and the contagion effect of the Cuban Revolution has given Latin America confidence in steering its own path to developmental change without the paternalism of the United States. Who could have possibly imagined twenty years ago that the barbudos (Castro's bearded guerrillas) fighting in the Sierra Maestra mountains would be able to carry out a radical revolution while at the same time gradually establishing a political alliance with the Soviet Union?

The significance of these changes that have taken place in Cuba are that they have formed the catalyst for the rest of Latin America to experiment with different ideologies, economic systems, trade relationships, and the purchase of military hardware from outside the United States. The Latin American states are definitely more powerful than in the past and more firmly in touch with developing outside the sphere of U.S. domination. The signs of change are evident in the decline of Latin American exports to the United States, the trends toward nationalization with compensation in Venezuela and Peru, the role of Venezuela and Ecuador in OPEC, and the fact that Japanese investment in Brazil now exceeds that of the United States. Thus, the Cuban Revolution has had a major impact on the shifts that have occurred in the U.S.-

⁶³ Schreiber, *op. cit.*, p. 405.

Latin American relationship. And if we can take the pronouncements of the Carter Administration with any degree of sincerity, then there is some room for optimism in the future of Cuban-American relations where our Latin American policy is based on mutual respect rather than a special relationship.⁶⁴

Economic coercion as an instrument of foreign policy represents a paternalistic attempt to “punish” Cuba for straying too far from the basic tenets of American foreign policy: conservative change, capitalist economic development, and a Christian ethic. The changes that have taken place over the past seventeen years will make the eventual removal of the trade embargo more a part of larger, global issues and concerns than strictly bilateral issues between the United States and Cuba. The more quickly the United States recognizes the importance of dealing with Cuba as a part of global problems—human rights, conserving world resources, providing an adequate supply of energy, etc.—the sooner it will be able to concentrate on the problems of the 1980’s. According to Professor Lowenthal, “A quick and clear gesture to establish relations with Cuba... would help signal the new administration’s desire to end Cold War policies and practices...”⁶⁵ This action would signal the end to the utility of a Latin American policy that imposes unilateral blockades and has a low tolerance for political diversity in the Western Hemisphere. The failure to establish mutually respectful relations with Cuba by ending the policy of economic denial only postpones and complicates the issues that the United States will face in the Caribbean and the rest of the Third World in the future. In this respect, the eventual complete removal of the U.S. trade embargo of Cuba may well symbolize that the U.S. presumption of hemispheric hegemony is over.

⁶⁴ Abraham Lowenthal, Speech delivered at the 9th Annual Hawkins Symposium on International Affairs, Towson State University, March 23, 1977.

⁶⁵ Abraham Lowenthal, “Ending the Feud with Castro’s Cuba,” *Washington Post* (January 9, 1977), pp. C1-2.