

Two Views of the Cuban Embargo

In his Nov. 4 op-ed column "Time to Talk With Cuba," Stephen S. Rosenfeld asked, "How is the embargo actually supposed to work to bring Cubans democracy?" Later he noted, "Internal change is already proceeding." To not see the correlation is to miss the purpose of U.S. policy.

Tepid as they are—and not comparable to China or Vietnam—recent economic changes in Cuba have been propelled by the fact that Fidel Castro has had to confront the reality of his obsolete and discredited "model." Indeed, little by little he is being forced to relinquish absolute control of Cuba's economy.

If the embargo were lifted—and Castro's coffers were opened to international loans, credits and subsidies—what incentive would there be for Castro to keep on his present course?

To date, of course, we have seen no political liberalization in Cuba (which is what Cuba truly needs), but it is clear that more economic changes will have to come. And the less control the regime has of the economy, the less control it likely will have politically. Maybe then Castro will accede to political pressures just as he has acceded to economic pressures. Isn't that what happened in South Africa and Haiti?

The answer to ending the Cuban people's suffering lies not in Washington but in Havana. Fidel Castro has the power to alleviate Cuba's crisis only through fundamental economic and political reform. U.S. policy serves to keep that crucial question right before his eyes.

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Following up on the U.N. vote that was overwhelmingly in favor of lifting the U.S. embargo against Cuba [news story, Oct. 27], I urge our government to rethink its policy toward Cuba.

After fighting a war with Iraq, we

did not forbid the sale of food and medicines to that country, yet with the passage of the Cuban Democracy Act (the Torricelli bill) in October 1992 we tightened the U.S. embargo against Cuba to include the sale of food and medicines. All reports emanating from Cuba since then have indicated such a rapid decline in living standards that, as we recently witnessed, many Cubans were willing to flee the island in rickety homemade vessels under adverse conditions. With little food or medicine available and no hope of change in U.S. policy toward their country, these people obviously felt that the risk of death was worth taking.

As someone who has spent 16 years researching and writing about the Cuban health care system and its biotechnology capacity, I am deeply distressed by the near collapse of what was once the premier health care system in the Third World and one that rivaled those of many developed countries. Rather than embargo the sale of food and medicine and further debilitate the Cuban people, we should help the Cubans preserve what they can of this extraordinary health infrastructure. This would benefit not only the Cuban people but the U.S. taxpayer, whose tax dollars will surely pay for some of Cuba's reconstruction during a transition.

Moreover, the U.S. pharmaceutical industry would like to get a toehold in Cuba to avail itself of Cuba's installed capacity in biotechnology and biomedical research and development. For humanitarian as well as economic reasons, we should rethink our Cuba policy to bring it into line with post-Cold War reality. At a minimum, we should lift the embargo, particularly on the sale of food and medicines.

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