

Cuba: Open-Armed Policy

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Last year, on the 5th anniversary of the opening of the Guantanamo torture camp in Cuba, I had the singular privilege of being able to travel there. Travel to Cuba by Americans is, of course banned, but where in a “free and democratic” society does my government get off telling me where I can travel, or not travel? So, defying the incomprehensible ban, our group of intrepid anti-torture and pro-justice activists set off from Cancun, Mexico to Havana on Cubana Airlines.

In my humble opinion, it is imperative that we citizens of the US look at anything that our government says, or does, with healthy skepticism. Knowing that the Bush regime did not invent lying and murder for profit, we can never go back to the days when we believed that the USA was always right and if the US kills or oppresses other humans, then it must be okay because “God Is On Our Side.” Especially when we have a “leader” who has a hot line to a God that seems particularly violent and vindictive. The anti-Cuban rhetoric has been prevalent from the establishment since I was born.

So, after being an American for almost 50 years (at that point), I expected to find a Cuba that was beat down and broken under decades of communism and the dictatorship of “Comandante Fidel” who just recently announced that he would be renouncing his role as president. Even though I expected to find a depressed Cuba, I also found it, again, very hypocritical of our government to normalize relations with a very oppressive communist government of China, but would not cut the nation of Cuba (which lies just 90 short miles off of our coast) any kind of economic slack. It may come as no surprise to people, but relations with Cuba have only grown worse during BushCo’s reign of terror.

After a few days in Cuba, talking to people on the street (who are far more educated than the average American due to free university education), I was amazed at how happy and healthy (due to free medical care—which is good, since I had to myself use it when I was there) everyone seems. We visited the medical school which trains doctors from all over the world (including the US) for no tuition with the only requirement being that the new Doctor must work in a poor community for a certain number of years after obtaining a license from the country where he/she wants to practice.

Since the “Special Period” in Cuba of starvation and massive deprivation due to the collapse of Cuba’s major trading partner: the USSR; all agriculture in Cuba has been organic or permaculture and food is fresh and it tastes like food; not plastic.

One of the glaring differences in US/Cuban leadership is that after Katrina, Cuban Doctors and Emergency Medical Technicians organized to go down to New Orleans to help but the

USA rejected the offer, even though, our resources were stretched paper thin, economically and strategically, by the twin disasters of Iraq and Afghanistan. However, during Cuba's "Special Period" all the US did for our brothers and sisters down south was to strengthen the embargo against Cuba by forbidding any subsidiary companies that do business with the US to trade with Cuba. The Cubans managed to eke out subsistence through conservation, rationing and ingenuity to struggle through the Special Period. Cuban women are rightly proud of the methods they used to stretch their family's rations by, for example, grinding banana peel to add to the food. However, I did hear horror stories of fathers watching their children slowly starve and cry from hunger. Cubans lost an average of 20 pounds each during the decade of the "Special Period" which was roughly the entire 1990's.

When we arrived in Guantanamo Cuba, we found a small town of family farms, (and large sugar plantations) chickens, horse and buggies and horse drawn wagons. The Internet connection was iffy and we did not have hot water for showers, but I was struck by the difference between the average Cuban life and the average American life. If, like during the Special Period in Cuba, America had 80% of our imports and exports curtailed, what would we do? Would we have to dig up our concrete and plant crops to be harvested sometime after we had already starved? Would we have riots for food and other consumables? What would happen if our oil faucet ran dry? It would be pure chaos, but Cuba survived conditions like these due to their already simple way of life.

If life in Cuba is as awful as some would claim then why do they have a longer life expectancy than we do here in America and why is their infant mortality rate lower? Do we give up "quality" of life for "quantity" of material possessions? I live in a city now where homelessness is rampant and a huge challenge, whereas in Cuba, homelessness is unheard of. Is the "bigger, better, more at any cost" lifestyle of capitalism more humane than communism? Here in America our lifestyle is obtained off the backs of so many around the world, and here at home, that we have to ask ourselves if it is worth it for a few extra square feet of living space or to drive an urban attack vehicle that guzzles precious resources and belches toxic waste.

I hope the trade and travel embargo is lifted from Cuba soon. They do suffer from having to import medical supplies and other goods from China and Europe and we suffer from being deprived of the opportunity to travel to a beautiful country where the people are welcoming and generous with the little that they do have. But with the notice that Fidel is retiring after surviving over 600 assassination attempts by the CIA, even Democratic hopefuls parroted the corporate party line and there is slim chance of a lifting of the embargo. Since the USA has a detention facility on Cuban soil where we torture and hold humans in adverse conditions without the basic human right of due process under the law, how can we condemn Cuba for human rights' violations?

After the fall of the Soviet Bloc, Cuba is learning to form positive alliances with other countries in South America and I would challenge our leaders to consider doing the same. Using our military to spread corporate colonialism throughout Latin America has led to the growth of populist governments (Venezuela and Bolivia for example), and instead of trying to undermine these governments, we should work with them to prove that we care more about humane democracy and less about supporting oppressive governments.

We need an "open-armed policy" with our neighbors in this hemisphere not an "armed and dangerous" persona. America is certainly perceived as a bully all over the world but in the case of Cuba, it could not be more exemplified.

The US talking tough to Cuba is like a lion roaring at a mouse. Reaching across the channel with fair trade and open arms will go farther towards Cuba becoming more free and democratic than strengthening embargoes that hurt families and only strengthen anti-democracy and anti-American sentiments.

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