

‘Economic Warfare, Designed to Starve the Cuban People into Rebellion’

CounterSpin interview with James Early on Cuban blockade

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Janine Jackson interviewed IPS’s James Early about the Cuban blockade for the [August 6, 2021, episode](#) of CounterSpin. This is a lightly edited transcript.

Janine Jackson: In the wake of Black Lives Matter and George Floyd protests, lawmakers in Florida—as elsewhere—passed legislation increasing penalties for blocking public streets, and offering protection to people who hit protesters with their car. But when people took to the street to show support for anti-government demonstrations in Cuba, the Florida Highway Patrol allowed them to block an expressway in both directions for nine hours. And the Miami police chief marched alongside them.

Anti-government demonstrations in Cuba have received a good deal of [glorifying US media attention](#)—in contrast to [other, larger movements](#) elsewhere in Latin America. The truth is, neither US governments nor corporate media make much pretense of projecting a single standard when it comes to Official Enemies. And Cuba has been high on that list for 60 years.

So little do the rules apply, multiple US outlets, from the **New York Times** to the **Today Show**, illustrated stories on Cuba’s anti-government protests with photos of huge crowds at a *pro-government* rally. **CNN** illustrated an article headlined “Cubans Take to the Streets” with a photo of a rally in Miami.

Accuracy—who cares? This is Cuba we’re talking about.

James Early has been writing about Cuba and US/Cuba policy for many years now. Currently a board member at the [Institute for Policy Studies](#), he’s the former assistant secretary for education and public service at the Smithsonian Institution.

He joins us now by phone from Washington, DC. Welcome to **CounterSpin**, James Early.

James Early: Thank you. It’s my pleasure to be with you.

JJ: The fog around Cuba is so dense, and of such long standing, that it can be hard to get a sense of what is even happening—much less *why* it's happening. What would you say are the primary factors driving the anti-government protests that we saw in Cuba this past month?

JE: The primary factors are both historical, dating back to 1898, when the US took over Cuba after forcing its secession from Spain, and actually invading Cuba on a number of occasions. And so, over the course of 60-some odd years, up until 1959, the US — in direct and indirect ways — dominated the sovereignty and independence and self-determination of Cuba, in alliance with some of its own elites, turning it into a playground for casinos and gambling and prostitution, and the addition of US racism with the historical racism of colonial Cuba, as is the case across the Americas. That's one deep historical factor.

Sixty-some years later, in 1959, with the Cuban Revolution, it was the first time that Cuba took full control of its sovereignty and independence, and its own determination of how it wanted to direct its economy and its governance system, which was reinforced in 2019, with a new constitution endorsing—I believe [some percentage](#) of Cubans—endorsing Cuba as a socialist republic.

Keeping in mind that since 1959, starting with President Eisenhower, with — CIA report, people can simply go online and find this, don't take my word for it—a [document](#) sent in March 1960 to President Eisenhower about the potential for invading Cuba, and stopping it from having its sovereignty and independence and self-determination. And many noted and acknowledged attempts at the assassination of Fidel Castro, when he was alive, over the years.

The coddling of terrorists in the bedrock of American terrorism in the Americas—which is Miami, Florida—with right-wing Cubans, right-wing Venezuelans, right-wing Colombians, right-wing Brazilians, etc. who have been coddled by the US state—some of them known terrorists—having bombed planes, killing Cuban citizens, citizens from Barbados and other areas of the Americas.

So that sets the context of not wanting to allow Cuba to be independent and sovereign and self-determining, and certainly not socialist. We should be very clear on that, whether there has been a Democratic or Republican administration.

The current situation is exacerbated by an economic warfare, since the 1960s, designed to starve the Cuban people into rebellion against their own government.

And that is not to suggest that all of the Cuban people are in agreement with the ideological and political and economic direction of Cuba. It would be surprising if such was the case of unanimity in any country. But it is a minority of people, whose voices are not unimportant, who want the restoration of capitalism and the overthrow of Cuban socialism. Those are factual matters.

That is further exacerbated by the global pandemic, which has engulfed all countries and impacted negatively all economies, and particularly the economies of underdeveloped countries and underdeveloped communities in developed countries, as we are witnessing here in the US, with regard to people of color, women, LGBTQ — particularly in the service industry, and then the healthcare industry, which has had a racialized and class impact.

And then the third factor is Cuba's own "errors and failures." I'm using terms that President [Miguel] Díaz-Canel Bermúdez, present president of Cuba, has used. I've met with him on two occasions over the last four years. And I read on Cuba daily. And the Cubans are going back, notably, to the presidency of Raúl Castro, who was nominated and elected by the national assembly of Cuba — not simply because he was Fidel Castro's brother—who has pointed out the issues of inefficiency in their own economic plan, of corruption, repeated chorus on the part of the past Cuban president and the current Cuban president, and the need to make their economic adjustments — which they adopted in the last few years — work, because they had not worked.

And so those three factors, including that historical backdrop, bring us to this present crisis moment in Cuba.

That context, then, is juxtaposed against the community of nations, 184 voting at the United Nations in the last few months, against two in opposition, the United States and Israel, to dismantle the economic blockade and sanctions. And these are majority capitalist countries, but who uphold the international protocols accumulated over the course of — what, 1947 and so on at the United Nations — of how nations should handle their mutual interests, as well as their sharp ideological and political and economic conflicts, in respect and peace. Not in becoming a rogue nation, as the United States is now, in the face of the global community.

And, recently, reemphasize, with President Lopez Obrador of Mexico — really confronting this blockade and sending tons of food into Cuba, as is the case with Bolivia and Uruguay and, of course, Russia and China have also done the same. So this is the context, I think, for looking inside Cuba, and listening to the voices—the range of critical, reflective voices, of how they're debating their nation, and how they're handling and attempting to resolve, within their nation, their own concerns in the context of what they've advanced since 1959.

JJ: Yeah, US media coverage of Cuba is so cartoonish and so binary, that to say that the US should not be imposing punitive sanctions, a blockade which — as you say, folks can look up — the purpose of which is to immiserate Cuba's people in order to bring about — this is the [language of a memo](#) — "to bring about hunger, desperation and overthrow of government." So, sometimes "the cruelty is the point" sounds poetic, but this is really what we're talking about here.

But the coverage is so binary that, if you want to say that the US shouldn't be imposing a punitive blockade, that the US has no right, certainly, to *militarily* intervene, that's somehow painted as a blanket apology or endorsement of the Cuban government. *I guess you think they're perfect, then.* And there's sort of no place to stand, because the story has been made so simplistic.

And I guess I would just add that media present the Cuban people—you know, if they aren't the freedom fighters who love the USA, well, then they're mindless and miserable sheep. Which seems to sort of set the ground to say, *Things are so terrible and benighted there that anything the US does should be welcomed.* It's a kind of a dehumanization, really, of the Cuban people.

JE: The US media—particularly the liberal media — is to be called to task for its fake news, its readiness to adopt the propaganda from the Cold War, and to assume that the US democracy, US virtues, should be imposed on the entire world. It is a failure to do basic 101

journalism, to repeat the propaganda standards that the US has been repeating over 60-some years. It is a failure to do serious investigative journalism about the range of patriotic voices, most of whom are not socialist or Communist in Cuba, but who are patriots, who don't want outside interests there, and who acknowledge the errors and inefficiencies of their own government, but who also want this blockade down.

It is amazing that **MSNBC, National Public Radio, Washington Post** and so on—who profess to be liberal and to have high ideals — are so shoddy in their own profession, so biased in their own profession, and would repeat what the Trump administration has been doing, as has been in the case of the Biden/Harris administration, who has betrayed their campaign commitments to return to the accord between then-President Barack Obama and President Raúl Castro.

This was not Barack Obama “opening up” Cuba. This came out of negotiations of a bilateral agreement, which is the standard protocol of nations — even those who have vehement disagreements with one another. And for the so-called mainstream liberal media to fall into such shoddiness in their profession, we must hold them accountable. Of course, we can see that with the case of apartheid Israel, or with the failure to look at the seven, eight military bases in Colombia, and the daily killing of trade unionists and Afro-descendants, and the taking of land, and the billions of dollars that both Democrats and Republicans have put into that.

So we have a crisis of morality, a crisis of professionalism, inside the US. And we should ask ourselves, *Who are we to be the moral barometer of the world, given our own internal contradictions?*

That is not to say that one should not have a critical approach to what is going on in Cuba. We are a globally connected world, and therein we have rights and responsibilities, both as citizens of this nation, but also of our extension and engagement with citizens around the world.

So we have every right to make evaluations. But we have no right to break the protocols of nations, and to interfere into the sovereignty and self-determination of other nations. This is a context that seems to escape millions of both Democrats and Republicans, who so quickly buy into a US chauvinism, a US imperial kind of might.

And we're saying, again, that this is being confronted. We see recently, now, the president of Mexico has called for the dissolution of the Organization of American States as a “lackey” of US interference in this hemisphere. And so even allies of the United States, in a certain manner, here in the Americas are calling into question the moral and legal grounding of the policies of the US.

And we as citizens, whatever our ideological and political perspective is in the United States, should stand forth and try to reintegrate ourselves into the community of nations, and then carry on our disagreements and our agreements within that context.

JJ: What, finally, to your mind, would real solidarity with Cuba's people look like right now?

JE: Real solidarity with the Cuban people first comes from recognition that the Cuban government are the daughters and sons of everyday households in Cuba, starting No. 1, so that we don't have this false division between the abstract “people” and the abstract

“government.”

Specifically, we should dismantle the US government legislation called “the embargo” on this side, and called “the blockade” from the Cuban side. It violates international law. It violates any principles of humanity.

We should also abandon sanctions. We should call for the freedom of US citizens to free travel, to go and see Cuba for themselves, and to have their own interactions. We are denied that opportunity.

We should recognize the potential contributions to Cuba to our own development. They have two existing and three pending vaccines which are effective to this pandemic. And even developed countries around the world are calling on them for assistance, even as they disagreed with the Cubans ideologically and politically. And the US could benefit from that.

In fact, the US *is* benefiting from that. Your audience, perhaps, does not know. Now, for several years, there’s been an agreement with a Boston company—this is a legal agreement—on one of the three or so preventative cancer drugs. It has an outstanding biotechnology development.

Now, there are other issues in Cuba that we also need to look at and listen to the voices about expanded democracy. There is a big debate in Cuba about democracy in the context of socialism. Democracy in capitalism and democracy in socialism do not equate to the same thing. It is people-centered, the *demos*, as the Greeks pointed out, the *kratia*, the power of ordinary people.

So citizens’ voices are critical to the development of these governments’ outlooks. But those are the specific things that we should take on, is this embargo, the sanctions.

And we should return Guantánamo to the full authority of the Cuban people and their government. Guantánamo has been a site of horrendous human rights violations of the highest order, that we should not forget has been an admission by both Democrats and Republicans in this country.

So that’s the context of not just solidarity, but of basic citizenship in an international community.

JJ: We’ve been speaking with James Early, board member at the [Institute for Policy Studies](#). James Early, thank you so much for joining us this week on **CounterSpin**.

JE: And thanks to you and your listening audience.

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testified to the Senate Communications Subcommittee on budget reauthorization for the Corporation for Public Broadcasting. Her articles have appeared in various publications, including *In These Times* and the *UAW's Solidarity*, and in books including *Civil Rights Since 1787* (New York University Press) and *Stop the Next War Now: Effective Responses to Violence and Terrorism* (New World Library). Jackson is a graduate of Sarah Lawrence College and has an M.A. in sociology from the New School for Social Research.

Featured image: Cubans take part in a mass rally in defence of the Cuban Revolution and calling for an end to US sanctions, July 2021. Photo: Helen Yaffe

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