

Side-By-Side Coverage of Cuba and Iran Highlights Shift in US Media Villain-Making

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US Secretary of State John Kerry and Iranian Foreign Minister Mohammad Javad Zarif conclude the nuclear agreement on July 14, 2015.

This was a particularly busy week for the United States news media, with headlines featuring the announcement of a completed multi-lateral nuclear agreement between the Islamic Republic of Iran and the P5+1 bloc of nations, as well as a historic resumption of formal diplomatic ties marked by the reopening of United States and Cuban embassies in Havana and DC. The parallel coverage of the Iranian and Cuban diplomatic achievements offered a distinct, real-time display of the dramatic shift in US media villain-making over the last two decades and its concurrent silencing of oppositional voices.

Corporate media in the United States have a long history of neglecting the viewpoints of those who are often most profoundly affected by US foreign policy, especially when such voices cast a negative light on policies that members of the US government and media elite are invested in promoting. Media outlets have recently come under fire for failing to provide sufficient—if any—coverage of the victims of the ongoing US-backed air campaign in Yemen waged by Saudi Arabia (Intercept, [6/6/15](#)), despite over 1,500 civilian deaths that have occurred there (UN News Centre, [7/7/15](#)). FAIR ([7/19/15](#)) and Just Foreign Policy opened a petition to urge the New York Times and Washington Post to reverse this troublesome trend.



To comment on the Iranian nuclear deal, PBS NewsHour featured (from right to left) a Bush administration State Department official (Dennis Ross), a former National Security Adviser (Sandy Berger) and two former CIA directors (James Woolsey and Michael Hayden).

Such overt exclusion was again on full display as media outlets in America digested the announcement of a nuclear deal with Iran. Of the 24 guests who spoke about the Iran deal on the major networks' Sunday talkshows following the announcement, eight were US government officials, while the only two non-Americans were British Prime Minister David Cameron and Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu (AP, [7/18/15](#)).

Not a single Iranian or Iranian official was presented to offer his or her opinion of the historic deal. Netanyahu—who compared the nuclear negotiations to HBO's popular fantasy series *Game of Thrones*, and referred to Iran as a “genocidal enemy” in his speech to the US Congress in March—was a guest on two of the programs, and regularly appears on all of them (Congressional Record, [3/3/15](#)).

Compare this with the coverage of the opening ceremony at Cuba's embassy in Washington, DC. In light of the platform granted to Cuban officials by the US government for this event, it would have been difficult for media outlets to altogether omit the comments of Bruno Rodríguez, Cuba's foreign minister, despite the fact that he used the occasion to criticize US policies that are still in place, including the trade embargo, the blockade and the notorious US military detention facility at Guantánamo Bay.



Bruno Rodríguez Parrilla, Cuban minister of foreign affairs, was given more airtime during coverage of the lifting of the US embargo on Cuba than his Iranian counterparts during coverage of the nuclear agreement.

Nevertheless, the New York Times, which devoted the vast majority of its article ([7/15/15](#)) following the Iran deal to quoting US officials, described Rodríguez's remarks extensively and followed them with yet more commentary from individuals sympathetic to Cuba's standpoint, including former Cuban diplomat Carlos Treto and James Williams, the president of Engage Cuba ([7/21/15](#)).

Of course, coverage of Cuba was rarely as balanced in the years preceding the recent rapprochement between the two countries. FAIR ran an article in the May/June 1991 issue of *Extra!* ([5-6/91](#)) cataloging ridiculous comparisons between Fidel Castro and Hitler aired in the US media as lingering Cold War sentiment in America turned its sights once again on the socialist government and its own supposed ballistic nuclear program. Yet this decades-long

period of American hostility and subversion culminated in Tuesday's embassy reopening, which was widely seen as a victory for the Castro administration and the Cuban people against an adversary that politically, militarily and economically outmatched them.

The new air of legitimacy granted to Cuban interests in US media reflects a generational shift of focus away from the spread of socialism and its ideological hostility toward the United States to certain Muslim nations in the Middle East and their objections to US intervention. Once the site of American military cooperation in proxy fights against the Soviet Union, since 9/11 the Middle East has become the primary target of US militarism, and thus corporate media follow suit by silencing external critics of US policy in the region lest their legitimate grievances reach an audience.

As such, while Cuban officials are granted airtime as they forcefully denounce American policies at a walking distance from the US Capitol building, similarly reasonable positions on the part of Iran—the desire to pursue nuclear medical research and civilian power, or a healthy dose of skepticism toward US weapons inspectors, for example—are treated as outrageous demands by American panelists on major network talk shows, which fail to provide any voices that are not explicitly promoting the US government's agenda (FAIR Blog, [7/20/15](#)). Socialism is simply no longer the threat du jour.

International diplomacy is predicated on the principal of mutual respect and a desire to find common ground, or, as Rodríguez put it on Tuesday, to “cooperate and coexist in a civilized way, based on the respect for these differences and the development of a constructive dialogue oriented to the well-being of our countries and peoples” (State Department, [7/20/15](#)).

When the media fails to provide a hearing to those who may have legitimate—albeit oppositional—opinions toward US foreign policy, guests like Netanyahu, whose contempt for US negotiations with Iran is perennially fierce and unwavering, fill that gap. A poll published by Pew Research on Tuesday found that 73 percent of Americans support the reestablishment of diplomatic ties with Cuba after 54 years of animosity between the two countries (Pew Research Center, [7/21/15](#)). In contrast, a considerably smaller majority of Americans—56 percent—support the recent deal with Iran (Washington Post, [7/16-9/15](#)).

US relations with Cuba have had a significant time to relax, and clearly there is still a long way to go with Iran, which George W. Bush famously included as a member of the “axis of evil” in his 2002 State of the Union address (White House Archives, [1/29/02](#)). One might wonder, however, were the US media to grant the same kind of legitimacy to Iranian perspectives as it now does to Cuba's, whether that latter number might tick up.

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