

The United States Reengages Cuba: The Habit of Power

By [Louis A Perez Jr](#)

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[Democracy In Cuba](#)

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Watch your thoughts for they become words,

Watch your words for they become actions,

Watch your actions, for they become habits, Watch your habits for they become your character, Watch your character for it becomes your destiny.

—*Ralph Waldo Emerson*

For nations, history plays the role that character

confers on human beings.

—*Henry Kissinger*

All that I have done was for your own good.

—*President William McKinley to Salvador Cisneros,*

explaining the U.S. military occupation of Cuba (1900)

Expectations soared on December 17: "Sweeping changes," exulted the New York Times, "ushering in a transformational era." "A truly historic moment," pronounced the Huffington Post. Archbishop Thomas G. Wenski of Miami rejoiced over the "game changer" announcements, and the Brookings Institution predicted "seismic change" in the offing. A "bold new policy," proclaimed the Chicago Tribune.

Maybe

That the announcements of December 17 in Washington and Havana portended change could hardly be gainsaid, of course. Some things did indeed change. Cubans and Americans at the highest levels of government were speaking to each other—instead of at each other. That's something. To reopen embassies in Havana and Washington: that's something, too. All to the good, of course. Assistant Secretary of State Roberta Jacobson was most assuredly

correct to note that “diplomatic relations and having embassies is incredibly important in a relationship like this where you have so much to overcome and where you have differences.”

But it is also true that some things have not changed, and therein lurks the specter of a past foretold, for much of what has not changed is precisely what has been at the source of the estrangement of the past 55 years.

The need for a change of policy was as self-evident as it was self-explanatory. A policy from another historical epoch, fashioned by policymakers three generations ago, bereft of plausible purpose, had assumed a life of its own as something of a policy legacy, as if a “trust”• passed on from one presidential administration to another: eleven presidential administrations, to be precise. The United States, President Obama affirmed correctly, cannot “keep doing the same thing for over five decades and expect a different result.” Hence, the President added, it was time to “end an outdated approach” and “to try something different.” The old policy, the President affirmed “hasn’t worked.” Senator Patrick Leahy agreed, and applauded the end of “53 years of a policy that has not worked.” A view shared, too, by Senator Jeff Flake: “It’s time to try something new.”

But troubling ambiguities lurk in the phrasing of celebratory narratives of the “bold new policy.” To change a “policy that has not worked” for 55 years in order to “try something new” speaks to an eminently rational logic, of course. But it is also true that power tends to assemble logic in accordance with its needs. In fact, the connotations of the phrasing are neither explicit nor explained: “has not worked” at . . . what?

But we do know what “has not worked”: what “has not worked,” of course, is regime change, which was the overriding purpose to which 55 years of U.S. policy was given. The government long vilified in the United States continues to govern Cuba, and continues to be vilified.

The “bold new policy” appears to suggest less a change of ends than one of means, from a punitive policy devised to impoverish the Cuban people into rebellion to a benign policy designed to empower the Cuban people as agents of change. And indeed the operative phrase of the new policy is precisely “to empower the Cuban people.” Not a changed relationship with the government of Cuba, but a changed relationship with the people of Cuba—what Chief of the U.S. Interests Section in Havana Jeffrey DeLaurentis explained to the *Harvard Crimson*, “to extend a hand to the Cuban people.” A portentous distinction, to be sure, one that implies more than a semantic detail, and indeed invites the conclusion that “to try something new” implies a new way to try regime change.

The purport of policy was made explicit in the very first sentence of President Obama’s December 17 announcement: “Today the United States is changing its relationship with the people of Cuba.” The President expressed his conviction that “through a policy of engagement we can more effectively stand up for our values and help the Cuban people help themselves as they move into the twenty-first century.” And at another point: “I believe we can do more to support the Cuban people and promote our values through engagement. After all, these 50 years have shown that isolation has not worked. It’s time for a new

approach.” Engagement with the Cuban people, the President indicated at his year-end press conference,

“offers the best prospect then of leading to greater freedom, greater self-determination on the part of the Cuban people Through engagement, we have a better chance of bringing about change than we would have otherwise And the more the Cuban people see what’s possible, the more interested they are going to be in change.”

The President reiterated the larger purpose of policy to Reuters, indicating that “we need to try something new that encourages and ultimately forces the Cuban government to engage in a modern economy.”

The “bold new policy” contemplates normal diplomatic relations with the Cuban government as a means to obtain wider access to the Cuban people, to enable the United States to “empower” the Cuban people as agents of change. “We strongly believe,” Assistant Secretary of State Roberta Jacobson explained to the House Foreign Affairs Committee, “that having an embassy in Havana will enable us to do more things that help us more effectively empower the Cuban people.” And Secretary Jacobson at another point in her testimony: “We want to try and go directly to the Cuban people I believe that we also will get some things that matter in opening our embassy and hopefully the ability to travel throughout the country and see more people, and support more people.” The United States, Secretary Jacobson emphasized, was “committed to the reestablishment of diplomatic relations, which will allow us to more effectively represent U.S. interests and increase engagement with the Cuban people.” The U.S. purpose was summarized by Assistant Secretary of State for Democracy Tomasz Malinowski: “The empowerment of the Cuban people must be the bedrock of our new policy towards Cuba, and it will be.”

Habits of power are not readily relinquished. U.S. relations with Cuba have been conditioned by nearly 200 years of history in which the warrant of entitlement has insinuated itself into the very premise of the policy rationale vis-a-vis Cuba. It presumes U.S. “authority”• to manage Cuban internal affairs, to seek to shape outcomes and to influence the course of events. The practice has historical antecedents in the nineteenth century, and in the course of time has developed into something of a default stance from which the United States has engaged Cuba, to this day. “If we engage,” President Obama explained to CNN’s Candy Crowley, “we have the opportunity to influence the course of events at a time when there’s going to be some generational change in that country. And I think we should seize it and I intend to do so.”

The interventionist disposition obtains moral validation in the guise of righteous motive and noble purpose, the exercise of power represented as the performance of beneficent intent, always in the best interest of the Cuban people and for their own good: deeds of disinterested concern for the wellbeing of the Cuban people. These are the sentiments that today inform the “bold new policy.”

Plus ça change, plus c’est la meme

The salient facets of U.S. policy initiatives stand in sharp relief as a matter of historical continuity. The policy appears to commit the United States to engage the Cuban people, to

provide moral support and material assistance as a means to propel Cubans to act in behalf of change as a matter, presumptively, of their best interest. The “bold new policy” seeks to achieve from within what could not be accomplished from without—the interior meaning of “trying something new.” If not change of regime, exactly, in the short run, then change *in* the regime, in the long run. “We would hope to bring about change in the regime,” Secretary Jacobson acknowledged. “And simultaneously, we would hope to empower the Cuban people to be able to make that change.” Hints of destabilization abound. Secretary Malinowski was lucid: “Authoritarian regimes don’t just give up their power voluntarily. But change comes by empowering people to demand change. It comes by making the Cuban people less dependent on the Cuban state for their livelihood, for their survival. It comes through information coming from the outside, and less control by the Cuban state. And it comes from international pressure, and we will be able to generate more international pressure on the Cuban government as a result of this policy.”

The policy is designed to drive a wedge between the Cuban people and the Cuban government, to wean the Cuban people off their “dependence” on the State as a means to promote the development of civil society and market economy, whereupon the Cuban people thus “empowered” would be motivated to act in behalf of their own economic interests as agents of political change. “Our hope is,” Assistant Secretary Jacobson suggested,

“that we can empower the small entrepreneurs . . . with the emerging entrepreneurial class separating from the state The more people who are not reliant on the state for their economic future, [to] make their own economic decisions . . . the more it empowers people.”

The United States, Secretary Malinowski indicated, favored those policies in which “the Cuban people will be less dependent on their government and will have more power to shape their future. That is what we hope will happen.” One of the virtues of the black market in Cuba, Malinowski suggested, was that people “in addition to enriching themselves, become more independent, and less dependent on the state.” Secretary Jacobson reiterated this point to NPR: “The most important thing that we can do now is focus on empowering the Cuban people, to make sure that they have the wherewithal to decide their own future.”

The revision of regulatory policies was designed principally to increase financial support for the emerging private sector. U.S. trade regulations, explained Matthew Borman, Deputy Assistant Secretary of Commerce for Export Administration, have been revised “to empower the nascent Cuban private sector by supporting private economic activity,” as well as “improve [Cubans’] living standards and gain greater economic independence from the state.” Indeed, by authorizing American companies to engage in telecommunications sales, Secretary Jacobson suggested, “and acting to get information into Cuba, to work with entrepreneurs . . . we can begin to increase the pace at which people separate themselves from the state.”

All in all, of course, policies the Americans deem to be in the best interest of the Cubans. The United States, Jacobson explained to Congress, wished to help the Cuban people “to be able to do what they wish. To be able to make their own decisions.” Simply put, Jacobson indicated, to enable “the Cuban people to freely determine their own future,” to “empower the Cuban people” and enable them “to take their lives into their own hands.” Habits of

power persist. At some point in the nineteenth century, Americans arrived at the conviction that Cuba's destiny was the possession of the United States. "We are guardians, self-appointed, to the Cuban people," the *New York Times* pronounced in 1899. The sentiment informs the logic of the new policy. Resumption of normal diplomatic relations suggests the U.S. intent to establish an "activist" embassy, with an ambassador and/or embassy assigned to "empower the Cuban people." They would follow the footsteps of past U.S. ambassadors to Cuba who inserted themselves deeply in Cuban internal affairs, including Enoch Crowder, Sumner Welles, Spruille Braden, and Earl E. T. Smith, among others, all of whom assumed something of a proconsular bearing in Havana. "We have always to consider," exhorted Enoch Crowder in 1922, "the eternal vigil that must be exercised by America's representative in Cuba." The practice defined the role of the U.S. embassy in Havana. "The United States," former ambassador Earl E. T. Smith acknowledged in 1960, "until the advent of Castro, was so overwhelmingly influential in Cuba that . . . the American Ambassador was the second most important man in Cuba; sometimes even more important than the President."

The specter of a new American embassy as site of opposition to the present Cuban government looms large. There is precedent for this, too: in 1933, when Ambassador Sumner Welles arrived to Havana in the name of U.S. "interest in the welfare of the Cuban people"—per his instructions—and thereupon proceeded to remove the government of Gerardo Machado and remained to conspire against the government of Ramón Grau San Martín.

The "bold new policy" toward Cuba emerges out of a tradition—indeed, a legacy—of entitlement, out a history in which the propriety of American power assumed the appearance of the natural order of things: all in all, culturally-determined and historically-conditioned practices from which the prerogative of power was normalized. The degree to which men and women charged with policy make decisions on the basis of historical self-understanding, often unwittingly, can be best understood through an understanding of the past by which they themselves were formed.

Louis A. Pérez, Jr. is the J. Carlyle Sitterson Professor of History and director of the Institute for Study of the Americas at the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill.

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