

Unfinished Business

America and Cuba After the Cold War,
1989–2001

MORRIS MORLEY

Macquarie University

CHRIS MCGILLION

Charles Sturt University



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Introduction

THE Cuban Revolution was a watershed in United States–Latin American relations, posing the most serious challenge to U.S. regional hegemony in the previous 100 years. Washington poured billions of dollars into an initially successful effort to politically isolate the revolutionary regime and restabilize the hemisphere in a manner conducive to U.S. interests, and mobilized resources and personnel on a global scale to sever the island’s economic ties with the rest of the capitalist world. In the process, U.S. policymakers sought to foreclose the possibilities that the new Cuban socioeconomic “model” might be viewed by the rest of the Third World, especially Latin America, as a viable noncapitalist path to development. Over four decades, American presidents, whether Democrat or Republican, liberal or conservative, exhibited a marked reluctance to accommodate themselves to the permanence of Cuba’s symbol of resistance to U.S. imperial ambitions. At minimum, each has maintained the core economic and political sanctions put in place in the early 1960s while searching for the right mix of coercion and diplomacy to achieve the consensus goal: the demise of Castro’s government and its institutional structures.

The changing global context that followed the end of the Cold War, however, eliminated the key security concerns that were presumed to underpin U.S. policy in the early 1960s through the late 1980s. Although Cuba took measures Washington had repeatedly argued were necessary conditions for any move toward normalized relations – withdrawing its troops from Africa, halting the export of revolution to Latin America, and drastically reducing its military security ties with the former Soviet Union – the White House in the 1990s failed to respond in a measured and reciprocal fashion. George Bush and Bill Clinton refused to contemplate any reassessment of the fundamental premises undergirding America’s Cuba policy, or any resolution of outstanding differences, in the absence of major changes in Cuba’s political economy. In fact, neither shifts in Cuba’s foreign policy nor the end of U.S.–Soviet rivalry lessened

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Washington's order of priorities: first, to achieve a political transition on the island; then, to talk about reengagement.

At least three major arguments have been advanced by U.S. policymakers to justify this continued hardline stance. First is the Castro regime's alleged intransigence and refusal to change in response to White House overtures. The impasse in relations is exclusively of Cuba's making. Havana's foreign policy shifts and its selective opening to market forces – initiatives Cubans were forced to make as a result of events (principally the collapse of the Soviet Union) over which they had no control – did not alter the essential nature of the regime. Economically, the reform process is deemed inadequate or irrelevant; politically, Cuba remained a country where democratic rights are absent, dissidents are imprisoned and harrassed, and foreign terrorists are harbored. The Castro leadership manipulates issues of concern to the United States, such as unregulated migration flows, for internal political advantage and revealed its true colors when it ordered the 1996 shutdown of unarmed aircraft over international waters in a callous disregard for basic norms of international behavior. Throughout the post-Cold War era, Fidel Castro has retained sufficient authority to be able to orchestrate confrontations with Washington and/or other provocative acts whenever relations across the Florida Straits show signs of thawing. In so doing, he constantly undermined the position of Clinton administration moderates. Whenever they proposed a policy review or discrete changes, Castro would impose new constraints on the island's dissident community or resort to some other act of sabotage, thus strengthening the hand of the executive and congressional hardliners.

Second, Bush and Clinton policymakers argued that the U.S. demand for democracy in Cuba was perfectly consistent with the rise of democracy-promotion (and human rights concerns) as a cornerstone of America's post-Cold War policy. This explicitly ideological component of U.S. foreign policy, they contended, was never limited to relations with Cuba, but was a global policy that Washington viewed as a key determinant of its relations with authoritarian and dictatorial rulers throughout the Third World. The Castro regime was denounced as an unreconstructed Cold War relic that resisted the kinds of political (and economic) liberalizing measures being embraced by the rest of the world, and this indictment legitimated a "no-change" White House policy.

The third major justification for keeping up the pressure for change in Cuba is the supposed failure of the "constructive engagement" approach adopted by the Europeans, the Canadians, and the Latin Americans to produce the desired results. The Castro regime, Bush and Clinton officials declared time and again, resisted democratic political changes, continued to intimidate political dissidents and human rights activists, and refused to move to a full-blown free

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market economy irrespective of the attraction of closer ties with America's allies. Constructive engagement, U.S. policymakers argued, achieved nothing beyond the promotion of short-term economic ties to the benefit of those advocating this approach – and, of course, the revolutionary government in Havana.

What our study reveals is that each of these arguments purporting to explain the immobility of U.S. policy is fundamentally flawed. Setting aside the Castro regime's own attribution of its behavior to the problem of dealing with a hostile superpower that is unresponsive to shifts in Cuban policy, U.S. policymakers' mantra of "Cuban intransigence," and the cavalier dismissal of reforms that have taken place as inadequate, leave unanswered a basic question: Why, if all administrations from Kennedy to Reagan linked substantive bilateral negotiations to changes in Cuba's *external* behavior, was neither Bush nor Clinton prepared to open substantive discussions with Havana once these long-demanded shifts in Cuba's foreign policy had taken place? Instead of reciprocity, the White House added new conditions – changes in Cuba's *internal* political and economic arrangements – as the basis for any move toward normalized ties. Washington insisted that the limited nature of Cuba's economic reforms as compared with the more extensive opening to market forces undertaken by other socialist states, notably China and Vietnam, was a major obstacle to rapprochement. However, this argument was disingenuous in the extreme because neither administration responded to *any* of Cuba's economic reforms. Also, after passage of the 1996 Helms–Burton Act, U.S. policymakers never ceased to emphasize that political rather than economic reforms were paramount for any change in U.S. Cuba policy to take place.

"Moving the goalposts" profoundly undermined any notion of reciprocity in U.S. policy and testified to a broader, overarching reality: the demise of Castro's rule and the end of the revolution were the actual preconditions for U.S. rapprochement with Cuba. Changes in American policy were not conditioned on Cuban actions or, as one senior Clinton policymaker so evocatively put it, Washington was not engaged in a duet with Havana. Thus, it was not surprising that the Castro regime could never implement the kinds of changes that would set in train the much vaunted "calibrated response" to reforms. Each Cuban shift was followed by demands for more concessions or taken to confirm the fact that the embargo was working and that it was important to keep the pressure on. Instead of viewing the reforms that did take place as a basis for negotiations, Bush and Clinton officials minimized their significance, dismissed them as window dressing, interpreted them as confirmation of the effectiveness of U.S. policy, or argued that talking to Havana would only delay more reforms rather than hasten them. Washington's starting point for compromise was the demise of the regime.

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The demonstrated refusal to respond to Cuban policy shifts and the Bush–Clinton commitment to achieving the historic goal that eluded seven presidents before them also cast serious doubt on the argument that Cuba policy liberals consistently had the ground cut out from under them by Castro’s actions. Indeed, what our study shows is that the basic White House stance between 1989 and 2000 provides little or no reason to believe that, if the Cubans had behaved themselves, these liberals could have gone beyond the kinds of limited modifications that took place. The obstacles were always formidable, not least including the view from the White House, where the domestic political calculus was overriding. The liberals’ room for maneuvering was extremely limited, and became even more so after the 1994 midterm congressional elections when Republicans assumed control of the House and Senate, and hardline anti-Castroists took over the running of the key foreign policy committees in both chambers.

Asserting that democracy-promotion was an integral feature of Bush–Clinton global policy is one thing; the practical application, however, was something else altogether – especially when it came to Cuba. Certainly by 1996, Washington was demanding arguably the most thorough and intrusive political reorganization that any state has required of another: a change of Cuba’s government, constitution, and political and economic systems. Not even Saddam Hussein’s Iraq was presented with these kinds of stringent conditions as a *quid pro quo* for improving ties after the Gulf War. The more appropriate comparisons, of course, were the socialist states of Vietnam and China. In both cases, the Clinton administration placed no political conditions on its relations with these countries remotely comparable to those it insisted Cuba must meet. On the contrary, although issues of human rights and economic reform were basic agenda items in discussion between U.S. officials and these governments, American demands for political democratization were not allowed to impede closer diplomatic and trade ties.

Far from exhibiting a sustained and principled commitment to democracy-promotion (and human rights), Bush and Clinton maintained the practice of pursuing these goals in a highly selective fashion, dictated by U.S. interests. Clinton policy toward China or, closer to home, to Haiti were instructive in this regard. Notwithstanding China’s well-documented record as a major human rights abuser and the manifest absence of democratic politics, economic and strategic factors were always accorded priority status in dictating relations between Washington and Beijing. Indeed, Clinton considered the congressional passage of legislation granting China permanent normal trading status as one of his major foreign policy successes. In the case of Haiti, the decision to intervene to oust the brutal rule of the generals in mid-1994 followed more than two years of procrastination and attempted compromise, and was ultimately dictated by

the latter's intransigent refusal to relinquish power (amid rising White House concerns about the electoral consequences of an unregulated refugee outflow) rather than by any principled commitment to democracy.

Finally, the concerted effort by Clinton officials to discredit constructive engagement by labelling allied governments that promoted this idea as mere economic mercenaries totally contradicted the approach the United States itself pursued in dealing with countries such as China and Vietnam. Although constructive engagement did not produce democratic change on the island, gaining access to the Cuban market for their traders and investors was not the only result achieved by those European, Canadian, and Latin American governments who championed this strategy. Expanding relations with Castro's Cuba permitted America's allies to engage in a dialog about reforms and negotiate outstanding bilateral issues such as compensation for nationalized properties. In the process they also developed contacts with mid-level Cuban officials, who are far more likely than the small and fragmented dissident community to play a crucial role in the post-Castro era. As far as these governments were concerned, engagement along these lines ultimately promised the best results, especially when contrasted with the blunt instruments preferred by U.S. policymakers over the previous forty years that had failed so dismally to show *any* signs of success. Hence, they were not discouraged by short-term setbacks for which they blamed Havana.

The central argument of this study is that although the rationale for a hostile posture no longer existed at the beginning of 1989, Washington's policy toward Havana remained consistent in the transition from the "Old World Order" to the "New World Order." Bush and Clinton policy operated within the same Cold War conceptual framework that shaped the policies of their predecessors: heightened economic warfare and a refusal to consider normalized ties in the absence of a regime change. The result was the pursuit of a policy that had nothing to do with promoting reforms in Cuba and everything to do with getting rid of Fidel Castro's regime and the institutional structures of the Cuban Revolution.

In the course of our discussion, a number of issues are highlighted that have a broader relevance to post-Cold War American foreign policy beyond Washington's relationship with Havana. The first is the unilateral nature of U.S. policy, most graphically reflected in the Bush-Clinton attachment to the doctrine of extraterritoriality. European and other allied governments were urged to fall into line behind Washington's approach – and pushed to do so by the global application of U.S. sanctions laws. A second issue is the way in which the White House sets the parameters for profit making by America's overseas capitalist class. Where the U.S. government designates a political regime like Cuba's as fundamentally hostile to American interests, however defined, it is prepared

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to subordinate profits to foreign policy imperatives. Clinton officials simply dismissed the pleas of U.S. agricultural producers, for example, that they could do business in revolutionary Cuba under the economic reforms that had taken place.

A third issue, never more salient than during the Clinton administration, was the triumph of politics over policy. Although U.S. policy toward Cuba remained a complex mix of historic ideological concerns and domestic politics during the 1990s, decision making was increasingly shaped by the latter. The White House was constantly sensitive to the interests of, and pressures exerted by, the anti-Castro forces in Miami and Washington. In those few cases where it pursued face-to-face negotiations with Havana, the justification was invariably couched in terms of the need to solve a discrete problem that threatened potentially negative electoral consequences beyond the Cuban-American community. On these occasions, however, U.S. officials went to extraordinary lengths to discount suggestions that any bilateral talks were the precursor of a major policy overhaul, or a response to anything Castro had done.

Privately, a number of past and present administration officials conceded that Bush–Clinton policy was anachronistic, even absurd, and on occasion publicly canvassed the need for a more rational approach similar to the increasingly businesslike manner the United States adopted toward most other governments with which it had disagreements, including even North Korea. The major obstacle remained the absence of political will in the White House to challenge entrenched interests in the Cuban-American community and, more importantly during the latter half of the 1990s, its champions in Congress. Staying tough on Cuba was the line of least resistance, no matter that it benefited European and Canadian foreign investors, denied cash-strapped American farmers a small but potentially lucrative export market, complicated a range of bilateral issues from immigration to trade to drugs to telecommunications, and maintained an unnecessarily stormy political climate across the Florida Straits.

Chapter One analyzes Bush administration policy toward Cuba in a period of shifting international alignments and the return to the world of a single superpower. It examines the reasons why the White House declined to take advantage of the collapse of the Soviet Union and the fading Cuban security threat to contemplate a new policy direction in relations with the Caribbean island. The Cold War may have been in its death throes in January 1989, and the revolution about to confront its worst economic crisis, but Washington's historic strategic goal remained basically unchanged. Indeed, Cuba's new external vulnerability was seen as an opportunity to apply increased pressure in the hope of toppling the Castro leadership from power. This took the form principally of urging the Soviet Union to terminate all economic ties with its longtime ally and tightened

U.S. economic sanctions. The decision to link any kind of reciprocity to major changes inside Cuba was partly ideological (a desire to simply get rid of the regime), but also a response to Cuban-American hardliners who wielded considerable influence over the administration's Cuba policy deliberations.

Chapter Two examines American policy toward Cuba from the beginning of the Clinton presidency until the February 1996 shutdown. The strategic goal of terminating Castro's revolution remained unchanged, as did the extreme reluctance to explore some new approaches or engage Havana. The electoral commitment to a rigorous application of the Cuban Democracy Act and other punitive measures to "bring the hammer down on Cuba" – contrary to the approach taken by America's allies – was the hallmark of Clinton's new policy, accompanied by limited, marginal changes in pursuit not of improved bilateral ties with the Castro government but its dissolution. The administration's failure to bring this objective any closer to fulfillment during its first term, however, triggered increasing frustration among the exile leadership in Miami and its Capitol Hill allies. The result was an attempt by both groups to seize the initiative from the executive branch and assert greater control over Cuba policymaking. During this period, no single issue preoccupied Clinton officials more than the Cuban rafter problem and how to solve it. Domestic political concerns dictated the method of settlement – direct negotiations – and established the limits of Washington's interest in engaging Cuba.

Chapter Three illustrates Clinton's even greater willingness than his predecessors to allow pragmatic political considerations to dictate Cuba policy decisions at crucial moments and on critical issues. The decision to sign the extraterritorial Helms–Burton legislation into law after Cuban fighter jets shot down unarmed planes piloted by Miami exiles off the coast of Havana in February 1996 provides the most striking example: even though his senior foreign policy advisers retained profound misgivings about the legislation, fearing that it would likely create major problems with America's trade allies, Clinton was prepared to take that risk. Helms–Burton (like the Cuban Democracy Act) did, indeed, trigger widespread condemnation among Washington's allies around the world who judged it unlikely to achieve its objective of destabilizing the Castro regime and, more importantly, defined the law as a threat to global free trade. Europe, Canada, and most of Latin America argued that economic pressures and political confrontation were much less likely to induce the revolutionary regime to implement desired changes in Cuba's political economy than an approach based on constructive engagement. By signing Helms–Burton, Clinton not only rejected this argument, but also ceded unprecedented power to Congress over the terms for lifting the embargo and normalizing relations with Havana.

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Chapter Four examines the rising domestic opposition to the Cuba sanctions policy, driven principally by influential sectors of the U.S. business community (notably agricultural producers) whose hostility toward Clinton's proliferating global sanctions regime had reached a breaking point. This occurred against the backdrop of a number of developments during the president's second term that could have been used to justify a major reassessment of Cuba policy: a relative weakening of the Cuban-American hardliners' claims to speak for the community as a whole; a growing mood in Congress sympathetic to an easing of Cuba trade and travel restrictions without posing any threat to Helms-Burton or the Cuban Democracy Acts; the 1998 visit of Pope John Paul II to the island; bipartisan support within the Washington political establishment for a comprehensive review of Cuba policy; and the Elián Gonzalez custody dispute, which severely tarnished the popular image of the Miami exile community. The White House greeted each of these developments as either a test of its resolve to stay tough on Castro or as an unwelcome challenge to the historic goal of forcing a regime change in Cuba. Nor was it prepared to use up any valuable political capital with the Congress by confronting the still formidable "Cuba lobby," for whom even the most minuscule policy shift was unacceptable.

In summary, what occurred during this twelve-year period was a corruption of the policy-making process by the Bush and Clinton administrations in the service of the erratic demands of increasingly unrepresentative hardliners in the Cuban-American community and their unreconstructed anti-Castroist allies in the Congress. Each strained to contort an intellectual defense for maintaining a confrontational approach in a changed global and regional environment and, having settled on democracy and human rights, proceeded to apply standards of good behavior to Cuba that they eschewed in dealings with other authoritarian and equally, if not more, repressive Third World regimes. Internal reports critical of the policy approach (e.g., over the effectiveness of TV Martí) or at variance with its underlying assumptions (e.g., the Pentagon assessment of Cuba's regional threat) were shelved or returned to the originating agency for reassessment. Bush and Clinton undermined their own, admittedly shifting, initiatives to encourage the growth of civil society in Cuba by pandering to domestic pressures for an ever-tightening embargo. They rebuffed Havana's overtures for cooperation in the war on drugs and placed at risk agreements already reached (e.g., migration) in order to be seen as tough on Castro. They sacrificed the long-term interests of the American agricultural sector for short-term political kudos or to avoid a struggle with the Congress, and ultimately surrendered to the legislature much of the executive branch's prerogative to make decisions regarding the normalization of U.S.-Cuban relations. Finally, they were prepared to brook no opposition from allies, subjecting them to the

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extraterritorial application of national laws and demonstrating a willingness to cavalierly put in danger the operations of global free trade instrumentalities and understandings.

As the Clinton presidency drew to an end, there was no foreign policy issue over which Washington was more isolated than Cuba. In October 1998, after 157 members of the U.N. General Assembly voted in favor of its annual nonbinding resolution calling on the United States to end its economic embargo of Cuba, with a mere 12 abstentions and only Israel lining up with the dominant hegemon, Cuban Foreign Minister Roberto Robaina called the White House “blind and deaf.”¹ Two years later, the “yes” vote jumped to 167 with only 4 abstentions, the White House managing to entice only the tiny Pacific Island microstate of the Marshall Islands to join it and Israel in voting against the resolution. Worldwide, American policy was seen as anachronistic and irrational, and beholden to domestic interests that cared little for the responsible conduct of foreign affairs or respect for international law.

Ever since the first strains began to appear in the Soviet Union’s hold on superpower status during the Gorbachev era, the United States seemed intent on recreating a world of uncontested American power, in the process subordinating the ambitions of competitor allies to its interests. George Bush declared that American leadership and power were prerequisites for a stable international order; that “American leadership [means] economic, political and, yes, military”; and that, in all three areas, it embodied “a hard nosed sense of American self-interest.”² Bill Clinton and his senior foreign policy advisors also stressed the importance of continued U.S. global leadership, or what National Security Council (NSC) Adviser Anthony Lake termed “enlargement.” In a major September 1993 policy speech, Lake spelled out the administration’s global strategy: “Only one overriding factor can determine whether the U.S. should act multilaterally or unilaterally, and that is America’s interests. We should act unilaterally when that will serve our purpose.”³ Yet what was new about this approach the United States would take in the New World Order was the fact that America’s key allies were much less willing to subordinate their economic interests in particular to American policy objectives and dictates. The conflict over Cuba was perhaps the outstanding example. When George W. Bush Jr. took up residency in the White House in January 2001, few issues more starkly revealed the degree to which U.S. policymakers had exhibited a striking lack of realism – about the U.S. national interest broadly defined or about America’s capacity to impose its will globally despite the return to the world of a single superpower.