



US Cuba Policy: Directions for Change
A Center for National Policy Conference
at the Ronald Reagan Building and
International Trade Center
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Conference Summary

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Key Findings

- Lawmakers at the conference said that there is a broad consensus in Congress for easing restrictions on travel and on the sale of food and medicine.

Byron Dorgan, US Senate (D-ND): “It is my intention immediately when we write an appropriations bill this spring to undo what was done... with respect to both travel and also [the] restriction on the financing of the sale of food to Cuba and I’m convinced that I’ll be successful in the Appropriations Committee. I’m convinced that we’ll successfully move through the entire Senate, we’ll be right back in conference on a fight and as I said before, at some point, I think sooner rather than later, we’ll win this fight in conference. But I’m sure the Senate, beginning with my efforts this spring, will take action immediately on this.”

- Conference participants noted the new political context within which Cuba policy will be debated. With a new, fairly evenly divided Congress, and a President elected by a small margin, policy-makers will make more progress on issues where there is a strong bipartisan consensus.

Chuck Hagel, US Senate (R-NE): “[T]his is an area, especially with the new President looking to anchor a new bipartisan foreign policy, where he can find some rather significant strong bipartisan support to change and to do something which in fact affects most of this country.”

- Conferees agreed on the need for the next President to take an active role, leading instead of following Congress, to craft and implement a coherent Cuba policy that advances overall US national interests rather than specific interest of one single-issue group or another.

Richard Nuccio, Pell Center, Salve Regina University: “[D]espite the good intentions and the excellent work that has been done in the Congress on the Cuba issue, we need a President to lead on this issue, and that can make all the difference in how soon a different US Cuba policy comes about and how sustainable that policy is over time, even if we see indications from Havana that try to disrupt the direction of change for US policy.”

- There was widespread consensus that person-to-person contact and American travel to Cuba would benefit both countries.

Mark Sanford, US House of Representatives (R-SC): “I would encourage any of you... as policy-makers either to go yourself [to Cuba] or help get other members of Congress to go. It was my personal visit down there that turned my thinking on this issue and I think the same would be true with any other member of Congress that goes down there.”

- Many conference participants voiced the view that, while economic reforms in Cuba are not ending socialism on the island, they nonetheless are fundamentally changing the economic environment there by making productivity matter and by creating a nascent economic sector governed by capitalist principles.

Philip Peters, Lexington Institute: “[T]hey’re making productivity matter again in Cuba. It’s not ending socialism, certainly not ending the political system, but it is fundamentally changing what’s going on in the workplace there.”

- Conferees agreed that Cuba is no longer a security threat to the US. The US has more to gain by cooperating with Cuba to enhance efforts to prevent the shipment of drugs through the Caribbean than by pretending it poses a threat to American security.

Alberto Coll, Center for Naval Warfare Studies, Naval War College: “It would be useful for the US military to have talks with the Cuban military focused on functional security issues such as counter-drugs.”

- Many conferees made the point that current US policy works against US goals. US policy has attempted to isolate Cuba, but participants for the most part suggested that the policy actually has isolated the US by forcing members of the international community to choose between the embargo and Cuba.

Marifeli Pérez-Stable, Florida International University: “US policy towards [the] Cuban government is a major obstacle in creating an international atmosphere capable of challenging Havana to improve its human rights record.”

- Conference participants noted that Cuba is not that important an issue to the US at present. It was argued that the problem for the US lies in the future, because, without effective action now, instability in Cuba could result in violent upheaval and unprecedented refugee flows to the US.

William D. Rogers, Arnold & Porter: “The question... is in terms of the US national interest, what is the policy which will best conduce to a soft landing, and a landing which will help us avoid what could be, under nightmare circumstances, the worst crisis in US-Latin American relations of the last 50 years?”

Meeting Summary

Ambassador Jim Jones opened the conference by welcoming the participants and offering the hope that the group would be able to discern new directions for US Cuba policy by giving full consideration to a number of factors having an impact on US national interests.

US Policy Maker Perspectives

The first panel consisted of current and former members of Congress who have traveled to Cuba. Jack Buechner, a former Republican member of Congress from Missouri, discussed his observations of US Cuba policy based on his experience as a member of a delegation to Cuba in May to June 2000, on a trip sponsored by The United States Association of Former Members of Congress (USAFMC). He noted the organization has sent several different delegations to Cuba with the object of reporting back to current members of Congress and shoring up gaps in information currently provided to them. Buechner observed that USAFMC delegations are always bipartisan and have included members from the Florida delegation.

Buechner noted that even though the backgrounds of those participating in the trips were varied, the recommendations coming out of the trips were decidedly unanimous, urging that embargoes on food and medicine be lifted, that air and telephone links be opened up, and calling for additional cultural exchange. The reports are also unanimous in that they offer criticism of Cuban President Fidel Castro's government, specifically the lack of free and fair elections and a poor human rights record.

Next Buechner turned to the issue of dollar remittances from the US, arguing that these are helping some people in Cuba survive, and helping others obtain needed information about the outside world. He closed by saying that the US embargo on trade with Cuba is based primarily on anti-Castro sentiment, which he believes is not an appropriate basis for policy. "Economic issues to me really do dictate that we are falling behind as a nation by allowing to keep the embargo... in a time that is not appropriate," Buechner noted.

The next speaker was Mark Sanford, a Republican member of Congress from South Carolina. Sanford described how he initially became involved in the issue of US Cuba policy, illustrating his participation in a Congressional delegation to Guantanamo Bay in 1995 to obtain information about 20,000 Cubans in refugee camps there. He later voted for the Helms-Burton Act, because at the time he believed it would put pressure on the Cuban government and would contribute to the downfall of that government.

Sanford described how some years later a human rights group invited him to go to Cuba. In Havana, he said, he saw signs of German, Spanish, Canadian, and Mexican investment, which brought him to the conclusion that US policy was not effective in putting pressure on Cuba. Later he took another trip to Cuba where he intentionally suppressed the fact that he was a member of Congress in order to ensure that he was obtaining objective information. He explained that these experiences led him to propose legislation that would allow Americans to travel to Cuba. He argued that person-to-person diplomacy could make a significant difference. "It was my personal visit down there that turned my thinking on this issue and I think the same would be true with any other member of Congress that goes down there," he said.

Sanford concluded by offering suggestions about how to change the politics of US Cuba policy. He noted that the coalition of organizations that supported his travel bill was quite wide, including the Alliance of Baptists, the CATO Institute, the US Chamber of Commerce, the American Civil Liberties Union, the American Society of Travel Agencies, and Amnesty International. He said that it is important to gather such a wide coalition, involving an appeal to range of different constituencies. Second, he suggested that the best way to obtain a legislator's support for a change in Cuba policy is to make an appeal based on issues of interest to that particular legislator, rather than engaging in "wholesale" methods.

Third, Sanford suggested that those arguing for the loosening or lifting of the embargo on Cuba make use of Congress' recent granting of Permanent Normal Trading Relations with China. Since both countries have communist governments and questionable human rights records, he said, it is hard to make the case that the US should have normal trading relations with one but maintain an economic embargo against the other. Fourth, he encouraged that members of the audience either travel to Cuba themselves or work to send members of Congress there to experience the issue firsthand. Fifth, he suggested the need to apply constant pressure and to battle against short attention spans in the legislature. Last, he suggested that testing the right to travel in a court case could be an effective way to use the judicial branch of government to work toward change.

The panel's third speaker was Byron Dorgan, US Senate (D-ND). Dorgan went to Cuba on a delegation with Tom Daschle, US Senate (D-SD), in August 1999, the highest-ranking American group to meet with Castro. Dorgan argued that the embargo has failed to accomplish its goals and has in fact strengthened Castro's hand.

Dorgan said there is no support for Castro even among those calling for a change in US policy. Despite his reservations about Castro, Dorgan noted that the Cuban leader has survived every US president since John F. Kennedy and could live for quite some time. Thus, he suggested, the embargo is unlikely to work any time soon. If it is unclear what will result from lifting the embargo, Dorgan said, it is clear that keeping the embargo in place will not prevent foreign investment from moving into Cuba.

Dorgan also considered arguments made in the US Congress about how trade with China could encourage that communist country to move "in the right direction." He also pointed to President Clinton's visit to Vietnam to highlight the American view that engagement with communist countries can be constructive. Dorgan asked why the US should continue a forty-year failed policy instead of engaging Cuba.

Dorgan said that broad majorities of both houses of Congress support the effort to lift the embargo on food and medicine, but that a few people have intervened to block change. He observed that, nonetheless, there has been progress on the issue, and also offered the thought that the holding of such a conference as this, in itself, indicated the possibility of an evolution in US policy in the near term.

Later, during the question-and-answer portion of the panel, Dorgan said, "it is my intention immediately when we write an appropriations bill this spring to undo what was done... with respect to both travel and also restrictions on the financing of the sale of food to Cuba and I'm convinced that I'll be successful in the Appropriations Committee, I'm convinced that [it] will successfully move through the entire Senate... I'm sure the Senate, beginning with my efforts this spring, will take action immediately on this."

Issues in US Cuba policy

The conference's second panel sought to detail specific areas of concern for US Cuba policy, including economic reform in Cuba, security issues, the human rights situation and prospects for democratization, and immigration. The panel began with a presentation on the Cuban economy by Philip Peters of the Lexington Institute.

Peters detailed a number of changes in the Cuban economy in past 10 years since the loss of Soviet support. Cuba has not abandoned socialism, he said, but rather has grafted elements of markets and capitalism onto the socialist model. He discussed the development of an entrepreneur class in Cuba, due in large part to economic reforms undertaken in 1993 and 1994. This group, he estimates, consists of about 160,000 people, or 3 to 4 percent of the Cuban labor force. He indicated they earn about 3 1/2 times the average salary, and to the extent they use their extra income to purchase goods and services, they create a multiplier effect on production and consumption.

Another recent development in the Cuban economy, Peters said, is the establishment of over 300 farmers' markets. The Cuban state still provides inputs to the farmers, and they are still required to deliver a quota of goods back to the state. The difference now is that the state is allowing the farmers to sell their surplus supply to private individuals. This step has added incentives to increase production.

Peters discussed other changes, including the introduction of joint ventures. In 1993 the Cuban government started allowing foreign corporations to form joint ventures with their Cuban counterparts. There are about 300 of these joint ventures in operation, Peters noted, and they pay workers significantly more than they could earn elsewhere. In addition, the creation of a tourist industry in Cuba has allowed for an infusion of cash into the economy by attracting foreign exchange. Peters also mentioned that reforms in Cuban state enterprises such as the sugar and tobacco industries are allowing workers in these industries to receive dollar pay.

“What all these changes are doing that I’ve described is they’re making productivity matter again in Cuba,” Peters said. The government is not ending socialism or the political system, he indicated, but he suggested that there is significant change nonetheless. Workers' incomes are being tied to output, which differs greatly from the situation 10 years ago. Elements of a capitalist economy, such as customer service, cost control, accountability, and efficiency are all helping to increase production and to create growth for the economy. Peters closed by arguing that by engaging the Cuban economy, the US would allow this new sector to grow, producing substantial benefits.

Next, Alberto Coll of the Naval War College gave a presentation on the role of security issues in US-Cuba relations. He began by detailing Cold War era concerns that the US had with respect to Cuba. US officials were concerned about a potential Cuban role in a NATO-Warsaw pact confrontation, due to the close relationship between Cuba and the Soviet Union. Due to its key location in the Caribbean, Cuba has good access to sea-lanes linking the US to its European allies. Another area of US concern during the Cold War arose from Cuban military involvement in Angola, Ethiopia, and, to some extent, Nicaragua, and from Cuban support for guerilla movements and violent revolution throughout Latin America. Cuba also was involved in the international drug trade in the late 1980's.

Turning back to the present, Coll noted a number of differences. Today, he said, Cuba poses no military threat to the US, observing that no serious, senior US military officer believes that Cuba poses a threat. Despite speculation that Cuba has biological weapons capability, Coll said, there is no

evidence to this effect. Cuba is not allied militarily with Russia. Cuba no longer supports violent revolution in Latin America, and now has full relations with most Latin American countries. In fact, they have played a positive role in the Colombian peace process.

Moreover, Coll stated that there is no evidence that the Cuban government is involved in the drug trade. Drugs are a problem, however as Cuban waters serve as a transshipment point for drugs. Budget cuts in Cuba's navy, air force, and coast guard have weakened its ability to combat drug trafficking. Coll argued that it would be useful for the US to cooperate with Cuba. Through intelligence exchange and counter-drug cooperation, the two countries could work together to limit the shipment of drugs to the US. At present, the only exchanges between the two militaries consist of captain-level meetings at Guantanamo Bay. Instead, Coll endorsed calls for Commander in Chief (CINC) level meetings. He noted that there are those in Washington who are opposed to such cooperation on the grounds that it would provide legitimacy to the Cuban government. Nevertheless, he pointed out, the US conducts talks and exchanges with a number of governments whose political structure or philosophy the US does not endorse.

Coll finished his presentation by referring to a future danger that Cuba could pose for the US - that of its collapse. "Pressure-cooker policies historically can be very dangerous... especially when they are directed towards a nation only 90 miles away from our shores and with the capability of exporting hundreds of thousands if not millions of migrants to our shores," he said. Thus, he argued, the US has an interest in peaceful evolution of the political system in Cuba.

Following Coll, the next speaker was Marifeli Pérez-Stable, who spoke on the subject of human rights and democracy in Cuba. Pérez-Stable said that she believed that for a number of reasons it is in the best interest of the US and the Cuban people to have as normal a relationship as possible, but her task was to focus on the human rights situation in Cuba. She pointed out that the Cuban political system is not bound by the rule of law as understood in representative democracies. She said the one-party system systematically denies the rights of a peaceful opposition. In addition, she noted that "US policy towards [the] Cuban government is a major obstacle in creating an international atmosphere capable of challenging Havana to improve its human rights record."

Pérez-Stable said that in contrast to the extremes such as past massacres carried out by dictatorships in South America's Southern Cone or in South Africa, the repression engaged in by the Cuban government is "low-intensity." She called attention to three recent events affecting human rights in Cuba. Following the Pope's visit to Cuba in 1998, she said, 300 political prisoners were freed, although some 300 to 450 people remain imprisoned for their political beliefs. Another significant event took place in March 1999, when the Cuban government passed a law that increased Havana's power to silence its political opponents. She indicated that this law has not been enforced for the most part. Third, in November 1999, the Ibero-American summit met in Havana. Many of the foreign leaders attending met with representatives of the Cuban opposition movement, which she said put the Cuban government in a difficult diplomatic situation. Pérez-Stable said that this serves as a good example for how engagement can be used to exert pressure on the Cuban government.

Next, Pérez-Stable turned to the prospects for democracy in Cuba and for normalization of relations between the US and Cuba. Looking back at the 1990's, Pérez-Stable argued that Castro and other hard-liners in Cuba were not serious about wanting the US to lift its embargo on Cuba. She said that the US serves as a useful prop for a regime with serious problems. She also posited that the US would not be able to fully normalize its relations with Cuba until there is significant movement toward

democracy on the island. Referring to Dorgan's comments comparing US relations with China and Vietnam to its relationship with Cuba, Pérez-Stable observed that Cuba is not in Asia, and that, in her view, it hasn't carried out the type of economic reforms that China and Vietnam have. She also said that Cuban democratization would come from within, and that outside actors and pressures are unlikely to play a significant role in the process.

The panel's last speaker was Robert Bach, a former official of the US Immigration and Naturalization Service, addressing immigration issues. He began by offering the observation that the Elian Gonzalez case effectively expressed a range of issues with respect to US immigration policy toward Cuba, including the following: split decisions among Cuban families about whether or not to come to the US, the extremes to which people go to leave Cuba, the dangers of crossing the Straits, the complexities of US law, the complexity of administering that law, the attempt to act humanely coming into conflict with the law, intense emotion, the way both governments use incidents to make different claims, and the inability to negotiate effectively because of the constant need for crisis resolution. Bach added that the biggest implication for him was the lack of any viable policy alternative except the use of force.

Next, Bach said that immigration policy has been in effect the only connection between the US and Cuba for the past 40 years, a fact that he believes has been detrimental to both US foreign policy and US immigration policy. Immigration policy, he said, deals with important values for Americans, including family, human rights, safety, and the protection of children, but treating these concerns in isolation has forced our policies to become exception bound. The way to remedy this problem, he believes, is to engage with Cuba on a number of issues, so that when there are problems in one area, they can be balanced with others and an acceptable solution can be negotiated.

Bach suggested that it is the isolation of immigration as the sole concern of US Cuba relations that leads to situations in which the US is regularly driven into crisis management, without diplomatic alternatives, with the consequence that force is often the only option available. From a variety of perspectives, Bach suggested, Cuban migration to the US is desirable. Yet, if one considers the overall numbers of people coming from Cuba, their skill level, family connections, or their contribution to the US in general or to South Florida in particular, there are many positive aspects of Cuban migration. Problems arise because waves of Cuban migration have occurred in a series of crises, including the airlift, the Mariel crisis, and the raft crisis. Acting solely through crisis management, he said, distorts principles of fairness. Instead, Bach said, the US should move toward predictable and orderly migration flows, which would improve stability in both Cuba and the US

Bach then considered the future, particularly with respect to the issue of an eventual transition from the current regime in Havana. He noted that 300,000 to 500,000 people have registered their desire to leave, and that the inability of the US to handle such a large flow of Cubans through normal channels poses the prospect of another crisis on the horizon. "The claim that Cuban citizens have on entering the United States and staying in the United States, and the inability of the United States to manage that in the future through its normal immigration process, exactly at the time we would want an immigration policy to prevail, bodes for another crisis that we could avoid now by beginning to change the expectations and the motivations for departure, the expectation that the flow is both ways, that you can travel [in an orderly fashion] to the United States and return and vice versa," Bach argued.

Participant Discussion Groups

Following the second panel, conference attendees were asked to form small (8 - 12 person) discussion groups. These groups were given three questions to discuss: 1) Should current US Cuba policy be changed?; 2) What are the three most critical policy steps or initiatives that the next president could take in dealing with Cuba?; and, 3) How would you advise the next president to handle the political situation associated with changing the current policy? After the discussion period, representatives from seven groups presented their conclusions to the full gathering.

According to the group leaders, there was a strong, general desire to see changes in the current policy. In fact, group leaders not only stated that their groups favored change, but also added that within each group the opinion was unanimous. Most often, the call for change was based on the belief that the current policy is simply not working on either a political or humanitarian level. Participants described the current policy as hurting the Cuban people, but not the Cuban government.

There were some definite areas of agreement with respect to the steps that the next president should take. Not surprisingly, at the top of the list were suggestions to repeal the travel ban and remove restrictions on food and medicine sales. There were also repeated calls for student/scholar exchanges, cooperation on drug control efforts, and improved diplomatic relations between the two nations. There were few calls for an immediate, full repeal of the trade embargo. However, in light of all the comments offered, this appears to reflect an appreciation of the political reality of the situation rather than an actual desire to maintain the embargo.

The advice for the next president was varied. Of all the suggestions, two surfaced most often. First, participants stressed that the president should educate the public by explaining how the embargo has failed to accomplish its intended goals. Second, the president was encouraged to change the dynamic of the debate by reaching out to moderate groups within the Cuban American community. Participants differed as to who in Washington should guide the nation's Cuba policy. Two groups urged the president to take the lead, while two suggested that Congress would be the more appropriate driving force. Among the groups that emphasized presidential leadership, there was a feeling that recent votes in Congress, showing strong support for change, would make the job easier politically.

Historical context of US-Cuban relations

Following audience-member reports, the conference's third panel addressed US-Cuban relations in a broader context. The panel opened with remarks by Julia Sweig of the Council on Foreign Relations. Sweig suggested that there are a number of continuities between the survival strategies used by Castro and his allies when they were seeking to oust Batista in the 1950's, and the survival strategies she sees the Castro regime employing today. She focused on six specific elements of similarity. First, she said, in the 1950's, Castro's 26th of July movement formed alliances with a variety of groups in Cuba, including the white-collar professional class, military, the Catholic church, labor, and the Communist Party. Today, the regime has built alliances with Catholics, Protestants, Jews, intellectuals, and artists. In addition, Castro has consolidated control over the military, opened sectors of the economy, and has devolved some decision-making to local and provincial authorities.

Second, Sweig pointed to Castro's use of a diverse supply network. In the 1950's, she said, Castro consciously brought in weapons from as many different sources as possible, including Venezuela, Costa Rica, Mexico, and the US. Today, reacting to the absence of Soviet support, the Cuban government has diversified its trade and economic relations with Canada, Latin America, Europe, and Asia. Third, Sweig said, in the 1950's Castro worked to gain international sympathy from the UN, ICRC, and various foreign governments. More recently, she noted, Havana has enjoyed similar sympathy following the passing of the US Cuban Democracy and Helms-Burton Acts. A fourth approach Sweig pointed to as showing parallels between the 1950's and today is the use of the media in Cuba, the US and elsewhere to promote Castro's agenda, evident most recently during the Elian Gonzalez case.

Fifth, she said, the Castro government has succeeded in using US government policies and American instincts. In the 1950's, she said, this took the form of cutting off Batista's weapons supply and building political coalitions with exiles in Miami and New York. More recently, it has been a case of using the embargo to serve as a buffer, allowing Cuba to slowly diversify its foreign trade and investment partners and to integrate slowly into the global economy. The last element that Sweig identified was the use of the Cuban émigré community. In the 1950's, she said, Cubans abroad actively raised money for the rebels, organized cultural events, and even tried to send weapons. Today, members of Cuban emigrant communities send remittances to Cuba, which possibly constitute Cuba's primary source of external revenue.

Next, Sweig focused on what she characterized as two missed opportunities to turn Cuba-US relations in a more positive and constructive direction. Documentary evidence indicates that in the 1960's the two governments talked through a series of back channels, even while the US was engaged in covert operations against Cuba. According to US government records, the CIA and NSC both saw room for agreement with Castro. Even after President Kennedy's assassination, declassified information shows that Castro sent feelers through a journalist that displayed a sophisticated understanding of US domestic politics. Eventually this effort was abandoned.

Another incident Sweig discussed took place from 1974-75, where archival documents show that the negotiators had a clear understanding of the domestic political constraints under which each government was operating. Contrary to the conventional wisdom, she indicated, these talks did not end when Cuba sent troops to Angola or because of differences over Puerto Rico.

Sweig closed by noting, "since the focus of US policy has changed from outstanding bilateral issues to domestic internal reform questions, it has been one of the objectives of the Cuban government in the current era to never allow the United States to take credit for any internal reforms that it may make." This could continue to complicate US-Cuba relations in the future.

Following Sweig, Lisandro Pérez of Florida International University spoke about the Cuban American community's attitudes toward US Cuba policy. First he discussed the issue of diversity and possibilities for change within the Cuban American community. He noted the group that has dominated the community's attitude toward US Cuba policy consists of people who emigrated from Cuba in the early 1960's. He observed that this group tends to take the hardest line against engaging Cuba, although he suggested that there are some members of this generation who would like to change this stance. After witnessing political changes in Eastern Europe, they argue for an end to hostility and isolation. Another group of Cuban Americans, who arrived in the US more recently, is more like traditional American immigrants who are trying to start their lives in a new country, and are not trying to recover their homeland. Demographically, the newer arrivals and Cuban Americans born in the US now make up more than two-thirds of the entire community. In the early 1970's, two-thirds of this community came from the "exile generation" of the 1960's.

These shifts within the Cuban American community have resulted in a shift of opinions concerning US Cuba policy. Pérez reported on a recent poll conducted by Florida International University that found 64% of the Cuban American community in support of the embargo, a drop from 78% in a previous poll. Also, he noted, 51% support the concept of dialogue with Cuba, the first time since the poll began in 1991 that a majority has responded in this fashion. Only 24% say they think the embargo is working.

While it is clear that opinions within the Cuban American community have shifted, Pérez said, it nonetheless is unlikely that these changes will have a large impact on the community's policy posture. Pérez said that on the subject of Cuba, the Cuban American community is rife with contradictions. He noted, "the leadership of the community... and the dominant discourse still is heavily influenced and determined by those early year exiles who in fact have not greatly changed in their position because that traditional leadership is willing to commit resources [and] political capital." The newer generations and newer arrivals think differently, Pérez said, but at the same time, the Cuban issue is not their primary concern. In a sense, he indicated, this mirrors the general US populace's attitude toward US Cuba policy, where most favor engagement but are not passionate about the issue.

Pérez then turned to what he called the issue of "obsession." He noted that the exile community has a group of very committed people, who see Cuba policy as their highest priority. Pérez said that more than 94% of Cuban Americans in Miami report that they are not active in any organization having to do with Cuba, but the small minority that is active goes to great lengths to further their strongly held beliefs. He believes they see themselves as actors in a moral drama, where moderation is not a virtue and extremism is not a vice. Pérez said that this results in a loss of rationality and pragmatism. He offered the Elian Gonzalez case as an example. In the FIU survey, 82% responded that the case hurt the Cuban American cause and the Cuban American community in South Florida, yet 94% said that they should not have acted differently. He also cited the apparent contradiction with respect to the embargo, where although only 24% think it is working, 64% support continuation. Pérez concluded with the observation that he sees increasing support in the Cuban American community for humanitarian aid and for lifting travel restrictions with respect to Cuba.

Next Steps in US Cuba Policy

The conference's afternoon panel focused on recommendations for future US Cuba policy. The panel's first speaker was Dan Fisk of the Heritage Foundation. Fisk argued that there is a fundamental soundness to keeping sanctions as a policy tool in general and specifically in the case of US Cuba policy. He said that full normalization of US-Cuba relations should only come after Cuba takes steps to legalize all political activity; free all political prisoners; dissolve all organs of state repression; establish freedom of speech, assembly and the press, and commit to free, fair, and transparent elections.

“The premise of policy change should not be whether there is dissatisfaction with US policy, but whether Cuba has attained or is even attempting or seeking to attain the minimum standards of freedom and democratic processes that exist in the rest of the Western hemisphere,” Fisk stated. He acknowledged that the political debate in Washington has changed, but argued that this has to do more with the US than with Cuba, and that unease with the current policy is a manufactured phenomenon representing the concerns of the agribusiness community rather than a genuine grass-roots movement for change. Looking to the next Congress, he predicted that inertia would work in favor of the embargo's maintenance.

Fisk recommended executive leadership on this issue, regardless of the identity of the next occupant of the Oval Office. He decried what he described as the current use of "salami tactics" in favor of a coherent, strategic approach. In carrying out such an approach, he believes, the next president needs to seek a new consensus to implement an activist policy that challenges Cuba, enlisting other members of the international community, through the use of political, economic, and humanitarian means. He closed by advocating three principles that he feels should frame the new consensus: that policy changes put the burden on the Castro government, that the focus be placed on Cuba and Cuban behavior, and that changes in Cuba be consistent with American democratic values.

The next speaker was Ana Julia Jatar of the Inter-American Dialogue. Jatar focused on three reasons why US policy toward Cuba should change from isolation to engagement. First of all, she argued, a change would serve US national security and economic interests. She reiterated the point that Cuba no longer represents a military threat to the US, and said that a change in US policy would help avoid the negative security implications of political instability in Cuba. Looking at US economic interests, she pointed to benefits from investing in and trading with Cuba. She also said that it goes against basic American principles to have the government dictate where US firms can and cannot do business.

Second, she argued, “US policy should change, because it will bring changes in Cuba.” She believes that such a change would have an enormous psychological impact in Cuba by altering the perception that Cuba is at war with the US. This perception, she believes, is hampering efforts to establish private property and private labor markets by causing many Cubans to cling to socialist ideology. The fact that the Helms-Burton Act focused on the issue of property claims reinforced this tendency, and made many wary of pursuing further economic reform. Instead of sending the Cubans the message that the US is interested in old property, she recommended communicating that the US is more interested in new democracy.

Jatar also said that changing US policy toward engagement would have more direct economic results that would bring change to Cuba. Lifting travel restrictions would allow US tourists to travel to Cuba and to spend dollars in support of labor-intensive industry. She believes this spending would have a

significant impact on several sectors in the Cuban economy, and that people outside the Cuban government who benefit from this spending could serve as a new constituency for further change in order to attract even more tourists to the island.

Jatar then forwarded a third reason for changing US Cuba policy. She posited that opening up to Cuba would make the policy more consistent with the rest of US foreign policy. She quoted US Secretary of State Madeleine Albright, who said on a recent trip to North Korea "confrontation is not the path to progress is this new era." Jatar argued that the same ideas that Albright and the State Department have with respect to US policy toward North Korea should be applied to US policy toward Cuba.

The panel's third speaker was Richard Nuccio of the Pell Center at Salve Regina University. Nuccio began by stating that Congress alone cannot implement an effective foreign policy. Congress' strengths in the area of foreign policy, he believes, lie in overseeing it and in throwing obstacles in the way of the Executive branch when necessary. He does not believe that Congress is good at conceiving, implementing, and sustaining a strategy, which is what he feels the US needs with respect to Cuba. Nuccio portioned out some of the responsibility for the current situation of Congressional involvement to the Executive branch, which he described as having a hands-off approach to Cuba policy, waiting for Congress to propose measures and only then deciding whether or not to support those measures. After the Brothers to the Rescue shoot down in 1996, Nuccio said, Congress changed the politics of Cuba policy, and the President, seeking re-election, went along by changing policy.

Nuccio then discussed three things he would recommend the next President consider when thinking about US Cuba policy. First, he should take account of what is happening inside Cuba. Here Nuccio cited a rebirth of civil society and the development of "enclave capitalism." He recommended that the US get rid of all possible barriers to the freer flow of people and ideas to Cuba in order to amplify linkages between the capitalist enclaves in the Cuban economy and other sectors. Second, Nuccio recommended that the next President pay close attention to developments in the international environment. He argued that by opposing foreign investment the US undercuts its interest in the spread of market forces there. Moreover, he added, current US policy also damages efforts to develop common understanding between the US and its allies and friends in Europe and Latin America about Cuba. He said this common understanding would be needed in the event that the US needs to coordinate efforts to deal effectively with regime transition in Cuba. Nuccio also posited that Helms-Burton prevents good, responsible foreign investment in Cuba, but allows speculative, risky investment, which is harmful to the cause of the successful transition of the Cuban regime.

Third and last, Nuccio surveyed domestic developments in the US. He offered the view that since the 1990's a new constituency has been developing that could be successful in seeking change on US Cuba policy. He described this constituency as consisting of traditional anti-embargo groups, the US Catholic Church, some Protestant churches, human rights activists, and mainstream sectors of the US business community, along with some sectors of the Cuban American community. Here he returned to his argument for an active Executive branch, stating, "despite the good intentions and the excellent work that has been done in the Congress on the Cuba issue, we need a President to lead on this issue, and that can make all of the difference in how soon a different US Cuba policy comes about and how sustainable that policy is over time, even if we see indications from Havana that try to disrupt the direct of change for US policy."

William Rogers of Arnold & Porter and the Council on Foreign Relations gave the panel's final presentation. He began by pointing out problems with the pro-embargo view. He noted that there has

been little change in Cuba in the past 40 years, despite constant American efforts to isolate Havana. In addition, he said, the US has not applied this policy elsewhere in Latin America, even though there have been other instances of military dictatorships during this period; moreover, there is no support among the countries of Latin America for current US Cuba policy. He suggested that internationally overall there is scant support, citing the fact that only Israel and the Marshall Islands joined the US to oppose a recent UN vote condemning the US embargo on Cuba.

Rogers argued that Cuba is not a terribly important issue for US foreign policy. The island nation is small and poverty stricken, and does not offer significant opportunities for trade. “What is the policy which will best conduce... a soft landing, and a landing which will help us avoid what could be under nightmare circumstances, the worst crisis in US-Latin American relations of the last 50 years?” he asked. To avoid such an event, Rogers urged the adoption of specific measures to promote a peaceful transition for Cuba.

Rogers then listed a number of measures advocated in a report to be released by the Council on Foreign Relations: the elimination of all restrictions on travel between the US and Cuba; the elimination of restraints on food and medicine sales; consultation between the US and Cuban militaries, and consultation on cooperation to combat international crime (particularly in the area of drug interdiction). Rogers also discussed a Council on Foreign Relations proposal on the issue of property claims, which will suggest that present US claimants registered with the Foreign Claims Settlement Commission be allowed to enter into joint ventures with the Cuban national enterprises presently managing their properties. The elimination of the claims could be considered an asset contributed by the US claimant to the joint venture. Rogers stated that such a step is permissible under both Cuban law and Helms-Burton, and that it is likely that the Cuban government would welcome such ventures. He added that progress in this area would help Cuban firms upgrade their entrepreneurial capacity and would help entrench capitalist practices in the Cuban economy.

Visions for the Future

The last speaker of the day was Chuck Hagel, US Senate (R-NE), who discussed the role that Cuba policy will likely play in the coming Congressional session. Hagel argued that Cuba could provide an anchoring role for a bipartisan foreign policy. Given the closeness of the presidential election, along with the prospect of a Senate that could be evenly divided and a House with a slim Republican majority, he suggested that the leadership would be forced to govern with less divisiveness than in the recent past. He argued that the situation presents some significant opportunities to gain consensus on issues that have been captured by special interest groups. “This is an area, especially with the new president looking to anchor a new bipartisan foreign policy, where he can find some rather significant strong bipartisan support to change and to do something, which, in fact, affects most of this country,” he said.

Hagel noted the importance of the Senate's vote in August 1999 against sanctions on food and medicine for Cuba. He argued that the 70 votes advocates mustered in the Senate shocked that chamber's Republican leadership, and augured a new direction in our relationship with Cuba. He decried efforts by the House leadership to block change favored by a broad group of members, but he insisted that these actions represent temporary roadblocks and not permanent obstacles.

Hagel also commented that opening up to Cuba would be important to farmers, including those in his home state of Nebraska. But he said that engaging Cuba also would be important for advancing human and religious rights and for aiding US corporations whose properties were expropriated as a result of the Cuban revolution. He said that engaging Cuba would be most important for the US in general as it seeks to craft a coherent foreign policy for the 21st century that recognizes the reality of where we are today in the Western Hemisphere.

Hagel said that there is no reason to continue to cling to an outdated 40-year-old policy toward Cuba. He noted that Cuba is no longer on the list of nations that support terrorism, and that there are nations in the Middle East and East Asia that pose much more of a danger to the US than Cuba, but with which the US nonetheless maintains relations. Moreover, he suggested that current US Cuba policy inhibits an honest evaluation of our overall foreign policy. He said the new president and Congress would need to understand the real dangers and challenges facing the US. He urged those seeking to change US Cuba policy toward engagement to maintain a strong coalition, and remain focused in order to bring about a Cuba policy that is relevant for the future.