

**SEARCHING FOR THE SOUL OF AMERICAN
FOREIGN POLICY: THE CUBAN EMBARGO
AND THE NATIONAL INTEREST**

**Dr. Irving Louis Horowitz
ICCAS Occasional Paper Series
September 2000**

SEARCHING FOR THE SOUL OF AMERICAN FOREIGN POLICY:

THE CUBAN EMBARGO AND THE NATIONAL INTEREST*

Irving Louis Horowitz

This set of hearings has been called ostensibly to assess the impact of the Pope John Paul II's visit to Cuba fifteen months ago. And I will try to address that issue, albeit somewhat elliptically, and perhaps in a less narrow manner. It is important to remember the many criticisms Pope John Paul II enunciated about the moral and spiritual disintegration of Castro's Cuba. Ironically, his call to remove the boycott of Cuba, has become one of the main issues driving the United States toward a more moderate policy position. The Pope's statement had been the core of the earlier round of hearings of the International Affairs Committee, and I dare say, will be this case in the present round as well. We are in the midst of a struggle. It is not only about whether the embargo helps to sustain Castro in power or whether it is the last best hope in weakening the regime in Havana and compelling at least a few economic reforms. It is also part of a much larger struggle over the soul of American foreign policy. More specifically, we are in a great debate as to what constitutes the American national interest and whether commercial private interests should drive it solely or primarily.

* Testimony prepared for delivery on March 24th, 1999 before the House Committee on International Relations, Subcommittee on the Western Hemisphere, Washington, D.C.

The United States has already attempted to soften the impact of the embargo on Cuba in a series of small steps and trial balloons. It has expanded telecommunications between the two nations; increased direct contact between political, cultural, academic and business personnel; and most important, limited still further what goods can or should be embargoed. These actions by the Clinton administration have been greeted with a series of stinging rebukes. Castro and his spokespersons have described such unilateral initiatives as little more than insults and interference with Cuban sovereignty. Yet at the same time he continues to claim that the embargo is the cause of all the miseries of the Cuban people. In the same breath he proclaims the embargo to be a hopeless failure in preventing Cuba from marching into the socialist future.

The internal political situation in Cuba has been far worse after such overtures than before – and that is saying a great deal. The legal apparatus of the Castro government has been mobilized to squelch even the most modest forms of criticism and to frighten the non-committed and the non-political into some sort of revitalized mass mobilization. Castro's response to a weakening internal situation is tightening the totalitarian vise, and thereby insuring that any transition period will remain autocratic and dynastic – not unlike the communist model used in the succession from father to son (in the Cuba case,

from older brother to younger brother) in the case of North Korea. Such steps have seriously compromised the efforts of the Cuba Lobby to “normalize”relations between American democracy and Cuban dictatorship. However, real world events do not seem to prevent the Cuba Lobby from continuing its campaign to invalidate or at least demonize, the Helms-Burton and Torricelli bipartisan legislation, as well as earlier, long standing legislative safeguards.

On the Cuba Lobby, its organization base and financial support, I will spare this committee any lengthy discourse, and with your permission, simply place in the record two articles I wrote twenty years apart. The first appeared in the *Washington Quarterly*, and more the recent one in *Orbis*. Both articles provide ample evidence of the existence of a well-financed lobby, the continuation over time of such a lobby, and finally, its policy aims. The renewed impetus of this lobby after the papal visit has not yet succeeded in changing the political structure of American-Cuban relations to any substantial degree, because the Castro regime has been intransigent to a fault. Indeed, were it not for its Marxist-Leninist fanaticism, and the sheer lack of flexibility and professionalism in Cuban foreign policy, the United States in its present conciliatory administrative temperament might well have seized any opportunity to overturn the embargo and move to a higher ground.

As matters stand, the continuation of such a conciliatory posture remains impossible for a variety of reasons. The essential position of the Clinton administration and its predecessors has been unusually consistent as well as resilient. It is best articulated in what I have elsewhere referred to as the three core principles of American policy toward Cuba: free parties, free elections, and free trade. Though many Cuba lobbyists have gleefully noted an inconsistency in U.S. policy towards Communist China and Communist Cuba, the Clinton administration has properly, if somewhat cautiously, noted that China has moved very far on the free trade and free enterprise fronts – which is at least one-third farther along the road toward global normalization than contemporary Cuba.

What is important about the current debates regarding the embargo is that they are essentially internal American debates – very weighty ones indeed, between economic forces on one side and political forces on the other. I would further argue that the contemporary debate in respect to Cuba well illustrates the premise I recently outlined in my new book *Behemoth*: that the end of the twentieth century witnesses a growing struggle between the commercial and business community at one pole, and the government policy apparatus on the other. This is a weighty struggle, with many tangential elements. It is an unanticipated development in the evolution of large-scale businesses and equally large-scale political

interests. The wide-ranging debate over our Cuba foreign policy indicates that different interests are served by different forces and underwritten by different constituencies.

In the case of Cuba, we have a strange alliance between conservative business forces and radical intellectual elements. For quite different reasons, both are anxious to restore and normalize relations. Business interests wish to do so as an illustration of a new coda: that the bourgeoisie has no political party allegiance, only an allegiance to the bottom line and to unimpeded trade. The cadre of intellectual devotees of Fidel for the past forty years simply wants to provide legitimacy and cover to the Communist regime of Cuba. These bedfellows are so strange, that institutions like the Council on Foreign Relations have sought to provide a patina of respectability to this alliance of convenience by enlisting the support of such outstanding luminaries as Bernard Aronson and former secretary of state William Rogers to serve as legitimating figures. And organizations such as the Latin American Studies Association have long served as forums that bring together Cuban university officials and their North American counter-parts – with a corresponding marginalization of Cuban American academics who stand in opposition to the Castro regime.

Those who uphold the embargo and the various pieces of legislation aimed at containing Castro's Cuba—at least until he is brought to heel on issues ranging from rights to reparations—are equally strange bedfellows. This is one of the few areas at the moment in which there is a firm coalition of Democratic Party and Republican Party representatives, senators, governors and mayors, united in their opposition to breaking the embargo. That there may be a directly political element, the voting blocs of Cuban Americans in Florida and New Jersey, does not obviate the fact that the mainline opposition to accepting Castro in the family of American nation-states has held firm, through thick and thin over the course of many presidencies. Those for whom American democracy is anathema seize on this broad-based coalition as proof positive that Castro is right and Clinton wrong.

But such is not the situation. To start with, the weight of empirical evidence as to the tyrannical and dictatorial nature of Castro is so overwhelming, that even those who advocate a lifting of the embargo are compelled, often grudgingly, to admit that the issue is one of tactics and logistics, not principles. Even opponents of current American foreign policy dare not make fatuous claims about the Castro regime as it enters its final and desperate years. Instead we are told from the side door, from the Aronson-Rogers commission, that we should recognize Cuban interests because not to do so is to

undermine Cuba's movement toward "a still fragile civil society which is struggling to take hold in Cuba" and a new alignment of political and economic forces. Not surprisingly the Castro regime always manages to come to the rescue of those who oppose lifting of the embargo by its own stony and unyielding rhetoric, not to mention legal repression. Those awaiting Castro's movement toward a civil society have had a long, forty-year wait, and the end is not in sight. Alas, tendencies toward democratization seem further from rather than nearer to realization.

Debate on what should be American policy toward Castro's Cuba is in fact a debate for the soul of American foreign policy as such. This is a debate in which the national interests of the state and its people are juxtaposed against the private interests of some elements of the commercial and industrial sector. U.S. relations with Cuba are a major policy issue, not an issue to be resolved simply by legislative act or executive order. This debate goes to the heart of who rules the United States, on whose behalf, and at whose behest. That we are even having such a debate at this point in time does not result from changes in Cuban political affairs. It reflects instead extraordinary changes in the coalition of social and economic forces that determine American foreign policy. The expanding globalization of business interests has made them increasingly impervious to old-fashioned political appeals. Indeed, such interests incorporate real politics into

their relationship with their own government and those of other nations. The corresponding increase in the concentration of government services at the national level has made the federal bureaucracy a force that is also more powerful than ever before. Thus we have in the debate on Cuba nothing less than an encapsulated version of the shape of the new politics of the 21st century, one in which big confronts big more frequently than right confronts left.

The business community, once as divided in practice as it was on the Cuba question in principle, has shown an increasing willingness to flex its muscles and put money behind every effort by every group to remove the boycott. It wants a business-to-business relationship with Cuba, arguing that this will fuel political change. The ineluctable problem is that Castro and his Communist Party militants will not play the game according to bourgeois rules. They are willing to have a connection with U.S. business, but only so far as it strengthens the Cuban government's control of all enterprises of any kind. Beyond that, the communist regime is not in any mood to discuss reparations for businesses confiscated soon after the seizure of power in 1959.

Fidel Castro has made plain his opposition to private enterprise in a series of actions – from shutting down efforts at small light industrial growth in private hands to resisting even a semblance of the

equitable distribution of funds from a scheduled exhibition baseball game. No event goes unsponsored, and no handling of Castro's effort at people-to-people contact goes unnoticed. The United States insisted that no money go to the Cuban government, while Cuba pushed to donate the proceeds to victims of hurricanes in Central America. A compromise was reached that permits the funds to be used to promote sports activities, anything but an acknowledgement of real needs of real Cubans. Unlike Ping-Pong diplomacy, baseball diplomacy illustrates his tendency to resist any aperture or opening to the United States. Every effort at normalization of relations is interpreted as a sign of a lack of American resolve, and has thus been met by everything from shooting down civilian aircraft to arrests and prosecutions of even the mildest human rights critics of the regime.

I do not argue that we should simply maintain our policy of partial embargo until we have concrete evidence of real change in political direction or in administrative rule within Cuba. Even were there no legal embargo it would still exist on the ground in practice. The Castro administration is congenitally unable to move away from the most backward precepts of Communist Party rule – even as large Communist regimes like China and small ones like Vietnam make just such an effort to do so. In 1964, I wrote about the early days of what I called the Stalinization of Castro's Cuba. In 1999 I must sit here and confirm the completion of this awful process. Castro has smashed an

independent administration, an independent banking system, an independent press, an independent labor union movement, and an independent military. What remains is the dried husk of what was once a promising beginning.

The good news is that Stalinism is an unstable form of government even within communist rules of the game. The bad news is that in the short run, the Cuban people must suffer such a tyranny. They suffer not as a consequence of United States initiatives to prevent Castroism from spreading its cancerous forms elsewhere in the world, as it did in the past from Africa and the Middle East, not to mention Latin American and the Caribbean. The cause of immiseration of the Cuban people over the past forty years, their decline from the most advanced nation in the Caribbean basin to one of the most impoverished and backward, is the Castro regime itself. The ideological eyewash that the Cuba Lobby has served up can neither refute nor rebuke what democratic peoples from the Hudson Bay to Tierra del Fuego know full well.

Question from the Chair: In a recent report by several former Members of Congress who visited Cuba they wrote “political dissidents, independent journalists and NGOs all express concern about the way Washington rhetoric links the construction of civil society in Cuba with the removal of Castro, especially as it is stated in

the Cuba Democracy Act and Libertad Act.” Is this a real concern and does it in fact expose these groups to charges that they are engaged in subversion of the regime?

Horowitz Reply: With the best of intentions, the Council on Foreign Relations Task Force Report on U.S.- Cuban Relations in the 21st Century attempted to assuage such fears and concerns. Bernard Aronson and William Rogers, directors of the report, did so by speaking of the present day Castro Regime as moving in the direction of a civil society. I confess not to share this faith in Castro’s capacity to conduct such an orderly transition. Cuba is a communist state, whose apparatus is underwritten entirely by military force and quasi-military party cadre.

The issue is neither the removal nor celebration of Castro, but the repressive nature of the regime as it has evolved and continues to function. Executive and even more forcefully, Legislative leaders on hemispheric affairs have repeatedly made clear that the movement toward civil society would be met by enthusiastic corresponding steps toward diplomatic normalization on the part of the United States. Thus far, steps toward civil society: free political assembly and expression; unfettered elections in which more than an official party can participate, and a free and open marketplace in goods, services and ideas can take place, are noticeably absent.

Opposition to the Castro regime within Cuba is not proof of dissident subservience to the United States, but simply a demonstration, however limited, that some beginnings to a civil society are feasible. That even the most modest, apolitical opposition to Castro is viewed as “subversion” says all that needs to be said on the fiction of this communist movement toward a civil society and a market economy. If and when such movement does take place, as it has in other parts of the old communist empire, the current status of American foreign policy toward Cuba can and should be reviewed, and if need be, revised. But to implement broad policy shifts unilaterally would be a sign of American ambivalence at a time when the Cuban people require American resolve.

Irving Louis Horowitz is University Professor and Hannah Arendt professor emeritus of sociology and political science at Rutgers, The State University of New Jersey. His most recent work on Cuba is in co-editing with Jaime Suchlicki the ninth edition of *Cuban Communism*. Among his other relevant works are *Three Worlds of Development; Beyond Empire and Revolution; Masses in Latin America*; and the Bacardi Lectures on Cuba, published as *The Conscience of Worms and the Cowardice of Lions: Cuban Politics and Culture in an American Context*. Dr. Horowitz is a member of the Advisory Board of the University of Miami Institute for Cuban and Cuban-American Studies' Occasional Paper Series.