



Cuba: Open The Door, But Check The Peephole

by Frank Calzon



U.S. Vice President Richard Nixon and Cuban Prime Minister Fidel Castro leave Nixon's office April 19, 1959, after a two-hour, 20-minute chat behind closed doors. AP



Frank Calzon is the executive director of the Center for a Free Cuba, a nonprofit, nonpartisan human rights and pro-democracy organization. He has testified on Cuba before congressional committees and the United Nations Commission on Human Rights in Geneva. Courtesy of Center for a Free Cuba.

NPR.org, April 16, 2009 · President Obama recently announced the relaxation on travel restrictions affecting "Americans with family members in Cuba." The measure, which has widespread support, demonstrates the president's humanitarian concerns. In lifting the ban, he is fulfilling one of his campaign pledges. He also pledged to keep the trade embargo, as leverage to obtain the freedom of all Cuban political prisoners and the political and economic reforms wanted by the Cuban people.

The president is not alone; many European leaders, including Poland's Lech Walesa and the Czech Republic's Vaclav Havel, have urged the release of Cuban political prisoners and for Havana to respect human rights.

When dealing with tyrants, sanctions are not uncommon. The world placed sanctions on the white supremacist government in South Africa, and many governments today have sanctions against the military junta in Myanmar. Sudan's Omar al-Bashir has been indicted by the International Criminal Court.

European nations and members of the Cotonou Agreement told Havana it had to meet minimal human rights and labor standards to join the trade agreement, which benefits developing countries. Havana withdrew its application.

Americans rejoiced with the U.S. Navy rescue of a ship captain who had been kidnapped by Somali pirates; one of the pirates is to be tried, perhaps in the United States. Years ago, Libya's Muammar al-Qaddafi had to agree to the prosecution of his terrorists before U.S. sanctions were lifted.

In 1996, Cuban war planes destroyed two small civilian aircraft in a humanitarian mission in the Florida Straits. Raul Castro was then Cuba's minister of the armed forces. Three Americans and one legal resident of the U.S. were murdered. The U.S. denounced the crime, but the killers were given medals by the regime. To this day, they have enjoyed impunity for the murders, and their names have yet to be sent to Interpol.

It remains to be seen if Obama's willingness to extend his "open hand" to the Castro brothers will be responded to in kind. When President Carter agreed to establish a U.S. diplomatic mission in Cuba, it was interpreted as weakness by Havana, which deployed Cuban armies under Soviet command in Africa. Last year, when the United States offered

millions of dollars of humanitarian assistance to help thousands of Cuban families left homeless due to two killer hurricanes, the regime rejected the offer.

What would be a suitable response to President Obama's limited policy shift?

Havana could allow Cubans, who have foreign visas, to travel abroad. Cuba is the only country in the Western Hemisphere that requires its citizens to have special permission to travel abroad. Many Cubans have visas from the United States, Argentina and elsewhere. They are virtual hostages in Havana.

The president may want to urge Latin American leaders in Trinidad this weekend to ask the regime to allow the reunification of these families. They could also ask Havana to allow the International Red Cross that visits the Guantanamo Bay base in Cuba from time to time to permit the IRC to visit Cuba's political prisons in Cuba-proper. An indisputable sign from Havana would be the release of political prisoners and to grant to its citizens the same economic opportunities that foreigners enjoy on the island.