

U.S.-Cuba policy: Don't change just for change's sake

By James C. Cason

April 12, 2009

The Obama Administration is reviewing U.S. Cuba policy: What to do about Cuba? What has failed? What's our national interest? Is Havana prepared to discuss any of the changes for which most Americans and Cubans yearn?

Above all, let's not change U.S. policy just for change's sake. These are the arguments for liberalizing U.S. travel and trade with Cuba:

American tourists will instill among Cubans a yearning for democracy.

Tourist spending will help improve living standards, or wages, for average Cubans.

Isolating the Castro regime has failed. Let's do something different.

These arguments are dead wrong.

They ignore what it's like to live in a totalitarian society where the state controls all aspects of peoples' lives and fear of "state security" is pervasive.

"Flooding Cuba with tourists" won't work because Cuban authorities harshly penalize interactions of ordinary Cubans with foreigners. Almost all tourists stay in "all-inclusive" hotels located in isolated areas. The Cubans they encounter are state employees trained to say the "right" things. The rare tourist who speaks Spanish and tries to proselytize attracts the attention of nearby police, who question and warn the Cubans against talking with foreigners.

Tourism and trade have never brought down a totalitarian regime anywhere at any time. In the last decade, more than 15 million tourists from democracies have visited Cuba, including several hundred thousand Americans. Cuba has not democratized or even liberalized.

Fidel Castro captured the benefits of tourism during the "special period" when Cuba was foundering, and those billions helped him recover. The better case is made that tourism has hardened the regime and increased its staying power.

Europeans have spent tens of billions of dollars, but the average Cuban has seen no benefit trickle down to better his life, because the economy is controlled by the state, for the state. Hotel workers take home about 5 percent (\$16 a month) of what hotel operators pay the government for their labor. Tips are not permitted at "all-inclusive" tourist hotels and discouraged elsewhere.

The "try something different" argument derives from exasperation that we have failed to induce Castro, the world's most enduring tyrant, to morph into a democrat. Fidel and Raul want the United States to remain "the enemy." Their profound enmity toward the United States won't end — whatever we say or do.

The travel ban is leverage that should not be given away for nothing in return. Let's hold it in reserve to support a transitional regime willing to move toward more freedom. In the interim, let's support the peaceful, democratic and courageous opposition in Cuba and help it prepare for the day when Cuba's transition to a civil society begins. We should not cast aside our longstanding focus on human rights just to "do something different."

James C. Cason is former chief of the U.S. Interests Section in Havana and president of the Center for a Free Cuba