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The Cuban Revolution After Fifty Years

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In the summer of 2009, signs all over the colonial city of Havana, Cuba, proclaimed 50 years of continued Revolutionary Government. However, Havana, outside of the billboards, now reflects little of the feverish anti-US attitude of the early years following Fidel Castro's 1961 pact with our Cold War enemies led by the late Soviet Union.

When I last visited Cuba in 1998, the country was still being run by cronies of the Castro brothers who had come down from the rugged interior of the country to oust Fulgencio Batista, the nation's long-term dictator. Havana, as well as the countryside, was well adorned with signs proclaiming the benefits brought on by the new revolutionary government. When no billboards were available to paint, Castro's supporters simply plastered their message on sides of buildings or along roadside fences. And, when you met with any of the government functionaries, they invariably proclaimed enthusiast support of the Cuban communist regime and condemnation for the attitude and actions of the U.S. government, particularly the embargo on trade. We even met for over five hours with a vigorous Fidel Castro, who demonstrated his stamina by the length of his answers to questions we had.

From July 22-25 of 2009, I returned to Cuba as a member of a U.S. delegation that went to Havana to meet with Cuban officials to exchange ideas on how to protect citizens and property from the ravages of natural disasters, with an emphasis on hurricanes. More specifically, our trip was planned to lay the groundwork for follow-on conferences that would explore ideas and improvements both nations could make to their own internal plans to deal with what appears to be a growing threat of severe hurricanes in the Gulf Region.

Our delegation was headed by retired U.S. Army Lieutenant General Russel Honoré, who commanded the Hurricane Katrina Task Force that restored order out of the chaos created by the 2005 storm that severely damaged New Orleans and much of the surrounding Gulf Coast region. The organizer of the U.S. delegation's trip to the Cuban capital city was Dr. Wayne Smith, who served as the U.S. Chief of Mission in Cuba during the Carter Administration. A third member was Stewart Simonson who served as Assistant Secretary of the Department of Health and Human Services during the Katrina recovery period. The other delegates were mostly individuals who are currently employed at the State or local level in Louisiana.

In the days the group spent in Havana, we met with a varied set of Cuban organizations involved with natural disaster planning. These included sessions at the headquarters of Civil Defense, a military organization that oversees Cuba's disaster management; the General Docente Enrique Cabrera Hospital, a medical facility that trains Cuba's Disaster Brigades; the Caribbean Medical Association, which coordinates medical support throughout the nation's 14 provinces; the National Weather Forecast Center; the Latin American School of Medicine, opened by Castro in 1999 with the purpose of training doctors to work in remote areas of the Western Hemisphere; and the Havana Province Committee of Defense & Revolution, an organization originally formed to combat "enemies of the State," but which in recent years has focused almost exclusively on protecting lives of its citizens and family and area resources.

What we learned from these sessions was that Cuba has been forced by its geographical location to make the threat of hurricanes' destructive power a very high national priority. The island nation has endured 98 hurricanes since it began recording them in 1900. In response, they now have a centralized organization controlled at the national level by Civil Defense authorities in Havana, supported by each province and city government and by citizen-manned Committees of Defense & Revolution. They annually have periods of preparation where citizens review their own family plans in case of hurricanes. This includes evacuation preparation as well as inspection of each individual residence to identify possible vulnerability to high winds and flooding. And, participation by all citizens in these exercises is mandatory, with fines being imposed on anyone who chooses not to participate. Cuban authorities point to these measures as being principally responsible for their nation being able to withstand five hurricanes in 2008 with only a total of seven fatalities.

Another area of concentration of Cuba's government, closely related to measures to protect its population from natural disasters, is the emphasis on medical care. While most Americans are aware that the Cuban government provides free medical care to all its citizens, they probably do not know the extent to which the Castro Government has gone to use medical resources as an instrument of foreign policy. In the middle 1990s, after enduring the failed attempts to use military intervention in Latin America and Africa, Castro switched to a foreign policy that featured medical intervention rather than military force. He started by training and organizing what he called "Disaster Brigades," organizations of doctors, nurses, and various specialists, that could be deployed for extended periods of time not only within Cuba, but also to other parts of the world that needed medical help after a natural disaster struck. Over the years he has

expanded the effort, deploying his good-will brigades to countries located in Latin America, Asia, and Africa. The Cuban government even offered to send a brigade to the United States to provide medical care for the victims of Hurricane Katrina. (The U.S. Government rejected the offer, explained by General Honoré: “I had all the medical help I needed. Besides, most of the residents had evacuated and the doctors I had were not kept busy.”) In 1999, Castro also opened The Latin American School of Medicine with 1933 students attending from Cuba and other countries in Latin America. Students had to agree that, after graduating, they would return to their country of origin to practice in isolated or poverty-stricken areas. Today the school can accommodate up to 10,000 students at one time, counting those studying in their home countries. Among the student body are more than 100 students from the United States.

One of the more interesting meetings we had was with the Vice Minister of the Foreign Office, Dagoberto Rodriguez Barrera. He spoke with us on the wider subject of US–Cuban relations. Rodriguez was critical of the U.S. embargo of his country but tried to make a case for the re-establishment of normal relations between the two nations, emphasizing that such a step was in the best interest of each. He pointed out that Cuba could be helpful, not only in the area of natural disasters, but also in the fight against both terrorism and illegal drugs. Further, he contended that the U.S. is a natural market for Cuba. He stated that Cuba would enter into discussions of renewed diplomatic relations without any pre-conditions but that the United States could be helpful by releasing the five Cubans now held in U.S. prisons after being convicted of espionage and by ceasing broadcast operations of Radio Marti that seek to encourage opposition to the current government.

In the other discussions we had with Cubans at all levels, there was almost a complete absence of things political. Many of the formal briefings began with a quote from Fidel Castro but after that, our hosts hardly ever mentioned either him, his brother Raul or the Communist Party. Nor did they bring forth the topic of the future of the U.S. base at Guantanamo. No one even mentioned the five Cubans convicted of espionage in U.S. jails despite the fact that their pictures are plastered throughout the city. They were, indeed, a different generation of Cubans from those who ruled the country in the years after the 1959 revolution. They were obviously much more professional and far less ideological than the old revolutionaries I encountered in 1998.

We returned to Miami optimistic that we had laid the successful groundwork for future conferences, a small breakthrough in the process of helping to restore normal relations with that island nation eventually. However, one cannot help but question if this process toward normal relations between Cuba and the United States is really something that the current Obama Administration should endeavor to accomplish as a matter of priority. For most of the fifty years of the Castro regime, the principal U.S. objective was to end or neutralize the alliance between Cuba and the Soviet Union and thereby end the possibility of the Russians using the island as a base for nuclear attack on the continental United States. Now, that possibility does not exist. Cuba is not a military threat to the United States. Thus, the principal advantages the United States would accrue by ending its diplomatic boycott would be increased trade for the ports along our southern coast and perhaps some sharing of intelligence on drug and terrorist activity

in the Caribbean. The downside of pushing for relations with Cuba for the Obama administration would be the reaction of the somewhat large and influential Cuban exile groups, principally in the States of Florida, New Jersey, Louisiana and Texas.

Today, the original exiles driven from their native island by the Revolutionary Government and having their properties seized and relatives persecuted are passing from the scene, but new generations of their offspring remain bitter. These newer generations have, in many cases, prospered and have considerable resources to use in opposing normal relations with the Castros' Cuba. In their fifty years of "revolutionary" government, the Castro brothers have made many enemies, both foreign and domestic, and the issue of ending the U.S. boycott of Cuba is not on the front burner of our neighbors' agenda in Latin America today. Fidel, in his mid-eighties and not in good health, is still a presence. Raul, now 78 and occupying the President's position, appears to be consolidating his own power base. Along with all the other challenges leading up to the presidential elections in 2012, establishing normal relations with Cuba would confront Obama with just another vocal and influential new opposition group. Thus, as long as either one of the Castro brothers is alive and in a position of influence, the re-establishment of normal U.S.-Cuban relations is unlikely.

When I was in Havana in 1998, I asked an official at the U.S. Interests Section if Fidel Castro's family had a history of long life. He replied that Castro's father died at age 92 and his mother at age 87. If his information is accurate, change in Cuba might still be a decade or so away!

