



# Executive Memorandum

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## BEYOND THE GONZALEZ CASE: HOW TO BRING FREEDOM TO CUBA

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After the Soviet Union collapsed and its subsidies to Cuba ended, Congress passed important legislation to aid the Cuban people and bring political freedoms to the island. Regrettably, the Clinton Administration largely ignores or misuses these laws to pursue stable relations with aging dictator Fidel Castro. For his part, Castro has kept the Administration in a conciliatory posture by provoking crises and manipulating events, such as the downing of U.S. civilian planes four years ago and the politicizing of the custody fight over 6-year-old refugee Elián Gonzalez. This tactic diverts attention from the continuing repression of Cubans.

At the height of the Cold War, successive U.S. administrations sought to isolate Castro and contain his efforts to export communist insurgency. Washington suspended diplomatic recognition of Cuba and placed an embargo on U.S.–Cuban trade. Castro's regime finally deflated as a regional threat when the Soviet Union's annual handout of \$5 billion evaporated in 1991. From 1991 to 1994, Castro allowed small private farms to make up for food shortages, permitted limited enterprises such as family restaurants, and legalized possession of U.S. dollars.

As these changes unfolded, Congress took an activist approach to pressure the regime and reach out to Cuban citizens. It passed the Cuban Democracy Act of 1992, authorizing direct sales and donations of food, clothing, and medicine to private Cuban entities and restoring direct mail and phone

service. In 1996, Congress passed the Cuban Liberty and Democratic Solidarity Act—the Helms–Burton Act—to authorize humanitarian aid to families of political prisoners, distribution of information to the island, and support for human rights groups, and to strengthen sanctions against the regime.

Instead of using these tools effectively to help the people of Cuba, the Clinton Administration makes placating Castro a priority. When riots broke out in Havana in 1994, Castro encouraged 30,000 refugees to flee to America in flimsy rafts. The Administration then ended a longstanding policy of admitting all Cubans as political refugees to prevent political fallout from another exodus like the costly 1980 Mariel boatlift that brought almost 125,000 Cubans to America. The President reluctantly signed the Helms–Burton Act after Cuban MiG fighters shot down two Brothers to the Rescue planes from international airspace on February 24, 1996, killing three American citizens and one Cuban-born legal U.S. resident. Since then, the President has suspended the Helms–Burton sanctions against the regime eight times. He has failed

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to fully implement U.S. policies, which only encourages those who want to benefit by doing business with the regime and leads to calls for an end to the embargo.

Lifting the embargo would be a serious mistake because it would focus relations even more on Castro and devastate those in Cuba who seek reform. It would signal that quick sales are more important to America than freedom while giving the regime additional resources to suppress opposition, control expression, and block the development of institutions that would serve as a basis for civil society.

Rather than ignore or undermine the tools available, the Administration should use them to build closer ties with the Cuban people. Specifically, Washington should:

- **Keep the embargo.** Under current Cuban law, trade is only possible with the Cuban government. Rather than provide resources to the regime, Washington should withhold full trade relations until Castro allows free elections, opens markets, releases political prisoners, and restores civil liberties. In the meantime, the Administration should streamline licensing procedures for donations, simplify paperwork for approved classes of travelers, and find avenues to support nascent autonomous sectors of civil society in Cuba, such as small entrepreneurs.
- **Improve public diplomacy.** Radio Martí, created by the Reagan Administration in 1985 to reach out to the Cuban people, is listened to six times more frequently than the closest Miami station despite jamming efforts, according to a 1999 University of Florida study. But until very recently, the Administration gave only slow and grudging support to both Radio and TV Martí. These are important tools and merit Washington's continued backing. Beyond such targeted communications, the White House should aggressively use public diplomacy efforts to educate U.S. and foreign audiences on the continuing abuses in Cuba and to explain U.S.

policies. Castro's views should not be the only ones heard.

- **Help families, not tourists.** Family members should be allowed unlimited visits in Cuba and the United States. Contacts between Americans and their relatives in Cuba are more likely to promote civil society and reconciliation than contacts with tourists who stay in isolated resorts. Boosting the \$1,200 annual limit on remittances would help. Although the regime might benefit from hard currency flowing into the economy, access to dollars would make Cubans less dependent on the government.
- **Promote international efforts to bring about change in Cuba.** Washington should ask its allies to speak out more in support of the regime's political opposition, nascent independent journalists, and non-governmental human rights observers. The 1998 visit of Pope John Paul II helped win the release of 99 political prisoners. When the king and prime minister of Spain and the presidents of Portugal, Mexico, and Panama attended the November 1999 Ibero-American Summit in Havana, their open criticism of the regime and their visits with dissidents legitimized alternate voices and cast new light on Cuba's independent thinkers.

While the Administration has concentrated on the battle over Elian Gonzalez, Castro has detained more than 300 dissidents and restricted the movements of hundreds of others. Instead of reacting to Castro's diversions, the Administration should concentrate its efforts on reaching out to the people in Cuba. It is time to penetrate Castro's blockade around the Cuban people by using laws already on the books. Failure to promote democratic change now could ensure that little if anything will change to alleviate Cuban misery after Castro himself departs.

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