IdeAs

Idées d'Amérique

10 | 2017

États-Unis / Cuba : une nouvelle donne ?

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Édition électronique

URL : <https://journals.openedition.org/ideas/2190>

DOI : 10.4000/ideas.2190

ISSN : 1950-5701

Éditeur

Institut des Amériques

Référence électronique

Isabelle Vagnoux, « Interview with Ambassador Roger Noriega on the United States-Cuba relationship », *IdeAs* [En ligne], 10 | 2017, mis en ligne le 12 janvier 2018, consulté le 20 octobre 2022.

URL : <http://journals.openedition.org/ideas/2190> ; DOI : <https://doi.org/10.4000/ideas.2190>

Ce document a été généré automatiquement le 20 octobre 2022.

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Interview with Ambassador Roger Noriega on the United States-Cuba relationship

Isabelle Vagnoux

Interview conducted by Dr Isabelle Vagnoux on November 21, 2017, with many thanks to Ambassador Noriega for sharing his views with us.

Roger F. Noriega is a former Assistant Secretary of State for Western Hemisphere affairs (2003-2005) and a former U.S. ambassador to the Organization of American States (2001-2003). He now coordinates the American Enterprise Institute's program on Latin America.

In retrospect, how would you evaluate the policies led by the Bush Administration and advocated by the Commission Assistance to a Free Cuba (regime change, democracy promotion, restrictions on travel, etc) ?

Our policies were oriented by what we felt would be in the best interest of the Cuban people. Clearly, there is a limit to what can be done in the face of a Stalinist dictatorship determined to hold onto power. However, in that period of time, you saw more and more courageous leaders emerge in Cuba and stand up for freedom like Yoani Sanchez, Antonio Rodiles, and Rosa Maria Paya. We made it clear that the U.S. stood with them and had their interests at heart. Unfortunately, the Obama administration sent a very different message to Cuban dissidents.

In retrospect, how would you evaluate the LIBERTAD Act's impact on the bilateral relationship and the fact that Title III has been regularly waived by all Administrations, Republican and Democratic alike ?

To the extent that the Libertad Act prevented absolute capitulation by the Obama administration in courting normalized relations with Cuba, I believe it has been an extraordinary success of which I am personally proud.

I do believe that the executive branch is no longer scrutinizing the waivers as they have in the past, and they are less justified than ever. I think Congress should

consider revoking that waiver authority unless President Trump instructs his team to be much more rigorous in applying the law the way it was intended.

In a piece published by AEI on 23 February 2017 you wrote that « no substantive progress has been made on human rights or political freedoms. » What would you recommend to help improve political freedoms in Cuba ?

We need to continue to make the case to the international community to do more in solidarity with the Cuban people. Perhaps one the most troubling aspects of the Obama policy is that embassies shut their doors to dissidents, activists, and independent journalists, caving to pressure from the dictatorship.

The singular obstacle to freedom and progress is the Cuban regime and anything that prolongs its existence or expands its ability to repress the Cuban people should be discarded. At the same time, I do believe that we need to be more creative in how we promote democracy on the island and pressure the regime.

What, according to you, would be necessary to fully normalize the bilateral relationship the way Washington did with other Communist countries such as Vietnam or China ? Why is Cuba different ?

The requirements for a normal relationship between the United States and Cuba are simple and clearly spelled out in U.S. law. The LIBERTAD Act expects a post-Castro government in Cuba to free all political prisoners, respect political freedoms, dismantle its police state, and commit to holding fair elections within 18 months. It is also required to at least make public commitments to establishing independent courts and honoring internationally recognized human and labor rights.

The reality is that Cuba remains the only country in the Western Hemisphere that cannot meet any of these foregoing conditions. Cuba's close ally Venezuela is vying to change that, a testament to the Castro dictatorship's destructive influence in the region.

As to why Cuba is "different", Cuba is 90 miles from the U.S. and we have over two million Cuban-Americans who are deeply interested in what happens there and maintain active ties to the island. There's no one size fits all answer, but it's fair to say that the models of China and Vietnam have been good for business without producing much progress in the way of human rights and political freedom.

How would you evaluate the influence of the Republican Cuban Americans on President Trump's decision to step back from President Obama's initiatives and slow down the normalization process ?

It is no secret that the Cuban-American community has been vocally critical of President Obama's normalization, particularly in the U.S. Congress. Many Cuban-Americans were rightly aghast at the willful disregard for human rights and political freedoms under the Obama administration's Cuba policy. However, it is important to note that Cuban-Americans were not alone in their concern over President Obama's rapprochement. I myself am Mexican-American, and I have been one of the most visible critics of the Obama administration's policy, as has a Colombian-American colleague of mine named José Cárdenas. At the same time, there are some prominent Cuban-Americans who are adamant supporters of the Obama policy.

It is important to note that the relatively limited changes that the Trump administration made are intended to deny the flow of revenue to the regime, and to members of the Castro family. These changes reverse one of the more perverse

effects of the Obama opening which essentially made a dynastic transition in Cuba more likely.

How do you view Cuban Foreign Affairs Minister Rodriguez' recent opening to Cubans living in the US?

I believe it is appropriate for the Cuban government to end its discrimination against Cuban-Americans and Cubans living in the U.S. You will recall that well into the normalization process, Cuban-Americans were still prohibited from travelling to the island on ships.

But the reality is that token moves like this completely ignore the Cuban government's abject failure to provide adequate safety for U.S. diplomats and basic human rights for Cubans. Furthermore, as long as Rodriguez is the puppet of a Stalinist regime, we can't take anything he says on faith.

Last February, panelists at a Brookings Institution event said that « policy-makers have to remove emotion from their decision-making process when it comes to the embargo ». Would you agree that emotion prevents a significant policy change ?

When someone references "emotional" responses or reactions to the Cuba issue, it is often a dog-whistle message meant to discredit the concerns of the Cuban-American community using ugly stereotypes. I wish it would stop, but many advocates of Obama's normalization have adopted it as a go-to talking point.

I'll add that one of Brookings' self-described regional experts once said, and I'm paraphrasing, "I don't know much about Cuba, but I can see things are changing." Maybe if he knew more about Cuba, he would know more about the daily abuse and repression of 11 million Cubans. Cuban exiles don't regard this debate as an academic exercise, nor should they. They know the destructive effects of accommodations to a repressive dictatorship.

The reality is that the consistent abuse of human rights, the beating of women and other peaceful protestors, the government's violence and discrimination against LGBT Cubans, and the denial of basic political freedoms to an entire island 90 miles from the U.S. should elicit an emotional response. If it doesn't, then there is something wrong.

How do you view a possible impact of recent developments in Venezuela on Cuba ? How do you view the close link between the two countries ?

The crisis in Venezuela has had a direct impact on Cuba and the ability of the Cuban dictatorship to sustain itself. In many ways, Cuba and Venezuela have intertwined destinies. Venezuela has long supported Cuba financially through its oil wealth, and Cuba has supported Venezuela's socialist government by sending it thousands of intelligence agents to bolster its repressive regime. Cuba also has an immense degree of influence in Venezuela and has been vital to shaping its direction under Hugo Chávez and Nicolás Maduro.

Now, remember that one of the Obama administration's main arguments for normalization with Cuba was that it would restore our influence in the rest of Latin America and secure more cooperation from Cuba on regional issues such as drug trafficking. Nearly three years later, Cuba continues to actively support the Venezuelan narco-dictatorship and work against efforts to bring an end to the crisis and accountability to the tyrannical Venezuelan regime.

Do you believe that Cuba's ties with Russia and China could be a threat to the United States ?

Cuba continues to be a key agent for hostile extra-hemispheric powers seeking to gain influence and strategic placement in Latin America. The goal of this is clearly to undermine U.S. influence in Latin America and bolster hostile and disruptive forces in the region such as Russia, China, and Iran. Both Russia and China have played key roles in financially supporting the Venezuelan dictatorship and delaying its inevitable collapse. Cuba also acts as a safe haven for Russian intelligence operations that directly undermine U.S. security. Unfortunately, Cuba has continued to roll out the welcome mat for hostile foreign powers under Obama's normalization.

How do you view future developments after Raul Castro leaves the presidency in February 2018?

First, it is important to note that Raul Castro is set to retain control of the Cuban military and the Cuban Communist Party even after he steps down from the presidency. Raul Castro has a very clear plan for what will happen after he leaves power that ensures his cronies and family will retain power to micromanage the economy.

Raul's chosen successor Miguel Diaz-Canel is set take his place next year. Many advocates for closer relations with Cuba claim Diaz-Canel is a moderate, yet leaked video from over the summer revealed that he is as hardline as they come and supports the active censorship and repression that continues under the Castros.

The military will almost certainly maintain control from behind the scenes, directly aided by the wealth derived from its control of hotels and tourism. Power and wealth will also be shared with the rest of the Castro family and their cronies, some of whom are strategically placed in the regime, such as Raul's son Maj. Alejandro Castro Espín and his son-in-law, General Luis Alberto Rodriguez, who controls foreign investment.

Those who say that the transition of power next year will lead to a different Cuba that respects human rights or basic freedom are either naïve or intellectually dishonest.

With that being said, every time I meet with Cuban dissidents and activists, I become more convinced that Cuba has a bright future. I believe that once the Cuban people have the opportunity to manage their own destiny, Cuba will become free and prosperous and have a positive influence in the region.

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