The Making of ENCASA/U.S.-Cuba

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n February 2006, a group of Cuban American scholars from all over the country met in Miami to forge an alternative vision for US-Cuba policy, to mobilize the largely silent and dispersed voice of Cuban American intellectuals and professionals, and to stimulate concerted action to reverse US-Cuba policy. The result, over the weeks that followed, was the formation of an Emergency Network of Cuban American Scholars and Artists for Change in U.S.-Cuba Policy (ENCASA/US-CUBA), and the drafting of a declaration which was published as an open letter in a full-page ad in the Miami Herald on April 27, 2006, along with the names and affiliations of more than 100 of its initial signatories.

By October 2006 ENCASA comprised a network of more than 400 scholars and artists, of whom 160 were Cuban Americans and more than 240 were non-Cuban scholars, affiliated with universities in more than 150 cities in 35 states, the District of Columbia and Puerto Rico—though just over half were based in California, New York and Florida (and one in nine resided in Miami). Many are distinguished academics in the nation’s leading research universities (about 40% are Full Professors); others are affiliated with non-academic institutions, and one in six is an independent scholar, artist, writer or other professional. But all share a common concern and commitment to change current U.S.-Cuba policy.

For almost half a century the United States has pursued a policy of isolation of Cuba, bent on regime change in the island. Time and again such efforts have backfired—only to be reinstated with a vengeance, despite the fact that the Castro government has outlasted ten U.S. presidential administrations, from Dwight Eisenhower to George W. Bush. Far from ushering in an era of new thinking, the end of the Cold War and the collapse of the Soviet bloc led instead to a ratcheting up of the strategy of economic strangulation to force political change. Under the theory that the end of massive Soviet assistance had rendered the island so vulnerable that an intensified embargo coupled with assistance to bolster opposition on the island would trigger regime change, the [Torricelli] “Cuban Democracy Act of 1992” and the [Helms-Burton] “Cuban Liberty and Democratic Solidarity (Liberatad) Act of 1996” were signed into law. But more than ten years after their enactment, it was clear that the approach had again failed on all counts.

Laws intended to isolate Cuba internationally have instead alienated the U.S. from the rest of the world, especially its closest neighbors in this hemisphere, while earning the Cuban government sympathy and solidarity. For fifteen consecutive years since 1992, with growing global unanimity, the vote at the United Nations has expressed world condemnation for the U.S. trade, financial and travel embargo against Cuba; the most recent vote, taken on November 8, 2006, was 183 to 4. (The 4 voting “no” were the United States, Israel, Palau and the Marshall Islands.) At a time when the United States should be seeking to repair an image tattered by disregard for international norms and for the views and rights of others, the last thing it should be doing is reinforcing a policy already roundly condemned by almost every nation in the U.N.

For that matter, polls show that the majority of U.S. citizens are against the blockade. In August 2006, shortly after 80-year-old Fidel Castro was hospitalized for major surgery, a CNN poll found that 62% of Americans believed that the U.S. should normalize relations with Cuba now and 69% believed that should take place if Raúl Castro replaces his brother as head of the government. However, the U.S. embargo denies opportunities to American farmers and businesses while inflicting economic hardship on the Cuban people. Harsh travel restrictions infringe on the rights of U.S. citizens to travel and contribute to the trauma of separation of Cuban families. Ironically, US policy only reinforces hard-line tendencies on the part of the Cuban government.

In 2004, the Bush administration implemented draconian new restrictions, the most punitive of the post-Cold War era, as articulated in the report of its “Commission for Assistance to a Free Cuba.” That 400-page document also arrogantly designs every aspect of future life in a post-Castro Cuba, from urban planning to agricultural production. It severely limits Cuban American travel and places new restrictions on remittances—absurdly redefining the meaning of what constitutes the Cuban “family” to exclude aunts, uncles, nieces, nephews and cousins, and permitting only one visit every three years for immediate family members regardless of circumstance. Likewise, scholarly and cultural exchange is increasingly restricted, even though evidence suggests that these have inspired more reform than the punitive policies. The new measures are politically ineffective and counterproductive, and irredeemably cruel and inhumane in terms of the consequences for the Cuban people on the island and abroad. Indeed, the brunt of
such failed policies has been borne largely by the Cuban family.

Adding irony to this tragic trajectory is that it was endorsed and given a mantle of legitimacy by influential Cuban American sectors that claim to speak on behalf of the entire community. At that juncture, as U.S. policy toward Cuba continued to drift toward more destructive and dangerous extremes, and as an even more comprehensive social blueprint toward Cuba was expected to be issued imminently in 2006 by the Bush Administration, it became critical for Cuban Americans who share a different vision to develop coherent alternatives—based on facts and realistic thinking, not on slogans and posturing—and to speak out forcefully in opposition to current policy trends. That is the impulse that gave birth to ENCASA.

In May 2006, shortly after our open letter was published, the Florida state legislature passed a bill, signed into law by Governor Jeb Bush a month later, prohibiting scholars in the state’s colleges and universities from using public and private monies to conduct research in Cuba and a few other countries they branded as “terrorist.” The law has generated substantial ridicule in the national and international press. On June 13, two legal actions were filed over restrictions on educational and scientific research travel to Cuba, on constitutional and other grounds: one, at the state level, a lawsuit by the ACLU of Florida against Florida’s new law; and the other, at the federal level, a lawsuit brought by the Emergency Coalition to Defend Educational Travel (ECDET) against the U.S. Treasury Department over the restrictions on educational travel issued by the Bush Administration’s Cuba Commission in 2004. ENCASA members have been involved in these efforts, and ENCASA lawyers filed an amicus (friend of the court) brief in the Florida lawsuit.

And on July 10, 2006, the administration’s “Commission for Assistance for a Free Cuba” finally released its follow-up to the original 2004 report. ENCASA was quick to reply. The new 2006 CAFC report, and its accompanying “Compact with the Cuban People,” cannot be read without experiencing a sense of tragic déjà vu. Its centerpiece is a two-year, $80 million program purportedly designed to help dissidents in Cuba, although some prominent members of the opposition in Cuba have insisted that their cause is only compromised by U.S. money, making them appear paid agents of U.S. interests. The policy calls for tightening the enforcement of travel restrictions even further, keeping next-door-neighbor Cuba off-limits to U.S. citizens—even though they are free to travel to any other country in the world, including Vietnam (where more than 58,000 American citizens lost their lives but with whom trade relations were re-established 19 years after the end of the war, so that today the U.S. is Vietnam’s largest market and Americans are the second largest contingent of tourists). Both reports were issued just before tough elections, both reek of hypocritical double standards, both evidence a profound ignorance of Cuban history and society. And what is one to make, for example, after the Iraq and Katrina debacles, of the pledge made by the U.S. government to a hypothetical “Cuban transition government” to “provide emergency food, water, fuel, and medical equipment and help ensure that these vital supplies are rapidly distributed throughout Cuba?”

Most ominously, the 2006 CAFC report is accompanied by a classified secret annex, one which recalls the long U.S. history of invasions, assassination attempts, sabotage, clandestine incursions and other cloak-and-dagger operations. Indeed, its emphasis on “restoring sovereignty to the Cuban people” after more than a century of repeated U.S. transgressions against Cuban sovereignty and of meddling in Cuban affairs is one of its most Orwellian aspects. It embodies the same misbegotten principle enshrined in the infamous Platt Amendment—which the United States arrogantly attached to the fledgling Cuban Constitution in 1902, giving the U.S. the right to intervene unilaterally in Cuba’s internal affairs—and in much of U.S. policy toward Cuba ever since. A state that respects the sovereignty of another does not produce a detailed blueprint for the political future of that nation and that people—in effect, for accelerated “regime change.”

ENCASA is part of a long continuum of Cuban American political activism. Since the early 19th century, literally hundreds of organizations have emerged in the Cuban exile community to try to influence U.S. policy towards Cuba in one way or another. The majority emerged after 1959. While ours is not the first organization to advocate diplomatic, cultural, and trade relations as a means of fostering positive change in both Cuba and the United States, ours is distinguished from our predecessors in its membership, comprised entirely of scholars representing a wide variety of academic disciplines, as well as artists, writers, and playwrights. This sector of the community has produced extensive research on Cuba, but has generally kept out of the political limelight in the name of academic objectivity. We can remain silent no longer. We are committed to promoting reasoned debate in the public arena, to countering the stereotype of a monolithic Cuban American community, to challenging the disproportionate influence of a sector out of touch with U.S. public opinion, and to help bring about an end to a failed policy that defies all sound principles for conducting foreign affairs.


NOTES
1 The declaration and list of signatories is at: http://www.encasa-us-cuba.org/encasafoundingdec.html
2 At: http://uscode.house.gov/download/pls/22C69.txt
3 At: http://usinfo.state.gov/usa/infousa/laws/majorlaw/h927_enr.htm
4 At: http://www.state.gov/p/wha/rt/cuba/

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