



# ***Policy Options for a Cuban Spring***

**Gregory Weeks, Ph.D., and Erin Fiorey**

**O**VER 20 YEARS after the fall of the Soviet Union and more than 50 years since the Cuban revolution, the Cuban government remains a stubborn reminder that not all Cold War conflicts have ended. As the world watches historic political change taking place in the Middle East, Cuba is ruled by the same two men who have governed since the administration of Dwight D. Eisenhower. Meanwhile, the policies of the United States have evolved only slightly in that same span of time.

The deep antagonism between the United States and Cuba has left policy options calcified. The official policy of the United States is that the Cuban government is illegitimate and should be removed from power. However, it has become clear that the United States has very little leverage and will therefore respond to transition in Cuba as it occurs rather than act as a driving force of political change. How to do so in the most effective manner possible is an open question. This article examines the evolution of U.S. policy toward Cuba and offers policy recommendations in the eventuality of a Cuban Spring, using the Arab Spring as a recent example for comparison.

## **Historical Background**

Cuban political history of the past century is tightly bound to the United States. As one scholar has put it, “the United States and Cuba have never had normal ties.”<sup>1</sup> “Regime change” was even codified into the Cuban constitution from 1901 to 1934 through the Platt Amendment. The third part of that amendment stated the point clearly:

That the government of Cuba consents that the United States may exercise the right to intervene for the preservation of Cuban independence, the maintenance of a government adequate for the protection of life, property, and individual liberty.<sup>2</sup>

Gregory Weeks is an associate professor of political science and director of Latin American Studies at the University of North Carolina at Charlotte. He holds a Ph.D. from the University of North Carolina, Chapel Hill.

Erin Fiorey is an M.A. candidate in Latin American Studies at the University of North Carolina at Charlotte. She holds a B.A. from Wake Forest University.

PHOTO: Dressed in white and armed only with an iris and a photo of their loved ones, the Damas de Blanco (Ladies in White) Association in Cuba march in protest of the detention of jailed dissidents. (Damas de Blanco)

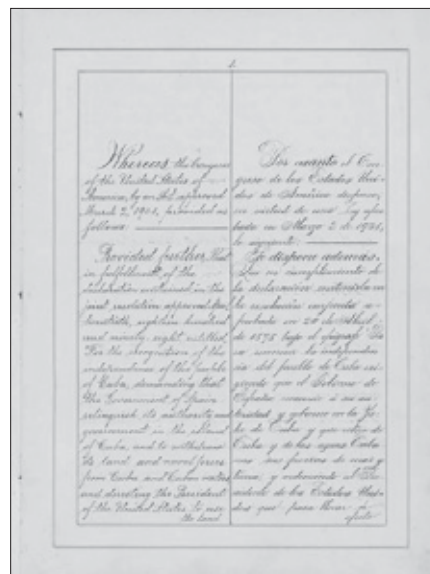
The United States intervened on more than one occasion, and U.S. ships and marines were common sights. Senator Platt wrote confidently, “The United States will always, under the so-called Platt Amendment, be in a position to straighten things out if they get seriously bad.”<sup>3</sup> As a prominent historian of Cuba notes, in the United States, Cuba was portrayed by media and politicians alike as a child, unable to make its own decisions capably.<sup>4</sup> President Franklin Roosevelt’s Good Neighbor Policy, announced in 1933, marked the end of the era of U.S. stewardship, but not intervention.

In part because of this asymmetrical relationship, the Cuban revolution was born and grew. Fidel Castro was born during occupation and became politically prominent at a time when the United States viewed dictator Fulgencio Batista as the ultimate defender of stability on the island. Castro’s distrust of the United States confounded President Eisenhower, who told a reporter, “When they got in trouble, we had an occupation, back about 1908, and again we set them on their feet, and set them free.”<sup>5</sup> That Cubans may not necessarily have appreciated foreign-led regime change crossed few minds. To succeed after the Castros eventually leave power, U.S. policy must always be cognizant of the Cuban population’s resistance to foreign manipulation, or even the appearance of it.

## A Dual-Track Policy of Isolating Cuba

The policy shift that began soon after the revolution is, of course, well known. The economic sanctions launched in 1960 (and expanded in 1962), the Cuban Missile Crisis in 1961, the failed Bay of Pigs invasion of 1962, and even assassination plots are all part of the historical record of U.S. policy toward Cuba. Taken together, they constitute an effort to isolate the Castro government both political and economically, with the ultimate goal of regime change. That policy goal, quite obviously, has never been achieved. Instead, the regime consolidated its position.

To further that aim of squeezing the Cuban regime, in 1982, the State Department listed Cuba as a “State Sponsor of Terrorism,” a designation that remains in effect to this day. Any country on the list has “repeatedly provided support for acts of international terrorism.” the most recent report,



U.S. Federal Government

### The Platt Amendment of 1901

The Platt Amendment stipulated the conditions for the withdrawal of United States troops remaining in Cuba at the end of the Spanish-American War and defined the terms of Cuba-U.S. relations until the 1934 Treaty of Relations.

released in late 2011 and less assertive than those the State Department issued during the Cold War, argued the following:

[T]he Government of Cuba maintained a public stance against terrorism and terrorist financing in 2010, but there was no evidence that it had severed ties with elements from the Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia (FARC) and recent media reports indicate some current and former members of the Basque Fatherland and Liberty (ETA) continue to reside in Cuba.<sup>6</sup>

The net result of the designation is to isolate the country by blocking economic assistance, arms sales, and to impose a variety of financial restrictions.

If anything, the end of the Cold War served to harden U.S. policy. Assassination attempts and covert operations were taboo, but the overall assessment was that the regime was on the brink of collapse, so more restrictions would push it further toward that result. The Cuban Democracy Act of 1992 asserted that U.S. policy was “to seek a peaceful transition to democracy and a resumption of economic growth in Cuba through the careful

application of sanctions directed at the Castro government and support for the Cuban people.”<sup>7</sup> That entailed tightening the embargo by penalizing foreign subsidiaries of U.S. companies that did business in Cuba, while also restricting travel and remittances. It emphasized that restrictions would not be lifted until free elections were held. The law was framed in both human rights and national security terms because of “subversive activities.”

The United States government no longer considers Cuba central to national security, but it is always present to a degree. Successive versions of the *National Security Strategy of the United States of America* addressed Cuba in some fashion after the Cold War, noting that it was the only remaining dictatorship in the region. Concerns about Cuba sending troops abroad—a constant issue during the Cold War—evaporated, giving way to an emphasis on promoting democracy. In 1998, the document reinforced the notion that the United States “remains committed to promoting a peaceful transition to democracy in Cuba.” The National Security Strategies for 1990, 1995, 1998, 2002, and 2006 display similar patterns in syntax and themes. For instance, each year offers “unprecedented” or “unparalleled” opportunities for the United States to exert its power and influence on the global stage as well as for the growth of democracy.

The United States exerted economic pressure on the Cuban government to enact reforms while it funded opposition civil society organizations and increased humanitarian aid. Cuba faded further from the national security radar after 9/11, when the United States shifted its focus firmly on the Middle East. By that time, Cuba had no real global presence and so was significant primarily for humanitarian reasons.

The greatest change in strategy came in 2010 with emphases on national endeavors for security

***The United States government no longer considers Cuba central to national security...***

rather than efforts to influence international events and on economic rather than democratic development. That year’s *National Security Strategy* document focused on streamlining and maximizing the effectiveness of U.S. institutions, including military deployment. The discourse on encouraging democracy throughout the globe, so prominent in all the documents from previous years, appears only briefly. Indeed, the new emphasis was that “we are promoting universal values abroad by living them at home, and will not seek to impose these values through force.”<sup>8</sup>

The 2010 *National Security Strategy* cited few specific examples why democratic development has succeeded or stalled and simply stated, “Even where some governments have adopted democratic practices, authoritarian rulers have undermined electoral processes and restricted the space for opposition and civil society.” It also dropped the imperative or “responsibility” of the United States “to oppose those who would endanger the survival or well-being of their peaceful neighbors,” used far less heated language, and made more references to international organizations for the resolution of conflicts involving the United States. These changes, only a few among many in the 2010 report, revealed a shift—albeit limited—in paradigms as well as acceptable strategies for national security. From this perspective, Cuba needed to change, but that change would not be forced.

A 2008 Congressional Research Service Report for Congress summed up U.S. policy as “a dual-track policy of isolating Cuba.” The two tracks were economic sanctions and efforts to facilitate a Cuban civil society that could become a more active political opposition. The report points out correctly that the Cuban Liberty and Democratic Solidarity Act of 1996 (the Helms-Burton law) constrains reaction to any political transition in Cuba. With logic similar to the Cuban Democracy Act, the law was intended to turn the embargo screws as tightly as possible to oust the Castro government.

## **Providing a Policy Framework**

The future U.S. response to political transition in Cuba must follow a cumbersome sequence. Section 203 of the Helms-Burton law requires the

president to appoint a coordinating official once a transition government is in power. That official must then create and convene a U.S.-Cuba council. Finally, the president must write a report to the appropriate congressional committees no later than 15 days after making the determination of a transitional government. In practice, this means influence over U.S. policy toward Cuba has shifted to Congress, which must approve the president's action. One stated purpose of the law is "to provide a policy framework for United States support to the Cuban people in response to the formation of a transition government or a democratically elected government in Cuba."<sup>9</sup> It will be a joint project between the president and Congress, at least until the latter proclaims the transitional government to be democratic, at which point the president's hands are freed.

The administration of George W. Bush added more layers of complexity. His Commission of Assistance to a Free Cuba, chaired by General Colin Powell, issued a report in 2004. General Powell noted in the preface that one purpose of the commission was to find ways to "hasten" the Cuban transition and then work with the transitional government.<sup>10</sup> Referring primarily to Helms-Burton, the report notes that "the report may include recommendations to assist a free Cuba that may be prohibited or limited by current U.S. law." Its essential recommendations were to continue isolating Cuba, to undermine the succession process, to fund the Cuban opposition, to restrict travel by U.S. citizens to the island, and to highlight the abuses of the regime. The report recommended an active role by the U.S. military for modernization and professionalization of the Cuban armed forces after the transition.

Barack Obama's administration made minor changes to Cuba policy in 2009, hoping to engage Cubans by allowing more family visits, remittances, and humanitarian donations as well as opening more telecommunication links to the island. In 2011, President Obama made more allowances for "purposeful travel" as part of a policy of "reaching out to the Cuban people."<sup>11</sup> Substantively, though, the change was not dramatic or drastically different from the past. However, as noted, the administration moved away from the rhetoric of "hastening" the transition or intervening. Thus, the report of the Committee of

Assistance to a Free Cuba, which does not have any legal standing, will likely not be immediately followed if a transition occurs while President Obama is in office. Indeed, the Department of State's 2010 *Quadrennial Diplomacy and Development Review* deemphasizes nation-building and focuses more on channeling resources through local governments to generate economic development.<sup>12</sup>

As the Castro dictatorship became deeply entrenched, signs of a "Cuban Spring" have been few and far between. Organized movements have periodically emerged but have not led to widespread protests and are harassed and closely monitored by the government. Especially given demographic change, however, some type of political transformation is highly likely. A growing number of Cubans were born after the revolution and—if they haven't emigrated already—are not necessarily as committed to it ideologically. This is not unlike the Arab Spring. When Fidel Castro became ill in 2006, rumors of his imminent death spread quickly and inaccurately. Regime change of some sort is inevitable, though its precise nature is impossible to predict.

## The Rule of the Sultans is Coming to an End

Although it has roots in the 2009 Iranian Green Movement protests, the so-called "Arab Spring" began in December 2010, when a man burned himself publicly to protest police brutality in Tunisia. Large-scale protests in Tunisia led to the president's removal the following month. Through the use of technology and social media, the example spread across the Middle East in a struggle against sultan-like governments controlled by a small, ruling clique that fuses the public and the private, the state and the ruler as one, with no accountability. As scholar Jack Goldstone put it, "The rule of the sultans is coming to an end."<sup>13</sup> One essential characteristic of all the protests is that although they might have found inspiration in events abroad, they were fundamentally domestic in nature. Indeed, the movements' vitality depended largely upon that fact.

The sources of homegrown dissent were numerous. Authoritarian rule, corruption, unemployment, and economic disparities combined

with demographic change that created a large cohort of discontented youth. No longer as closely linked to the socio-political conditions—most notably the Cold War—that helped install the dictatorships in the first place, young people demanded change. But they faced long-standing dictatorships unaccustomed to allowing more than token opposition.

As they grew and clashed—sometimes very violently—with their governments, these movements received foreign moral and material support. With regard to the United States, the nature of this response has varied considerably, ranging from support for a NATO operation in Libya to the removal of rhetorical and material support for Hosni Mubarak in Egypt. Given differing and very fluid circumstances, there is no rigid policy model to follow. In a 2011 speech, President Obama referred to the Arab Spring in terms that echoed years of Cuba policy, where the United States would promote reform and democratic transition, even in countries where transitions had yet to take place. However, at the same time, “it was the people themselves who launched these movements, and it’s the people themselves that must ultimately determine their outcome.”<sup>14</sup> This position falls in line with the 2010 *National Security Strategy*.

To date, regime change has occurred in four countries: Egypt, Libya, Tunisia, and Yemen. Meanwhile, political conflict has engulfed Syria and Bahrain and may still emerge elsewhere. Regimes that only a short time ago were widely considered solid crumbled in a matter of weeks. The United States has managed to establish positive, although cautious, ties to the emerging transitional governments. This has been the case in no small part because of the measured policy response. Diving headfirst into civil war is a decidedly risky business.

Although these political processes are still undergoing change and outcomes are uncertain, there are lessons for better understanding the Cuban situation and the role of the United States in contributing to democratization in Cuba. Sultans also run the Cuban regime, as there is little difference between the state and the Castros. When a transition occurs, there will certainly be some similar economic and demographic characteristics.

At the same time, we must acknowledge important differences. One critical factor is the political activism of the Cuban-American community in the United States, for which there is no parallel for the countries affected by the Arab Spring. Tied closely to that is geography. Civil conflict in the Middle East certainly affects the United States, but for Cuba the impact is immediate, in the form of refugees. That possibility was raised in the 1998 *National Security Strategy* and never leaves the minds of policy makers. Nonetheless, we can establish some policy parameters.

## U.S. Money Won’t Cause Change in Cuba

What would a Cuban transition look like? Why would it start? No one predicted the Arab Spring, and for Cuba the many possible permutations are well beyond the scope of this article. Cuban opposition blogger Yoani Sánchez writes that Cubans view transition as similar to a dilapidated building in Havana: “The hurricanes don’t bring it down and the rains don’t bring it down, but one day someone tries to change the lock on the front door and the whole edifice collapses.”<sup>15</sup> In any event, given the hermetic nature of the regime and its successful resistance to U.S. influence, it is



Internationally renowned *Generation Y* blogger, Yoani Sánchez, Havana, Cuba, 2011. (Orlando Luis Pardo Lazo)

***Widespread perception that the United States is attempting to direct events fosters distrust...***

very unlikely that the United States will have much influence over its initiation.

As the prominent Cuban dissident Oswaldo Payá argues, “One talks about the United States’ money for civil society . . . . The United States’ money won’t cause change in Cuba.”<sup>16</sup> It is a point he has made repeatedly. If there is a Cuban Spring, then its emergence and ultimate success will hinge on its domestic wellsprings. In fact, this echoes the policy position of the administration of Barack Obama. As Secretary of State Hillary Clinton put it in 2011, “These revolutions are not ours. They are not by us, for us, or against us, but we do have a role. We have the resources, capabilities, and expertise to support those who seek peaceful, meaningful, democratic reform.”<sup>17</sup> Even the Catholic Cardinal in Cuba, Jaime Ortega, has cautioned against “a type of U.S. subculture which invades everything.”<sup>18</sup> He was referring not only to culture, but also to politics.

What the wariness entails is an increased risk of backlash if the United States injects itself too forcefully. The United States faced a similar dilemma in the Arab Spring Middle Eastern transitions. Widespread perception that the United States is attempting to direct events fosters distrust and provides leverage to pro-regime forces or at the very least puts leaders on the defensive who might otherwise welcome assistance from the United States. This is commonly referred to as “blowback,” and over the long term, it could greatly reduce U.S. influence.

However, once the political transition is underway the United States will have to respond, especially given Cuba’s geographic immediacy and the domestic political ties of the Cuban American community. It must do so in a constructive way, to avoid remaining in the habit of “rejecting most tools of diplomatic engagement” as a 2009 Senate staff report put it.<sup>19</sup> The report also accurately noted that any transitional government or opposition movement attempting to become a government will not be a *tabula rasa*. Even

if they are more positive toward the United States than the Castros are, the movement’s leaders will also be steeped in the history of U.S.-Cuban relations; that is, steeped in U.S. efforts to exert political control. In 2009 congressional testimony, former Southern Command commander General Barry McCaffrey noted, “There is no question we lack influence.”<sup>20</sup> Establishing influence is no easy task, and we cannot accomplish it quickly.

## **Policy Responses**

If we bring together the lessons of the history of U.S.-Cuban relations and the initial experience of the Arab Spring, then we can make some informed policy recommendations based on Cuban sensitivities to their country’s sovereignty, the difficulties inherent in unilateral action, and the delicate balance between legislative and executive policymaking.

First, material support from the United States must come at the request of the transitional government. Premature action can actually undermine protests by allowing the government to reframe them as U.S. strategy to assert undue influence. Even prominent Cuban opposition members express concern in that regard. Aid can be useful, but it can also easily backfire. This is true at all stages of the transition.

The Commission for Assistance to a Free Cuba advocated immediate, wide-ranging action, but even the opposition will be wary of its northern neighbor. Moving precipitously would force a potentially friendly group into a nationalistic response. That would complicate domestic political calculations in the United States and could even slow down the transition itself.

Second, the United States should engage with other Latin American countries to facilitate as peaceful and autonomous a transition as possible in Cuba. This will not necessarily be a smooth process; it will face multiple challenges. As in the Middle East, a multilateral response will increase the domestic and international legitimacy of the transitional government and the governments that follow it. This does not mean the United States “leads from behind” but rather that it avoids unilateral responses. In particular, economic aid and debt relief will be important for the new government.

A multilateral approach will entail a slower response than a unilateral approach. However, it will



(U.S. Navy, J01 Preston Keres)

**U.S. Navy hospital ship USNS *Comfort* (T-AH 20) passes the Statue of Liberty enroute to Manhattan to provide assistance to victims of the 9/11 terrorist attack on the World Trade Center in New York, 15 September 2001.**

increase the chances that the new government will be able to normalize relations with the United States. It will also be difficult, at least at first, because five decades of unilateral embargo policy have left the United States isolated in both the region and the world.

Third, the use of U.S. troops is not recommended. Given the history of Latin American governments' strong preference for nonintervention, unlike in the Middle East, it is highly unlikely that regional support would emerge for the use of force in any form, and the history of U.S.-Latin American relations warns against unilateral action. It would almost certainly be viewed as illegitimate. This is consistent with the policy shift outlined in the 2010 *National Security Strategy*.

Across Latin America, the use of military force is viewed in almost entirely negative terms. Not only does the region boast one of the lowest rates of interstate war of any region in the world, but there are many examples of unilateral intervention by the United States that were not viewed favorably.

Fourth, soft power is important. As Joseph Nye argues, soft power "is the ability to get what you want through attraction rather than coercion

or payments."<sup>21</sup> He adds that "attraction can turn to repulsion if we act in an arrogant manner and destroy the real message of our deeper values." The relevance of soft power has been cited with regard to the Arab Spring as well. It should also be noted that soft power can include the U.S. military, though not in the sense of combat or training. In his book, Admiral James Stavridis makes the point that medical missions, most notably the USNS *Comfort*, have proven highly effective in promoting a positive image of the United States.<sup>22</sup>

Since the end of the Cold War, the United States has tended to focus more on payments to civil society, although there have been periodic humanitarian efforts. However, as aforementioned, money alone is not only insufficient but also counter-productive, if executed poorly. Ideally, soft power has no strings attached and simply becomes a concrete demonstration of goodwill that goes beyond rhetoric.

## **A Post-Castro Relationship**

The history of U.S.-Cuba relations and the experience of the Arab Spring provide a useful context for identifying the optimal policy responses

to an eventual Cuban political transition. There is a fine line between caution and passivity, but this line is one the United States must successfully walk. There will be strong resistance to a foreign presence, and the possibility of blowback is very real. The United States can and must play a role in Cuban democratization, but it cannot create it.

The policy of the United States toward Cuba has been remarkably consistent for decades, but has never achieved its stated goals, namely regime

change and democratization. There is no way to predict when a political opening will occur, and it is highly unlikely the United States will be the motor of change, but we have laid out the optimal ways of addressing regime change when it occurs. The most effective responses will be constructive, measured, and multilateral, but active. These are not terms usually associated with U.S. policy toward Cuba, but they are central to a new post-Castro relationship. **MR**

---

#### NOTES

1. Marifeli Pérez-Stable, *The United States and Cuba: Intimate Enemies* (New York: Routledge, 2011), 1.

2. Robert H. Holden and Eric Zolov, *Latin America and the United States: A Documentary History* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2011), 83.

3. Lars Schoultz, *That Infernal Little Cuban Republic: The United States and the Cuban Revolution* (Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 2009), 24-25.

4. Louis A. Pérez, Jr., *Cuba in the American Imagination* (Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 2008).

5. Shoultz, 129.

6. See <<http://www.state.gov/j/ct/rt/crt/2010/170260.htm>>.

7. For text of the law, see <[http://www.state.gov/www/regions/wha/cuba/democ\\_act\\_1992.html](http://www.state.gov/www/regions/wha/cuba/democ_act_1992.html)>.

8. See <[http://www.whitehouse.gov/sites/default/files/rss\\_viewer/national\\_security\\_strategy.pdf](http://www.whitehouse.gov/sites/default/files/rss_viewer/national_security_strategy.pdf)>.

9. For text of the law, see <<http://thomas.loc.gov/cgi-bin/query/F?c104:1:/temp/~c104FmzEdw:e12706>>.

10. For the full text of report, see <[http://pdf.usaid.gov/pdf\\_docs/PCAAB192.pdf](http://pdf.usaid.gov/pdf_docs/PCAAB192.pdf)>.

11. See <<http://www.whitehouse.gov/the-press-office/2011/01/14/reaching-out-cuban-people>>.

12. For the full text, see <<http://www.state.gov/documents/organization/153108.pdf>>.

13. Jack A. Goldstone, "Understanding the Revolutions of 2011," *Foreign Affairs* 90, 3 (May/June 2011): 8-16.

14. See <<http://www.whitehouse.gov/the-press-office/2011/05/19/remarks-president-middle-east-and-north-africa>>.

15. Yoani Sánchez, "Country for Old Men," *Foreign Policy* (November 2011): 37.

16. See <<http://www.libertadsindical.com/entrevista-con-oswaldo-paya/>>.

17. See <<http://www.state.gov/secretary/rm/2011/11/176750.htm>>.

18. Paul Haven, "As Pope Visit Nears, Spotlight on Cuba's Cardinal," *The Boston Globe*, 18 February 2012, <[http://www.boston.com/news/world/latinamerica/articles/2012/02/18/as\\_pope\\_visit\\_nears\\_spotlight\\_on\\_cubas\\_cardinal/](http://www.boston.com/news/world/latinamerica/articles/2012/02/18/as_pope_visit_nears_spotlight_on_cubas_cardinal/)>.

19. *Changing Cuba Policy—In the United States National Interest*, Staff Trip Report to the Committee of Foreign Relations, United States Senate, 23 February 2009, 2.

20. *National Security Implications of U.S. Policy Toward Cuba*, Hearing Before the Subcommittee on National Security and Foreign Affairs of the Committee on Oversight and Government Reform, House of Representatives, 111th Congress, First Session, 29 April 2009, Serial No. 111-121, 16.

21. Joseph Nye, *Soft Power: The Means to Success in World Politics* (New York: Public Affairs, 2004), x.

22. James Stavridis, *Partnership for the Americas: Western Hemisphere Strategy and U.S. Southern Command* (Washington, DC: National Defense University Press, 2010).

# Military Review



*Military Review* is a forum for "fearless, thoughtful, but loyal dissent..."  
 "...this is a sign of institutional vitality, health, and strength."  
 - Secretary of Defense Robert Gates

**Want to comment? *Military Review* is now on Facebook.**

The official *Military Review* Facebook site is now available for professional discussion and debate. We encourage comments on specific articles published in each issue, as well as on the overall magazine layout, design, or content. To comment, go to our webpage at <http://militaryreview.army.mil> and click on the Facebook icon.

"Out-of-the-box thinking from deep inside the Army box."  
 - *Armed Forces Journal*