

1-8-2009

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LADB Staff

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### Recommended Citation

LADB Staff. "Changing Us Cuba Policy; Hopes And Issues." (2009). <https://digitalrepository.unm.edu/noticen/9667>

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## Changing Us Cuba Policy; Hopes And Issues

by LADB Staff

Category/Department: Cuba

Published: Thursday, January 8, 2009

As Cuba celebrates the 50th anniversary of the revolution and the US prepares to celebrate the inauguration of its first African-American president, observers on both sides of the Florida Straits have begun to expect new developments in the historically moribund relationship between the two. The hope is in part generational. Fifty years is longer than President-elect Barack Obama has been alive. He was not even born when Cuban dictator Gen. Fulgencio Batista fled the island with the victorious Fidel Castro and his guerrilla troops at his heels. Also as yet unborn were the younger generations of Cuban Americans in Miami and elsewhere who have taken a much more moderate view of the relationship than had their elders, who left the island to become the powerful electoral constituency that has made rage against the revolution a constant in US policy. Being black aside, Obama is also the first president-elect not to be beholden to this constituency. He won Florida and its crucial stack of electoral votes without them, with just 35% of the Cuban-American vote. "US Cuba policy has not been a foreign policy," said Shannon O'Neil of the Council on Foreign Relations (CFR). "It's been a domestic policy based on the Cuban vote in Florida." Nonetheless, recent polling found 55% of South Florida's Cubans favor an end to the embargo, 65% favor restoration of diplomatic relations, and even more favor an end to travel restrictions. That means, said Daniel Erikson, director of Caribbean programs at the Inter-American Dialogue, "that he didn't need the Cuban vote to win Florida, and he did not need the Florida vote to win the presidential election." But, while Obama has carved out some space for himself to realign the priorities, he has spoken equivocally about what he would do about Cuba. Running in Illinois for the US Senate, he called the embargo a tactic that had "utterly failed in the effort to overthrow Castro," said that he wanted "to end the embargo with Cuba," and specifically called for "normalization of relations with Cuba." But in his presidential campaign, Obama spoke differently. "Throughout my entire life, there has been injustice in Cuba. Never, in my lifetime, have the people of Cuba known freedom. Never, in the lives of two generations of Cubans, have the people of Cuba known democracy. This is the terrible and tragic status quo that we have known for half a century of elections that are anything but free and fair; of dissidents locked away in dark prison cells for the crime of speaking the truth. I won't stand for this injustice, you won't stand for this injustice, and together we will stand up for freedom in Cuba," he said in a speech to the Cuban-American National Foundation (CANF). And he also said, "I'm going to maintain the embargo (see NotiCen, 2008-05-29). Returning to limitations of presidential power It is also the case that Obama cannot lift the blockade on his own. Both the Cuban Democracy Act of 1992 and the Helms-Burton Act of 1996 require that Congress approve either a lifting of the blockade or the normalization of relations, at least while a Castro is in power (see NotiCen, 1997-04-17). Allowing Helms-Burton to prevail required the action of President Bill Clinton, who was no less in the pocket of the Miami Cubans than was Bush. There are some things he has said he would do, however, that could ease the difficult economic conditions for Cubans. US President George W. Bush, who owed the Cuban hard-liners for their support in both his election bids, imposed very strict new limits on Cuban Americans, including reducing the right to visit relatives on the island to a single visit every three years and limiting remittances to family members to US\$300 per year. Travel to Cuba for non-Cubans has also been reduced to near zero, but, said Erikson, "There is pretty broad support for lifting the travel ban for all Americans." The requirement

of congressional approval is not necessarily a stopper. Many legislators in both houses would like to see restrictions eased to facilitate trade with the island for their states. This is particularly true in the Midwest, where farmers would like to sell their grain and also see Cuba eligible for normal financing. At present, Cuba, when it is allowed to buy from the US at all, must pay cash. Even with the restrictions, the US has been Cuba's largest supplier of agricultural products since 2002. The island is among the top-ten export markets for soybean oil, dry peas, lentils, dry beans, rice, powdered milk, and poultry. It is also a major market for corn, wheat, and soybeans. Buying more than 25% of its food from its adversary, Cuba paid US suppliers more than US\$437 million in 2008. Congressional support comes from both sides of the aisle. Chair of the House appropriations subcommittee on agriculture Rosa De Lauro (D

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