

Thawing Relationship: Cuba & the USA

Different Perspectives

Older Cuban Citizens: Some of you work for the government and are members of the Communist Party. Others in your group work as doctors, engineers or managers, and may have gained your position by following the rules. In school you were taught to be suspicious of the United States, regarding it as a hostile nation intent on dominating Cuba, but lately some of you are not so sure.

John F. Kennedy, who strengthened economic sanctions against Cuba in the early 1960s, has a whole room devoted to his sins. But the final exhibit, at the Italianate palace that houses the Museum of the Revolution on the edge of Old Havana, is "a gallery of cretins" — cartoon-style wooden cutouts of recent American presidents who are thanked for "helping us strengthen the Revolution."

The line of rogues ends with George W. Bush, raising the question: What about President Obama? Will he eventually join the gallery, or has the parade of the hated finally ended?

As Cubans absorb the news that the United States will begin normalizing relations with their government after more than five decades of hostility, they are contending with a rush of both excitement and uncertainty about what could be the end of a long global drama in which Cuba has played a prominent role.

The country's leaders in particular, after decades of battling and blaming the United States and powerful Cuban exiles — calling them worms, ingrates and far worse — now find themselves without the usual excuse for Cuba's economic failures and human rights restrictions, at a time when the population's expectations are soaring.

At the same time, they are now being told — directly and indirectly — that Cuba can no longer blame its old enemy for all of its problems.

Many Cubans say they had known this for years. "We're always told that everything bad is because of 'the United States,'" said Chuchi Garrido, using air quotes to emphasize the absurdity of the idea while he sold black-market cellphones outside a government store in Havana. "It hasn't been true for years. The government is just admitting it."

He and dozens of other Cubans, from the capital to the countryside, said that it was time that the country's leaders de-emphasized ideology in favor of more tangible goals.

Regina Coyula, a blogger who spent nearly two decades working for state security, said that Cubans should be glad to leave the era of exceptionalism behind. "It's high time for us to be normal, to be just another island. We live in a kind of bubble, and that is a drag on us," she said. "We want to be part of the global community."

While some Cubans rejoiced at the idea of the United States no longer being the enemy, some veteran dissidents lamented the loss of a loyal friend.

Elizabeth Newhouse, director of the Cuba project at the Center for International Policy, said that Cuba and the United States would have to find a new way to relate to each other. Though no longer enemies, they are not yet friends. "Raúl has been diluting the U.S. as enemy for quite some time, no longer blaming all ills on the embargo," she said. "But the embargo and its effects are very much present in billboards, and since it's not going to be lifted anytime soon, I doubt that will change. Will we be frenemies?"

Excerpt from *If Not David to the US Goliath, Cuba Asks What Is Its Role Now*:

<http://www.nytimes.com/2014/12/21/world/americas/castro-cuba-united-states.html>, December 20, 2014.

Younger Cuban Citizens: Members of this group hold a variety of jobs, such as tourist-hotel doorman, farmer, fisherman or schoolteacher. With the average salary in Cuba near \$20 a month, it has often been a struggle to make ends meet, and some of you are not convinced the government has done all it can to improve life in Cuba.

Headphone-clad youths pore over phones on a street corner at dusk. A mother holds a laptop on Havana's seafront as her children cackle at seeing family abroad. Surreptitious vendors offer Internet cards at a markup. Cuba's new Wi-Fi hotspots - 35 nationwide since July with more promised soon - are a sensation in a highly controlled country with one of the world's lowest Internet penetrations. Yet young Cubans are not satisfied. They want the Communist government to provide more, cheaper and less restricted Wi-Fi for Cuba's 11 million people.

"Everyone around the world has great Wi-Fi easily available these days. Why not us?" said Ariel Boggiano, 20, on Havana's La Rampa avenue after an hour's conversation with an uncle in Las Vegas via an app and a \$2 card from the state phone company. "We need more access, better prices ... And there are too many restrictions when you are surfing. There's not good access to news. And there's too much demand, it gets saturated fast," he added opposite a government sign reading: "Long Live Free Cuba!"

U.S. technology firms are keen to step in and help provide better service for Boggiano and friends, especially in the wake of diplomatic detente between Washington and Havana and an easing of some half-century-old U.S. trade restrictions.

Google executives have visited twice in the last two years. The potential is obvious: less than a third of Cubans have access to the web, with only 3.4 percent of homes connected to either the Internet or a local Cuban Intranet, according to U.N. data. Cuba says it wants broadband in 50 percent of homes by 2020.

Yet as with all aspects of change in Cuban society, President Raul Castro's government proceeds cautiously and at its own pace. "Everyone knows why there isn't more Internet in Cuba, because it's very expensive," Vice-President Jose Ramon Machado Ventura, a hardline ideologue, told a state newspaper recently.

"Some want to give it to us for free, not so Cubans can communicate but to infiltrate us for ideological work ... We have to possess the Internet our way, knowing the imperialists aim to use it to destroy the Revolution."

While the government blames cost for lack of investment in internal infrastructure, critics suggest the real impediment is its fear of losing control on media and seeing new avenues of political opposition open up. Ideological considerations do not impress many of the young Cubans hanging out at open-air hotspots in Havana and the eastern city of Santiago in the cool of the evening, fiddling with Galaxys and iPhones brought in from abroad.

In interviews, several said they were fed up with the ideological hang-ups of the older ruling generation, and simply want to watch films, access Facebook, and enjoy other online activities that are part of daily life for their equals abroad.

In Santiago on a recent evening, bars and clubs were empty while youths thronged plazas to use the new Wi-Fi service. "We hadn't seen each other for nearly four years!" said Jesus Vazquez, 43, excited and emotional after a video call between him, his wife and youngest daughter in Santiago with two other

daughters in the United States and Europe. "It's a really good initiative. But I think they could make it cheaper," he added. The \$2 hourly tariff represents about 10 percent of a typical monthly salary.

Excerpt from *Relishing new Wi-Fi, Cuba's Young Clamor for More*:

<http://www.reuters.com/article/2015/09/23/cuba-internet-idUSL1N11N1UP20150923>, September 23, 2015.

Older Cuban-Americans: You or your relatives fled Cuba after the revolution in 1959, and you might have had property taken by the communist government and given to the state, or felt harassed because of personal beliefs. Some in your group continue to regard that government with suspicion or hostility, while others might be open to new views after 55 years of conflict.

Obama also will ease parts of the U.S. embargo against Cuba. The two countries swapped prisoners in December. Though historic, the changes hardly soothe the deep psychic scars carried by many senior Cuban-Americans.

Among those most traumatized by the Cuban revolution were the 14,000 unaccompanied Cuban children airlifted to the United States in a U.S.-sponsored operation called Pedro Pan, a reference to Peter Pan. Parents sent their children to U.S. soil out of fear that communism would usurp parental authority. Many children were later reunited with their parents in America, but others ended up in the care of Catholic churches, orphanages, foster homes and delinquency facilities.

One of those children, Estela Bueno, now 68, called Obama's normalization of relations with Cuba as "one of the saddest days in my life." "To see my government that is the United States would do such a thing, it does not value what they say about freedom of expression and the human rights," said Bueno, who was 15 when Operation Pedro Pan brought her to America.

"The new generation did not suffer what we did, they did not see what we did," Bueno said. "They don't know how the Castros are.... It's an oppression, and the new generations don't know that and they don't know the Cuba I know, and for them it's different and for them it's an advancement, but it doesn't compare what we saw."

Her husband, Arturo, 69, also arrived to the United States as one of the Pedro Pans, at age 16. The couple, who met in college, lives in Torrance, California. Obama's announcement was "an insult and a betrayal," including to those Cubans who perished in the shark-infested Straits of Florida on rafts and unseaworthy boats while fleeing the island, he said. "It surprised me completely," Arturo Bueno said. "It's a betrayal to the memory of many Cubans who have died and who have died in the ocean or that they've killed just because they didn't agree with the communist government."

Older generation Cuban-Americans such as Oscar Pichardo, 63, of Redondo Beach, California, call Obama's diplomatic and trade initiative with Cuba "a major insult and a slap in the face," he said. Pichardo recalled how parents sent him and others to the United States when the Castro regime sought to conscript youngsters in the military.

"My parents left everything behind, absolutely everything," said Pichardo, who reunited with his parents in the United States a year after he was airlifted during Operation Pedro Pan. With his long view of Cuba, Pichardo contends that, in the end, Obama's measures won't change a thing in Cuba.

He pointed to how nothing changed on the island after the late Pope John Paul II visited the island in 1998 at the invitation of then-President Fidel Castro, now 88. The Pope publicly [urged freedom there](#) in what was the first papal visit in Cuban history.

"I think in five years we will be here and we are going to look at this day and say nothing has changed," Pichardo said. "Remember, the same promises that (Raul) Castro is telling Obama, (Fidel Castro) said 15 to 20 years ago to the Pope, and nothing changed in the 20 years since the Pope went to Cuba. "So history is repeating itself," Pichardo asserted.

Excerpt from *Generation gap: Renewed ties expose painful Cuban-American rift*.

<http://www.cnn.com/2014/12/27/world/americas/cuban-american-generation-gap/>, December 27, 2014.

Younger Cuban-Americans: You weren't born when Cuba and the United States slipped into conflict, and many of you are more open than your older relatives to improving ties with Cuba.. Some of you work in business and might be interested in trading with Cuba if the embargo ends, or you might be interested in traveling there some day.

Many in the younger generation in south Florida are ready for a change.

"I represent a generation of Cubans who are very interested in the future of Cuba. We think that the best days for Cuba have yet to come. And we think that in the end, the Cuban people need to stop being pieces in a game of chess," George Davila said.

Other young Cuban-Americans with parents from the island, like Felice Gorordo of Miami, treads lightly when talking about Cuba with older relatives.

Visiting Cuba is even a more perilous subject.

Gorordo's father left Cuba in 1961 as one of the Pedro Pans. Gorordo's mother left Cuba in the 1970s as a teenager. In 2002, Gorordo, then 19, decided to visit Cuba and see the relatives his parents left behind. "My grandparents were very against it and so were my parents," said Gorordo, now 31, who runs a startup firm providing tax filing services to immigrants.

"You have to recognize there is a lot of pain in this community, and it's real and you can't deny it or cover it up," Gorordo added. "But at the same, there's a sentiment among younger Cuban-Americans and even the older ones that this might be an opportunity to bring about change that we hoped for in Cuba."

That sort of change ultimately calls for a democracy in now communist Cuba. It's a vision that Fidel and Raul Castro certainly don't share or won't allow. That doesn't deter Gorordo and his generation.

Gorordo, Moas and a network of 5,000 U.S. students at 50 universities seek change in Cuba by giving their island-based contemporaries a lode of technology.

They send laptops, flash drives, tablets and phones so that Cubans can better their lives and amplify their voices in "the Western Hemisphere's last dictatorship," according to the website for the U.S. student group called Roots of Hope, or Raices de Esperanza, based in Miami Beach, Florida. Moas is executive director, and Gorordo a co-founder.

The group's donations align with how Obama is now allowing the export of more U.S. telecommunications and Internet equipment to Cuba, where only 5% of the population enjoys unfiltered access to the web.

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