



11350 Random Hills Road, Suite 800, Fairfax, Virginia 22030 Phone (703) 934-6101 Fax (703) 352-3678

fff@fff.org www.fff.org

End the Cuban Embargo!

by Sheldon Richman

Barack Obama and Cuban President Raul Castro have nothing to talk about. While they do their diplomatic dance, the Cuban people are suffering because of the American trade embargo. It should end forthwith. The idea that trade between Americans and Cubans must await an American president's say-so is an insult to anyone who aspires to be free.

In a gesture toward liberalization, Obama has lifted travel and financial restrictions on Cuban-Americans with family in Cuba (but not on Americans without family there). Still in place, though, is the nearly half-century-old economic embargo. That won't change, the administration says, until Cuba's communist regime shows a willingness to change. "Over the past two years," Obama said, "I have indicated — and I repeat today — that I am prepared to have my administration engage with the Cuban government on a wide range of issues — from human rights, free speech, and democratic reform to drugs, migration, and economic issues."

His chief economic advisor, Larry Summers, says free trade between Americans and Cubans is "way down the road. . . . [I]t's going to depend on what Cuba . . . does going forward."

In other words, the Obama regime is continuing the long-standing American policy of meddling in the affairs of other countries, not to mention in the business of Americans. Where does Obama get the moral right to say when Cubans and Americans may trade and on what terms?

American hegemony lives. This is change we can believe in?

An economic embargo is act of war and has long been recognized as such. For 47 years American presidents have been making war on the Cuban people — and also limiting the economic freedom of Americans — by prohibiting economic relations between the two populations.

What has it brought? Certainly not a change in regime. While Fidel Castro, founder of Cuba's communist government, held power from 1959 until poor health took its toll last year, ten U.S. presidents were in office. Nor did the oppressive nature of the regime change noticeably. We have no reason to think that Castro has personally suffered any deprivation from the sanctions.

However, the Cuban people, without access to American products, have suffered terribly. That is how embargoes usually work.

The Cuban embargo only strengthened Castro's hold. He could easily blame his regime's failure at central economic planning on the American boycott. Castro might have been long gone by now.

So why does Obama continue this cruel policy toward the Cuban people? Because it's so cruel, it is ludicrous to say he does it for their benefit. Thanks, but no thanks, they might reply.

Politics is one reason. National politicians can't afford to alienate the older and still-powerful Cuban-Americans in Florida, a key electoral state, who want the Castro brothers out. Another political reason is that no president wants to look soft on communism even in the post-Cold War era.

But a major reason is this: Obama heads the American State, which has traditionally claimed the authority to dictate or at least to veto what goes on in "its backyard." For all his talk about "partnership," Obama apparently has no intention of breaking with that policy.

The arrogance of the American position lies in the demand that Raul Castro satisfy the U.S. president before lifting the embargo can even be considered. If Castro makes the right gestures, perhaps the president would deign to sit down with him to talk. But Castro has to earn the photo op with Obama or else — heaven forbid — he might gain a prestige he does not deserve.

What nonsense. These are two politicians who are more alike than different. Both live off wealth extracted by force from their respective populations while they devise ways to impose their wills on their societies. Cubans surely have less freedom than Americans do, but it's a matter of degree.

Must the Cuban people continue to suffer while Obama and Castro play their diplomatic games? In the name of humanity, the embargo must end at once. After that, they can talk all they want.

*Sheldon Richman is senior fellow at The Future of Freedom Foundation, author of **Tethered Citizens: Time to Repeal the Welfare State**, and editor of [The Freeman](#) magazine. Visit his blog "Free Association" at www.sheldonrichman.com.*

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