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Still Meddling After All These Years

by Sheldon Richman

American presidents have long regarded Latin America as their “backyard.” The Monroe Doctrine warned the European powers to stay out — by what right? — and since then American chief executives have deemed it entirely proper to intervene when things did not go as they liked.

Mexico, Nicaragua, Guatemala, the Dominican Republic, Chile, Panama, Cuba — all were scenes of U.S. covert and sometimes overt intervention. Some of this activity predated the Cold War, so the Soviet Union did not always provide the excuse for U.S. involvement in the region.

Things have changed little today. The methods may differ, but the thrust of the policy endures. The newspapers furnish the evidence daily.

Cuba, for instance, has been much in the news. For nearly 50 years the U.S. government has maintained an embargo on commercial relations with the communist island-nation. During his presidential campaign, Barack Obama’s tone suggested a change in policy, but once he was elected, the change was negligible. 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 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.... [It’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?

It is a sign of how warped U.S. foreign policy is that Obama’s approach is seen as superior to George W. Bush’s. Bush had no interest in talking to the Cuban leader. The embargo would stay

in place until Cuba no longer had a communist government. Obama is willing to “engage” the Castro regime. This apparently means that if the regime makes concessions in human rights and democratic reform, Obama will reciprocate with changes in the U.S. economic policy toward Cuba.

The differences between Bush and Obama are more apparent than real, I submit. Both see what goes on inside Cuba as the U.S. government’s concern and believe that commercial relations between Americans and Cubans are properly the subject of U.S. policy. They just have different criteria for modifying that policy. Neither recognizes that Americans have a natural right to deal with any Cubans who wish to deal with them, and neither recognizes that the relationship between the Cuban people and the government there is their concern alone. From the objective moral judgment that the Cuban state is bad it does not follow that the U.S. government should do something about it.

Why the embargo?

An economic embargo is an 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, 10 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, denied direct access to American products and markets, have suffered terribly. That is how embargoes usually work.

In fact, the Cuban embargo only strengthened Castro’s hold. He could easily blame his regime’s failure at central economic planning on the American boycott. This point is underappreciated. Other nations trade with Cuba, so that country is not isolated from the world market. Nevertheless, the inevitable economic disaster of Cuban central planning can be propagandistically attributed to the hegemon to the north that seeks to crush the island. At least that is what Castro has been telling his people for nearly half a century. How many people know enough economics to see the fallacy in Castro’s propaganda?

Without the embargo (and other menacing policies), Americans would have been traveling to Cuba regularly, bringing with them attractive products, hard currency, and liberal culture. The people there would have seen up close what they were missing and would have learned much from their contact with Americans. A booming tourist industry would have exposed ordinary Cubans to the benefits of a freer economy. The government there might have tried to limit contact, but that would have been difficult, especially with an active Cuban-American community.

Blaming the United States for the Cuban people's plight would have been a hard sell. We'll never know, but the communist government might have been long gone by now.

So why does Obama continue this cruel policy toward the Cubans? 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 Fidel Castro's brother and successor, Raul, 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 day may be past when a U.S. president could send troops to, say, Venezuela to overthrow Hugo Chavez, but Obama still regards it as his responsibility to find ways to moderate regimes that don't meet American expectations. Whether by carrots or sticks, it's still intervention.

The arrogance of the American position can be seen 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. Some may find that statement outrageous, but consider this: While Americans' right to *speak* out against the welfare state is respected by the U.S. government, their right to *opt* out of it is no more respected than the Cubans' right is. The taxman is just as insistent here as there. True, each American gets one more vote than each Cuban gets. The difference is as small as the arithmetic indicates.

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.

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