

CUBAN-AMERICAN RELATIONS THROUGH THE LENS OF A CUBAN AMERICAN

The US-Cuban relationship has been difficult, strained, and based on distrust in recent history. In this article, a Cuban American who spends extensive time in her native Cuba discusses how Cubans like herself have been affected by the lack of diplomatic relations and, more recently, by the Obama and Trump administrations' policies. The author concludes that the Biden administration is consequently in a difficult position, having to address the numerous problems regarding Cuba-US relations that have accumulated over the years.

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I left Cuba as a young two-year-old child on 9 April 1968 with my parents, an older brother, and sister. My parents were also expecting another child, my younger brother, who was later born in the United States. My parents' oldest son was of military age and at university and was not granted the exit visa with the rest of the family. He would eventually join us as an adult, ten years later with his own family.

We settled in Union City, New Jersey, after a few months at my father's uncle's home in New York. As I recall, the residents of Union City (or at least in my close community) at the time were mostly Cubans; a good number of Italians; a few Puerto Ricans, Dominicans, Germans; and people who practiced conservative Judaism. In our home we only spoke Spanish, but I remember the feeling of not understanding all of the children when I played outside, as they would speak English, the language I was yet to speak or understand. I was pretty much always surrounded by Cubans, the Cuban culture, and an all-Spanish community. Not a day went by in our home when Cuba was not mentioned. My mother had left all of her six brothers behind, and my father, his only sister. Both had left behind numerous nephews and nieces, friends, neighbors, and a whole life's worth of relationships. The main reason for the daily mention, however, was that their eldest son remained there and this separation was too much to bear and very painful for them. All they wanted was to have the family unit together again.

My parents did not leave Cuba for political reasons but for economic ones. I recall the stories of hardship and the lack of work, income, and sometimes of basic needs including enough food for the family. My mother was a seamstress and my father a musician of mostly sacred music for their place of worship which did not provide an income. He took on all sorts of odd jobs to provide for our growing family. We lived in a room large enough for a bed, piano, sewing machine, and a makeshift kitchen area. The bathroom was a shared space for the whole neighborhood. It was a humble and poor community but a safe one, where neighbors looked out for each other. Many years later, when I first returned to the area in 1997, it was quite touching to see that several neighbors still remained and had many fond memories of me as a child.

In Union City, my father taught English and Spanish lessons (he was also fluent in French and had a good grasp of Italian and was learning German) as well as music lessons. He also worked blue-collar side jobs. I recall at one point him having a full-time job and two part-time jobs. My mother took care of the family and home and for a while also worked from home for a sewing factory. During those years, from 1968 to the mid 70's, the relationship between Cuba and the US was polarized. We

were unable to make direct calls or travel to Cuba. Sending or receiving mail with any time consistency was not possible either. We used to have to rely on Western Union telegrams for communication, which at times we could not afford to receive. I remember the delivery man, realizing our situation, would allow us to open and read the telegram, then seal it again and return it as undeliverable so as not to charge us for delivery.

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The Cuban identity is strong for most Cuban Americans, regardless of how long it has been since they departed the island. Cubans, in my experience, are not ones to assimilate to another culture, but rather maintain their Cuban culture while managing to adapt to another language and lifestyle. This may be why Cuban Americans are so passionate about what happens in Cuba. Cuban and Cuban Americans view life through different lenses, and this, at times, creates serious conflict regardless of the love they both have for their country.

My family’s migration story is not unlike many other Cubans who left everything behind during different times of Cuba’s recent history in search of a life with opportunities—ones they felt they did not have in Cuba—to improve their families’ quality of life. We have all run away either from or toward something. While many who initially left did so thinking it would be temporary, later on, it became clear for others that once they left, there would be no turning back. Today, many factors impact how we view US-Cuba relations: whether we have close family in Cuba, if our business is dependent on the status of diplomatic relations, personal experiences while residing in Cuba, and of course political and societal differences.

How Did We Get Here?

In 1959, Fidel Castro overthrew the Batista regime which was backed by the United States until that point. Since then, US-Cuba relations have been difficult, strained, and based on distrust. The history includes periods of mass immigration to the United States, most notably between 1959 and 1962, immediately after the revolution; from 1965 to 1974, when relations slightly thawed; in 1980, during the Mariel Boatlift; and in 1991, after the collapse of the Soviet Union, which had a huge negative effect on the Cuban economy. Immigration has changed substantially

since the Obama era elimination of the “wet foot/dry foot” policy that gave Cubans who arrived in the US without a visa the opportunity to become residents. It was a policy that was very controversial for many years due to the perceived inequities toward other immigrant groups.

The profiles of Cuban migrants varied significantly depending on the wave they came with. For example, the arrivals immediately after the Castro takeover were primarily white, wealthy, and professional and affluent Cubans whose properties were confiscated. This group was the one who for the most part believed it was a temporary departure and that things would return to “normal” soon for their return. When that did not happen, especially after the failed Bay of Pigs, these Cubans took on a variety of blue-collar jobs. Working as maids to gas attendants to begin a new life in the US, they essentially started from the bottom up. These Cubans of professional and highly educated backgrounds quickly (albeit with much sacrifice) began to establish themselves, start businesses, and thrive in their communities, especially Florida’s cities such as Miami. Then open flights in the mid to late 60’s started, after Castro indicated in a 1965 speech that Cubans could leave of their own free will and in 1966 President Johnson enacted a law that allowed Cubans to pursue residency after one year in the US. Economic times were tough in Cuba, and as my family did many were looking for economic relief and opportunity elsewhere. The Cuban immigrants at this stage were more of the middle to lower or working classes. In 1980, there was the Mariel Boatlift when over 100,000 Cubans departed Cuba from the port of Mariel.¹ The incident that started this was the crash of a bus at the Peruvian Embassy, which led to thousands of Cubans storming into the embassy. Castro decided to let them leave and the Carter administration welcomed them.

I recall as a young girl in Miami when Cubans with boats lined the streets on the way to Key West to launch out 90 miles to pick up any Cuban that was ready to leave the island and bring them back to the US. Many of those Cubans were placed in a camp near our apartment home. I used to go daily with my mother in search of my cousin whom we had heard was on one of those boats. Sure enough, we found him. This wave of Cubans that arrived in Miami were primarily blue-collar workers, criminals, or mentally-ill individuals, but also families from all socio-economic levels that took the opportunity to depart for the US.

The Obama and Trump Administrations

The Obama administration believed they could do more to support the Cuban people and promote American values through engagement rather than isolation. With

¹ Amanda M. Perez, “40 years later, Cuban Americans reflect on the Mariel Boatlift,” *News@TheU*, 22 April 2020, <https://news.miami.edu/stories/2020/04/40-years-later-cuban-americans-reflect-on-the-mariel-boatlift.html>

that in mind, they made certain changes to the way the US managed this relationship. Some of the key changes were

- removing Cuba from the list of State Sponsors of Terrorism list;
- re-establishing diplomatic relations by opening embassies in Havana and Washington, D.C.;
- encouraging tourism and exchanges in a variety of areas such as culture, education, science, sports, and technology;
- easing regulatory restrictions related to commerce and financial transactions like the ability for US citizens to send money to their families in Cuba.

These changes were very impactful for Cubans in Cuba and the US. There were more families reunited, the economy in Cuba improved with the influx of US travelers and Americans, and Cubans enjoyed the cultural exchanges to create greater understanding and support for the Cuban people and their culture. For example in May 2018 the John F. Kennedy Center for the Performing Arts in Washington, D.C. held a two-week extensive cultural expo of Cuban arts in which Cuban and Cuban-American visual artists, singers, musicians, dancers, actors, filmmakers, and fashion creatives, many who for the first time had traveled to the US, participated.

The Trump administration's policy on Cuba was to reverse everything it could from the Obama era. This included reducing the licensees under which Americans could travel to Cuba, canceling all cruise ship travel to the island, banning all flights to Cuba other than those to Havana, removing the ability to wire money to family via Western Union services among other new restrictions. Just a few days before the transition of power to the Biden administration, Cuba was designated as a terrorist-harboring country once again. This designation now makes it more challenging for the Biden administration to make any changes to the policy toward Cuba. While many of these changes are urged by Cuban Americans who still believe that this type of pressure is the only pressure that will bring about a change, other Cuban Americans do not agree and believe that dialogue, not economic sanctions that have not worked for 60 years, is the way to go. There is a great divide among Cuban Americans on what is the correct route to take to improve the lives of Cubans on the island. The Trump administration's changes very much impacted the Cuban people. Cubans lost tourism-derived businesses and sources of income in addition to losing the financial support that they in many cases depended on from family members and friends in the US. As if the drop in tourism due to US policy was not enough, Cuba,

along with the rest of the world, is now suffering from the effects of the COVID-19 pandemic.

Looking Forward

The Biden administration is in a tough position by having to address these issues related to Cuba-US relations early in the term. What are some Cubans hopeful for? The re-opening of the US Embassy in Havana; resuming remittances and the easing of embargo restrictions, especially regarding items in relation to the pandemic's effects on the island; reinstating travel to and from the island and for other measures that will relieve Cuban people of the hardships they face. Others are looking for a change in the Cuban government structure, particularly as it pertains to human rights.

I believe most Cubans, regardless if they are in Cuba or in the US, are hoping for a brighter future for our country, one where we are less divided and can focus more on our similarities than differences. I wish for a future where there is true dialogue and exchange of ideas, where we are able to create opportunities together for all Cubans to prosper and continue to share with the world the beauty that Cuba harbors.