

An Open Letter to Secretary of State Colin Powell

Regarding the Commission for Assistance to a Free Cuba



INTER-AMERICAN
DIALOGUE

Dear Mr. Secretary:

We are writing to express our deep concern about the conclusions and recommendations of the recently released report of the Commission for Assistance to a Free Cuba that you chaired. All of us are individuals with considerable interest and experience in Cuba and U.S.-Cuban relations. We were invited by the Inter-American Dialogue to review and comment on the report following its publication in May.

We are most troubled by the report's ambivalence about the commitment of the U.S. government to peaceful change in Cuba. U.S. policy towards Cuba has long been controversial and even divisive, but there had been wide agreement that the central goal was a peaceful transition to democracy in Cuba. Abandoning that commitment would represent a dramatic and unfortunate change in U.S. policy.

Keep the transition peaceful

The White House fact sheet that accompanied the release of the report states that the leading U.S. policy objective towards Cuba is to “bring an end to the ruthless and brutal dictatorship”—omitting any reference to a peaceful process. The Commission's report refers to a “peaceful transition” in some instances, but the “expeditious end of the Castro dictatorship” is the phrase used to describe the central objective of the U.S. government. Many sections of the report appear to anticipate violence. The executive summary suggests that the U.S. should “prepare to keep all schools open during an emergency phase of the transition in order to keep children and teenagers off the streets and learning during this unstable period.” Similarly, the chapter on “Meeting Basic Human Needs” warns that “the domestic Cuban food supply, transportation, infrastructure, and the storage base could be disrupted by turmoil that could follow a vacuum of authority.”

Several of the report's recommendations might well increase the risk of violence and social unrest in Cuba during a transition period. The report calls for a transitional administration to disband Cuba's existing security institutions, and quickly move to prosecute former regime officials. The chapter on “Establishing Democratic Institutions” foresees a long list of officials to be targeted for punishment or, in the report's own word, “vengeance.” These include “prominent senior officials of the Communist Party, the government, the mass organizations, and especially the police and security services.” Yet the report itself states that these actions could be difficult and potentially destabilizing. We agree that the past cannot simply be buried and forgotten. Investigations of past abuses can aid reconciliation among Cubans. But when and how these take place must be the decision of a democratically elected government, or they could end up increasing antagonism and fostering conflict in Cuba.

Taken as a whole, the report suggests that the U.S. government regards the possibility of peaceful change in Cuba as subordinate to the larger goal of ending the Castro government. We believe that the relative priority needs to be reversed—and that a peaceful transition in Cuba should remain the fundamental goal of U.S. policy.

Cuba

POLICY
BRIEF

“The Commission proposes measures that will increase, not diminish, the suffering of the Cuban people.”

The wrong way to hasten change in Cuba

None of us supports the policies of the current government of Cuba. Nearly all us have been publicly critical of the regime for many years. That has certainly been the position of the Inter-American Dialogue in all of its reports and publications related to Cuba. The Commission's short-term proposals for bringing about change in the Cuban government, however, will harden and intensify a U.S. policy that has failed to achieve any progress either in ending Fidel Castro's rule or in making that rule less repressive and more open.

The report proposes to severely curb family visits by relatives living in the U.S. and to curtail the flow of remittances, which help many families in Cuba survive and others to avoid desperate poverty. These measures will increase, not diminish, the suffering of the Cuban people. They will also place a heavy burden on Cuban-Americans who are committed to maintaining close ties to people in Cuba, by restricting their ability to visit and otherwise assist their relatives. Worse, the report fails to make clear how cutting off family visits and remittances will, in fact, contribute to positive changes in Cuba.

Other recommendations are self-contradictory. There may be value in increasing support to dissident groups in Cuba, as the report proposes, but remittance flows are now a major source of income for those groups. Why curtail that? Yet that is the effect of the new rule that limits remittances to the immediate families of senders. Similarly, the Roman Catholic Church and many civil society organizations opposed to the Cuban government argue that their efforts to promote change in Cuba would be enhanced by easing the ban on U.S. travel to the island. But the U.S. government, instead, is now proposing to make travel by U.S. citizens more difficult.

Moreover, the recommendations for hastening the end of the current regime are not conducive to the subsequent goals of a successful transition to democracy and market economy. If there was any consistent lesson from the transitions from Communist rule in Eastern and Central Europe, it was that the more contact and communication a country

had with the West, the more successful its transition was. The most isolated and alienated regimes of the former Soviet bloc have made the least progress in the post-Cold War world. How the U.S. relates to Cuba now will inevitably shape the course the island follows in a post-Castro period and the quality of U.S. ties to the country. In this vein, we believe that any effort by the U.S. government to respond effectively to change in Cuba must be directed toward a peaceful transition and be based on the following premises—none of which were adequately addressed by the Commission for Assistance to a Free Cuba.

Defer to the Cubans

The people of Cuba need to determine their own future. We believe that the U.S. has an important role to play in Cuba's transition to democracy. But it is the Cubans who should decide what kinds of assistance they require from the U.S. and how that assistance should be delivered. U.S. experts and technicians, as the report recommends, can provide enormous help to Cuba during a transition. Yet the report appears to overlook the fact that there are large numbers of well-trained Cuban professionals who can and should be turned to first to take on these technical roles—and decide for themselves what additional assistance they need.

Another disturbing recommendation is the call for dramatically restructuring Cuba's health and education services. The fact is that Cuba, with limited resources, has done relatively well in both sectors, surely far better than most other countries of Latin America. Cuban professionals know what is needed to sustain and improve health and education. They deserve respect. Certainly the report's findings demonstrate a lack of serious research in these sectors. The Commission calls for all Cubans under five to be given vaccinations, when the vast majority has already received them. Similarly, the report appears overly zealous in its sweeping calls to retrain educators and replace educational materials. In any event, such a decision should rest in the hands of the new Cuban government—not the U.S.

The Commission portrays its recommendations as a set of ideas intended to be helpful to a free and sovereign Cuban government. The fact remains, however, that this four-hundred-plus-page report is heavily prescriptive, offering extremely detailed proposals for every political, economic, and social aspect of Cuba's potential transition. It sounds like a blueprint for Cuba's future, not like "take it or leave it" advice from one friendly government to another. Contrary to the tone of the report, in the end, it is up to the new Cuban government to decide how closely it wants to work with Washington. The U.S. government can certainly make important contributions to Cuba's political and economic development, but the Cuban authorities may prefer to start quickly to walk on their own. Washington policymakers should respect that decision, and so should the Cuban diaspora in the United States and elsewhere.

Deal with expropriated properties sensitively

The Commission is wrong in its approach to the sensitive topic of restoring expropriated properties to U.S. nationals and corporations—which the report estimates to exceed \$7 billion, an amount more than three times greater than Cuba's annual exports. Forcing a new Cuban government to quickly settle these huge outstanding claims is not the way to assist a fledgling democracy build public legitimacy and get on its feet economically. Nor is it any way to develop trust between the U.S. and Cuba. More likely it will build resentment. The report's emphasis on restoring property, because it seems so self-serving, could well undercut U.S. assertions that it is acting mainly to help Cubans build democracy on the island. This is especially true when one considers that the U.S. has been trying so hard to have other countries forgive Iraq's debts, but in this report asks all countries but itself to provide Cuba with "debt relief from its major creditors."

No matter how justified the claims are, Cubans will resist giving up homes that they and their families have occupied for many years, particularly given the destitute state of the economy and the island's enormous housing shortage. Yet the report emphasizes that Cuban exiles will be able to reclaim their

properties or receive compensation, evict current tenants after a specified period of time, and be able to charge or even increase rent. This is not good politics, intelligent economics, or smart diplomacy. Many Cuban-Americans have legitimate claims to expropriated properties in Cuba, but those claims must be balanced against the need to create a strong foundation for democracy and economic development in Cuba.

Multilateralism is better

We welcome the report's frequent references to multilateral approaches, but a careful reading makes it clear that the Commission proposes a far-reaching, unilateral role for the U.S. in Cuba's future. We are surprised by the degree to which the report suggests that the U.S. go it alone in Cuba. Indeed, the document appears to suggest that other countries are principally expected to accept U.S. policy objectives and assist in their financing and implementation. Other nations—in the Caribbean, Latin America, and Europe—have an important part to play, as do the key multilateral institutions. In the end, a broadly cooperative approach will be healthier for Cuba and for longer-term U.S.-Cuban relations.

The report correctly recognizes the important contribution that the International Monetary Fund, the World Bank, and the Inter-American Development Bank can make to Cuba's future. It also suggests that universities, non-governmental organizations, professional and scientific associations, and religious groups can be helpful to Cuba's development. We agree with this set of recommendations, but would add that it makes most sense to encourage these institutions to start building relationships now. There is every reason to believe that they can play a vital part today in preparing the way for democratic politics and market economics in Cuba—and help to set the stage for a more successful transition.

In closing, Mr. Secretary, the bulk of the recommendations in this report will not help in Cuba's transition to democracy. They are wrong in tone and substance, and more likely to do harm than good. The report demonstrates, throughout, a very shallow knowledge

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of Cuban history and current conditions in Cuba; it fails to draw on important recent experiences of U.S. military and humanitarian interventions, or on the considerable understanding that academics and policy groups have developed regarding best practices to promote democracy; and it is not respectful of the Cuban population. Moreover, the report disregards the importance of doing everything possible to keep the transition peaceful and to make sure that Cubans are in charge. A successful U.S. policy must reaffirm the importance of peaceful change in Cuba that is managed by the Cubans themselves.

The Commission for Assistance to a Free Cuba is not a good basis for U.S. policy and it will poorly serve U.S. interests in Cuba and the wider region. It proposes recommendations that are likely to damage the welfare of the Cuban people and will undercut the future success of a democratic Cuba.

Sincerely,

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