

THE LOGICAL FALLACY OF THE NEW U.S.-CUBA POLICY AND ITS SECURITY IMPLICATIONS

José Azel

In the study of government transitions, particularly those that took place in Eastern and Central Europe following the collapse of the Soviet Union, a pivotal argument about the sequencing of reforms took the form of a “chicken or the egg” causality dilemma: What should come first, political or economic changes? Since, in most countries economic prosperity is found together with personal freedoms, some postulate that economic reforms cause the advent of political freedoms.

However, the fact that two events are frequently observed together does not mean that one causes the other. Logicians often offer a quotidian example to illustrate this reasoning error: We press the button to call the elevator, wait impatiently, and then press it again. The elevator arrives and we incorrectly deduce that the second button push is what caused the elevator to come. In logic, the principle that correlation does not imply causation is known as the *cum hoc ergo propter hoc* fallacy (translation from Latin: “with this, therefore because of this”).

This same *cum hoc ergo propter hoc* error of argumentation is present in the new U.S.-Cuba policy announced by President Obama on 17 December 2014.

Following President Obama’s announcement of a rapprochement with the Cuban regime, U.S. government officials have offered that the cornerstones of the new policy are (1) fostering the small enterprise sector in Cuba; (2) encouraging U.S. investments; and (3) boosting U.S. tourism to the Island. These efforts, together with the reestablishment of diplo-

matic relations, they believe, will advance U.S. security interests and democratic governance in Cuba. Their logic, however, fails to pass the most basic tests of logical coherence, and the new policy may, in fact, be inimical to U.S. national interests. Let’s take a look.

FOSTERING THE SMALL ENTERPRISE SECTOR IN CUBA

Architects of the new U.S.-Cuba policy rationalize that unconditionally ending economic sanctions will strengthen Cuba’s self-employed sector and, thus, foster a civil society more independent of the government. Eventually, they explain, this more autonomous civil society will function as agents of change, pressuring the regime for democratic governance.

This is an ethnocentric proposition, anchored on economic determinism, that overweighs economic variables and fails to understand the Cuban regime. For example, in a totalitarian system, those in self-employed activities remain bound to the government for the very existence of their businesses. Self-employment in a totalitarian setting does not confer independence from the government. On the contrary, it makes the newly minted entrepreneurs more beholden to the government in myriad bureaucratic ways as few are willing to risk their livelihood antagonizing their all powerful patrons.

History instructs us as to the outcome we can expect. During the student protest in Tiananmen Square, China’s business community did not come out in support of the students. More recently we also witnessed a similar situation in Hong Kong. Sadly, these

business communities were not willing to jeopardize their positions and support those promoting democratic change. What makes U.S. administration officials think that a Cuban business community bound to an all powerful State for their very existence would act differently?

Supporters of the new policy believe that a critical mass of self-employed individuals will make it very difficult, if not impossible, for the regime to resist social pressures for change. That is, thousands of micro-firms operating in Cuba would be an unstoppable force for change. From this perspective of economic determinism, governments under such pressures must change or collapse. Again, this fails to account for the nature of the Cuban regime. We can look for instructive guidance in Cuban history.

Beginning in the early days of the Revolution, and climaxing with Fidel Castro's "Revolutionary Offensive" of 1968, the Cuban regime embarked on a systematic effort to eliminate all private property. First came the expropriations of foreign enterprises, followed by the expropriation of large Cuban-owned businesses, and finally all economic activity was taken over by the government in 1968.

According to Cuban government statistics, 55,636 micro enterprises, mostly employing one or two persons were confiscated. Among them were 11,878 food retailers, 3,130 meat retailers, 3,198 bars, 8,101 food establishments, 6,653 dry cleaners, 3,345 carpentry workshops, 4,544 automobile mechanic shops, 1,598 artisan shops, and, 1,188 shoeshine stands.

Even with this sizable private sector in operation, the regime was able to exert total control. Moreover, this private sector had fresh memories of an imperfect, but significantly free, pre-Castro Cuba. It was a civil society still imbued with the political principles of the 1940 Cuban Constitution enshrining liberty. And yet, this civil society was unable to prevent the communization of the Island, or bring about change in the regime.

Not coincidentally, and perhaps correlational, this period was the most brutally repressive of the Castro era, with thousands of executions and tens of thousands of long-term political prisoners. A strong argu-

ment could be made that self-employment in the absence of political freedom requires intensified repression in order to maintain control. Thus, increased repression in Cuba could be one of the unintended consequences of the new U.S. policy.

Self-employment in Cuba consists of permits to individuals to provide services in 201 subsistence occupations, such as umbrella repairing and fruit peeling. Its participants are mostly individuals born after 1959 with no living memories of political freedoms. So, on what grounds do supporters of the new policy formulate the proposition of change championed by the newly self-employed?

Controlled laboratory experimentation is mostly unavailable to social scientists. Therefore, our analysis is necessarily based on the use of analogies, often borrowed from historical experience, as I have done above. The new U.S.-Cuba policy is one that accommodates the Cuban regime with respect to the continued denial of political freedoms. It is a condescending formulation that sets aside expectations of freedom without offering even an analogical defense for the thesis that freedom may come some day as a byproduct of economic engagement.

In the United States we believe in the presumption of freedom. And yet, the new policy abandons the historical U.S. exigency for political freedom. Therefore, just as in our system of justice the burden of proof is on the accuser and not on the accused, the burden of demonstration on the efficacy of the policy is on those yielding on our core principle of freedom. The advocacy for liberty needs no validation.

DIRECT U.S. INVESTMENTS

In March 2014, hoping to attract new investments, Cuba adopted a new foreign investment law it described as "strategic and transcendental." As of this writing—over a year later—only a handful of investments have been reported as approved. The law, part of Chieftain Castro's economic reforms, is based on the idea that one can influence something based on its resemblance to another thing—a delusion social scientists call "cargo cult."¹

A "cargo cult" involves the performance of various ritualistic acts that practitioners believe will lead to

the appearance of an abundance of material wealth (cargo). Cargo cults often emerge and develop under conditions of social stress and usually involve leadership with a new myth-dream.

The “cargo cults” of Pacific Melanesia offer the most widely known real life examples. During World War II, the Melanesian islanders—many of whom had never seen outsiders before—saw prodigious amounts of war material, canned food, clothing, and other goods that were air-dropped to supply U.S. military bases.

The islanders were astounded by the wondrous possessions of the U.S. visitors who, incredibly to the islanders, enjoyed these goods without making them themselves. The goods simply were air dropped from aircraft that descended from the sky. No U.S. visitor was ever seen making them. This observation confirmed for the islanders the metaphysical nature of the goods. They learned that this abundance from the sky was known to the Americans as “cargo.”

When the war ended, the military bases were abandoned, thus ending the miraculous and seemingly effortless flow of goods from the sky. To summon the cargo back the islanders mimicked the rituals they had observed U.S. servicemen use. They cleared their own landing strips, and erected control towers with rope and bamboo, carved headphones from wood, lit torches to light up the runways, and even waved the landing signals while standing on the runways.

Renowned physicist Richard Feynman popularized the metaphorical use of “cargo cult” to describe attempts to recreate successful outcomes by replicating circumstances associated with those outcomes when the circumstances are either unrelated to the causes of the outcomes or insufficient to bring about the outcome.

In the Caribbean island of Cuba, using effigies for correspondence—not unlike the sympathetic magic (sorcery) of the Melanesian islanders—Chieftain

Raúl Castro hopes to attract the material goods that flow from American investments with his version of metaphorically fabricated airstrips and control towers. The General, poorly mimicking a few random characteristics of a free market, seeks the arrival of the American cargo. He will be as unsuccessful as the Melanesian islanders.

Investors will be intrigued by the Cuban fabrications, but after taking a closer look, they will reject the Chieftain’s simulated runways. On paper, the new Cuban investment law purports to allow 100% foreign ownership of a project. But this has never been permitted, and foreign investors have been reduced to being minority shareholders in partnership with the Cuban military as the controlling shareholder. The law also stipulates that the foreign investors’ assets may be expropriated for reasons of public utility or social value. All this, in an environment of systemic corruption, where there is no independent judiciary to adjudicate claims by a foreign investor.

The Cuban foreign investment law also imposes an Orwellian staffing process in violation of international labor protocols. Foreign companies are not allowed to hire their own employees. Instead, they must request the staff they require from a Cuban government agency. The agency will provide the employees and will invoice the foreign company for the employees’ salary, to be paid to the government agency in convertible currency. In this “worker’s paradise,” the government agency will then pay employees in Cuban pesos, retaining, for the state, approximately 92% of the employees’ salary.

This exploitative practice is “*Slavery by Another Name*,” to borrow the title of Douglas A. Blackmon’s book which explores forced labor of imprisoned black men and women through the convict lease system used by state governments, white farmers and corporations in the southern United States after the American Civil War.

1. Social scientists use the term “cargo cult” anthropologically in myriad ways and contexts. With respect to Cuba, the earliest usages I can find are: David Rieff, *The Exile: Cuba in the Heart of Miami* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1993), p. 187; Gail E. Hawisher and Cynthia L. Selfe, *Global Literacies and the World-Wide Web* (London: Routledge, 2000), p. 218; and Servando González, *The Nuclear Deception: Nikita Khrushchev and the Cuban Missile Crisis* (Oakland, CA: Spooks Books, 2002), p. 192.

No responsible U.S. company—particularly one publicly traded and subject to governmental oversight and investor scrutiny—is going to be enticed to invest under these conditions to serve a relatively small and impoverished market of eleven million with an average monthly income of twenty dollars.

The Cuban Chieftain may believe he has recreated, with his voodoo doll replica of economic reforms, the correspondent conditions to attract foreign investments. But, puncture, pinch, and squeeze as he might, the American cargo will not be forthcoming.

AMERICAN TOURISM

The proposition seems intuitively reasonable: American tourists will help bring democracy to Cuba. But it is also demonstrably false.

The idea that American tourists, innately imbued with democratic values and norms, will proudly reflect and share those values while traveling abroad is an authentic premise. Thus, we could view American tourists as ambassadors for democracy, and a powerful force in communicating the virtues of democratic governance. And whereas this may indeed be the case, it does not follow with syllogistic certainty that such ambassadorship can bring about the empowerment of the citizenry in a totalitarian regime.

For decades, two million tourists from Canada, Europe, Latin America, and elsewhere have traveled yearly to Cuba with no impact whatsoever on the Cuban regime. The more empirically valid argument is that expenditures by tourists add to the longevity of the regime, since the monies flow into enterprises controlled by the Cuban military. Moreover, tourist dollars allow the regime to avoid meaningful economic and political reforms.

In any case, international tourism has not brought about political reforms in Cuba, or in the remaining universe of totalitarian regimes. For example, China and Vietnam welcome 130 million and 8 million tourists, respectively, each year with no impact on their form of government.

Advocates of tourism as a means to democratic governance counter argue that Cuba is different, and suggest that is not the total number of visitors that counts, but American tourists. Yet, the logic behind

this chauvinistic view of American tourists as the only effective couriers of democratic values is never explained. It is only offered that American tourists, by some vague cultural and historic affinity, are better endowed to convey the values of democratic governance to the Cuban people. But if such cultural and historical kinship does exist, it would apply much more to Spanish-speaking tourists from Latin America and Spain.

In fact, American tourists have only limited contact with the Cuban population. Most tourism resorts are in isolated areas, controlled by the security apparatus, and off-limits to the average Cuban. Most Americans encounter a language barrier, and it is not clear that they consider their vacation time as an opportunity to subvert the Cuban regime. Most likely, Americans, as most tourists, prefer to relax with *mojitos* in the beautiful beaches of Cuba. In the case of cruise ship tourism, passengers will disembark for a few hours to purchase rum and cigars, and return to the ship. Again, it is not clear how this helps to usher in democratic governance, unless the argument relies on some mysterious osmotic process.

Nonetheless, rather than rejecting the “American tourists” arguments only on its lack of logical merits, I looked for statistical proxies to test the hypothesis. American tourists represent only 1.6 percent of inbound tourism in China. In Cuba, tourists from the United States account for 3.3 percent of total tourism. In other words, Cuba’s tourism is twice as “American intensive” as China’s. Neither country has engaged in political reforms, but it is only fair to ask: What percentage of tourists must be American in order to validate the “American tourists will bring democracy” thesis? Answer: unknown.

Another revealing comparison is to relate the number of American tourists to the population of the host countries. China, with a population of 1.3 billion, receives 2 million American tourists each year. Cuba, with a population of 11.2 million, welcomes 90,000 Americans. Thus, on a per capita basis, Cuba welcomes an American visitor for every 124 Cubans, while China receives an American tourist for every 650 Chinese citizens. In theory, at least, this means that today the per capita concentration of American

tourists in Cuba is five times greater than that of Americans in China and yet, no democratic reforms are visible in either country. Again, it is fair to ask: How many American tourists per capita are required to substantiate the “American tourists will bring democracy” theory? Answer: unknown.

The point of all this is simply to show that the “American tourists will help bring democracy to Cuba” working proposition of the Administration’s new U.S.-Cuba policy, fails to pass the most basic tests of logical coherence. We deserve more critical and rigorous thinking from our policymakers.

NATIONAL SECURITY IMPLICATIONS

Last year, when The New York Times editorial board and others intensified their campaign for a unilateral-unconditional change in U.S.-Cuba policy, I published an essay titled: WWCD (that is, What Would Castro Do?) if the United States were to unilaterally and unconditionally end economic sanctions?

I noted in that essay that not probing how Castro would respond was a curious omission since the formulation of U.S. foreign policy is often compared to a chess game in which every prospective move is analyzed and weighted with an eye to what the adversary’s counter move would be.

I argued that it was irresponsible to advocate for a policy change without offering, at least a theory of what the other party would do. A foreign policy move always seeks reciprocity in the spectrum of “If this, then that” array of possibilities.

Nonetheless, advocates of an unconditional change in U.S.-Cuba policy succeeded in their quest as evidenced by the President’s December 17 announcement to seek normalization with Cuba and his State of the Union message urging Congress to unilaterally eliminate all economic sanctions.

With that success, however, comes the duty of accepting responsibility and ownership for the outcomes of advocacy and policy recommendations. And General Raúl Castro has provided a comprehensive answer to my WWCD question.

On January 28, 2015, speaking in Costa Rica at the III Summit of the Community of Latin American and Caribbean States (CELAC), General Castro set

his preconditions for actions the U.S. must take for the two nations to re-establish normal relations:

1. Unconditionally eliminate all economic sanctions.
2. Return to Cuba the Guantanamo U.S. naval base.
3. Stop all the transmissions of Radio and TV Marti.
4. Compensate Cuba for the supposed damages caused by the embargo—which Cuba estimates at 116 billion dollars and growing.
5. Eliminate Cuba from the U.S. “State Sponsors of Terrorism” list.

The General further outlined his thinking noting that “If these problems aren’t resolved, this diplomatic rapprochement wouldn’t make any sense.” And more significantly he stated that “It would not be ethical or acceptable to ask Cuba for anything in return... it cannot be expected that Cuba will negotiate on these internal matters which are absolutely sovereign.”

Upon hearing the General’s preconditions, those that have advocated unconditional concessions to the Castro regime, if they were to act responsibly, should now acknowledge that they misread the nature of the regime. I suspect they will not. Unfortunately, they are more likely to double down and spin all sorts of doctrinaire and dangerous arguments as to why we should stay the new course.

We will hear that General Castro was just laying out a starting negotiating position or that, since we tried economic sanctions for half a century, should we not give this new policy some time? And more troubling, we may even begin to hear arguments that Cuba may indeed be entitled to compensation from U.S. taxpayers, or that the naval base in Guantanamo is an unnecessary and expensive relic of the Cold War. When you begin to hear these arguments, just consider for a moment how Mr. Putin and the Russian navy would love to have a warm water port in the Caribbean of the quality of the U.S naval base in Guantanamo.

Consider also that if we move further along this new path and, say, remove travel restrictions, thousands of small private vessels from South Florida will be

visiting Cuba on a regular basis and may return with hidden cargo. We can all use our imagination as to the nature of the cargo whether contraband materials, or human trafficking.

Our Coast Guard, overstretched as it already is, would not be able to effectively monitor thousands of private vessels traveling regularly between South Florida and Cuba. Given the long standing and close links between Cuba and Iran, this ocean travel possibility opens us to new and serious vulnerabilities to terrorism in terms of border and maritime security.

Moreover, the President's new measures will enrich primarily the Cuban military, which controls most of the island's economic activity and thus will bolster the regime. It is hard to discern how fortifying a totalitarian government promotes democracy. Any resulting improvement in U.S.-Cuba relations will not impact General Castro's close alliance with Iran, Russia or Venezuela.

Also, it is well known that Cuban personnel are advising and training Venezuela's security apparatus. Cuba is also handling the issuance of Venezuelan passports and other identity documents. This gives Cuba the ability to provide false documents to Iranian and Cuban agents to travel throughout the world as Venezuelan citizens.

The President's new Cuba policy has legitimized the Cuban totalitarian-military regime in the eyes of the world, and particularly in the eyes of Latin America. By legitimizing an oppressive regime that violates human rights with abandon, the President has reversed our long standing support for democratic governance in the region.

Since the 1970s, U.S. policy toward Latin America has emphasized democracy, human rights, and constitutional government. Under President Reagan, the U.S. intervened in Grenada; under President H.W. Bush, the U.S. intervened in Panama; and under

President Clinton the U.S. landed marines in Haiti, all to restore democracy to those countries.

Arguably, U.S. policy in defense of democratic governance has not been uniform throughout the world. But until recently, defending democratic values was our long-established policy in Latin America. While no one is advocating military intervention, the gratuitous normalization of relations with an oppressive military dictatorship sends the wrong message, and damaging visuals to the continent.

Every Latin American would-be dictator and their want-to-be sycophants now know that suppressing civil liberties in their countries is not particularly troubling to the United States. Certainly, suppressing civil liberties it is not detrimental to having a good diplomatic and commercial relation with the United States, as evidenced by the new U.S. approach.

That is the message the new Cuba policy has sent to the region and it will have detrimental U.S. national security implications in obvious as well as in many subtle ways.

Contrary to the argument of some that the new U.S.-Cuba policy will help improve relations with Latin America, our implicit concessions and seal of approval of a military dictatorship further weaken American influence in the region. It encourages anti-American leaders in Latin America and elsewhere to take positions inimical to U.S. interests as Cuba has done for decades.

Finally, we should keep in mind that Cuban negotiators, in order to secure whatever advantages they may be pursuing, may offer promises of some minor concessions. But before getting into bed with Raúl Castro, and surrendering, in amorous embrace, whatever little leverage we may have left, U.S. negotiators should know that the General will not respect them in the morning.