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Why the US-Cuba Deal Really Is a Victory for the Cuban Revolution

The left should recall and applaud the long resistance of tiny Cuba to the northern Goliath.

Tom Hayden

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No one in the mainstream media will acknowledge it, but the normalization of American relations with Havana, symbolized by release of prisoners today, is a huge success for the Cuban Revolution.

The hostile US policy, euphemistically known as “regime change,” has been thwarted. The Cuban Communist Party is confidently in power. The Castros have navigated through all the challenges of the years. In Latin America and the United Nations, Cuba is accepted, and the United States is isolated.

It is quite legitimate for American progressives to criticize various flaws and failures of the Cuban Revolution. But the media and the right are overflowing with such commentary. Only the left can recall, narrate and applaud the long resistance of tiny Cuba to the northern Goliath.

For those actually supportive of participatory democracy in Cuba, as opposed to those who support regime change by secret programs, the way to greater openness on the island lies in a relaxation of the external threat.

Despite the US embargo and relentless US subversion, Cuba remains in the upper tier of the United Nations Human Development Index because of its educational and healthcare achievements. Cuba even leads the international community in the dispatch of medical workers to fight Ebola. Cuba is celebrated globally because of its military contribution to the defeat of colonialism and apartheid in Angola and southern Africa. Now a new generation of Cuban leaders who fought in Angola is coming to power in the Havana and its diplomatic corps. For example, Rodolfo Reyes Rodríguez, Cuba's representative to the United Nations, today walks on an artificial limb as a result of his combat in Angola.

When few thought it possible, Cuba has achieved the return of all five prisoners held for spying on right-wing Cubans who trained at Florida bases and flew harassment missions through Cuban air space. The last three to be released served hard time in American prisons, and are being welcomed as triumphant heroes on the streets of Havana. Three of the Cuban Five served in Angola as well.

Tens of thousands of Americans, from the veterans of the cane-cutting Venceremos Brigades to the steady flow of tourists insisting on their right to travel, deserve credit for steady years of educational and solidarity work and for pushing a hardy congressional bloc towards normalization.

President Obama has kept his word, despite relentless skepticism from both the left and the mainstream media. He is confounding the mainstream assumption that the Cuban right has a permanent lock on American foreign policy, especially after the Republican sweep in the November elections.

In this case, Obama's extreme emphasis on diplomatic secrecy worked to his advantage. For over a year, leaders in both countries have conducted regular private debates and consultations, which resulted in the detailed normalization plan released in both capitals today. No one was more important on the American congressional team than Senator Patrick Leahy. Their tight discipline held until the final moment.

It is known that the private US-Cuba conversations about Alan Gross and the Cuban Five were the most difficult. The United States has never acknowledged that Gross was a de facto spy of a certain type, having traveled five times to Havana to secretly distribute advanced communications technology to persons in Havana's small Jewish community before he was arrested in 2009. Also problematic for American officials immersed in decades of Cold War

thinking was the task of wrapping their minds around the idea that the Cuban Five were political prisoners and not terrorist threats.

Finally, when both sides had achieved an internal consensus, the project was derailed by the furious Republican-led blowback against Obama's trade of five Taliban captives for captured American soldier Bowe Bergdahl in May 2014. Then the November elections interfered with, and threatened to indefinitely delay, the beginning of normalization. Chanukah was the last date for an announcement before the installation of the new US Congress.

Because of the anti-Cuban slant of mainstream thinking, the media will make much of the anger of the Cuban right exemplified by Senator Marco Rubio. But while it's too early to know, it's hard to imagine his presidential ambitions being enhanced by arguing in 2016 that Obama should have tried to overthrow the Castros. Senator Bob Menendez has been a leading Democrat trying to block the Obama initiative from his chairing position on the Senate Foreign Relations Committee. Most Democrats will be delighted to see Menendez, who represents Cuban exiles in Union City, diminished in the Senate.

Going forward, the United States will remove Cuba from the "state terrorism" listing, which will ease the possibility of funding from the international financial system. For American citizens, permission to travel to Cuba will be significantly widened. Business and trade possibilities will increase. Starting with the 2015 Summit of the Americas in Panama, the American and Cuban delegations will sit at the same table. The so-called interest sections will be upgraded to formal embassies. The embargo is going to be hollowed out from within, with American tourist and investment dollars permitted to flow. With or without congressional action to lift the 1996 Helms-Burton act, the embargo is being dissolved. More than 400,000 Cuban-Americans traveled to Cuba last year alone.

And here's a prediction: if the president has his wish, the Obama family will be seen on the streets of Havana before his term is up.