

CUBA IN THE FOREIGN POLICY OF THE UNITED STATES OF AMERICA
XXI EDITION OF THE CONVERSATION SERIES
HOSTED IN HAVANA
TUESDAY, DECEMBER 17, 2024

Remarks of Robert L. Muse
Washington, DC

**My Six Presidents: Lessons Learned in U.S.- Cuba Policy
Formulation**

In my thirty-five years of experience of six U.S. presidents, only one administration can fairly claim to have had a Cuba policy *as a matter of foreign policy* – if, that is, we employ the classic definition of a 'policy' as an organized set of principles relating to a specific subject and created to obtain articulated outcomes. *Ad hoc* responses are not policies. Nor does the pursuit of a goal unrelated to an intrinsic subject constitute a policy. An example would be someone seeking personal political gain by taking a position on a matter. This can be said to be a personal policy of self-advancement or self-protection, but it does not qualify as a foreign policy – it is simply a motive.

Using such a definition of policy, Obama is the only president in my professional lifetime in Washington who can be said to have had an actual *Cuba policy*, in the last two years of his presidency. I will return to this later, but first, I will present a chronology of presidential activity involving Cuba across six presidents. I believe this will demonstrate that such activity is almost purely reactive to political concerns in the US, or, more rarely, actions taken by Cuba. I will end with a somewhat counterintuitive assessment of what Donald Trump's second term may look like in terms of US-Cuba relations.

CUBA IN THE FOREIGN POLICY OF THE UNITED STATES OF AMERICA
XXI EDITION OF THE CONVERSATION SERIES
HOSTED IN HAVANA
TUESDAY, DECEMBER 17, 2024

Remarks of Robert L. Muse
Washington, DC

George H.W. Bush 1988-1992

In Bush the Elder's first year in office the Berlin Wall fell and East European governments toppled, ending with the dissolution of the Soviet Union in 1991. During his re-election bid in 1992 Bush was surprised to see Bill Clinton travel to Cuba, meet with Jorge Mas Canosa and announce he supported corrupt New Jersey Congressman Torricelli's *Cuba Democracy Act*. As Clinton put it, it was time to “bring the hammer down on Castro.” Bush, who hitherto had taken a mild approach to Cuba, reluctantly withdrew his threat to veto the proposed law. He went on to narrowly win Florida, but lose the election. Bush's support for the bill was a reaction to a domestic electoral threat, not a policy toward Cuba.

Lesson learned: A Democratic presidential candidate could be competitive in Florida.

Result: Cuba emerges as a matter of self-interested political policy among U.S. contenders for elected office rather than a subject of foreign policy.

Bill Clinton 1992-2000

Clinton paid little attention to Cuba until 1994 when a refter crisis in the Florida Straits engaged his attention. Sanctions were applied and withdrawn piecemeal over the next couple of years. In 1994 Republicans took over Congress and the Helms-Burton Act was introduced. It was shut down in the Senate - I know, I was there. But the shooting down of two small planes that provocatively entered

CUBA IN THE FOREIGN POLICY OF THE UNITED STATES OF AMERICA
XXI EDITION OF THE CONVERSATION SERIES
HOSTED IN HAVANA
TUESDAY, DECEMBER 17, 2024

Remarks of Robert L. Muse
Washington, DC

Cuban airspace created a stampede in Congress and the bill passed in a romp. Note this important fact: *Never one time did the Clinton White House threaten a veto of the bill, while we fought senator-by-senator to deprive Helms of the 60 votes needed to end Senator Chris Dodd's filibuster.* Why? Because, notwithstanding Clinton's revisionism on the subject he was always going to sign it with his re-election looming in November of 1996, and his settled conviction that he had to win Florida from Bob Dole to be re-elected. It was only a matter of agreeing waivers of certain provisions.

Lesson learned: A Democrat could win Florida.

Result: Cuba is confirmed as an element of domestic US policies.

George W. Bush 2000-2008

Much like his father, George W. was preoccupied with other matters in his first term - i.e. his legacy-ruining invasion of Iraq. His neglect of Cuba in his first term was however resentfully noted as he ran for reelection in 2004, by Cuban American political figures (e.g. Ileana Ros-Lehtinen) who took a rather self-pitying posture and said “they might as well vote Democrat” in 2004 for all the good getting him over the top in Florida with Gore in 2000 (as they claimed) had done them. In reaction, Bush established a Presidential Commission that duly recommended limits on remittances and the elimination of most travel to Cuba, including limiting family

CUBA IN THE FOREIGN POLICY OF THE UNITED STATES OF AMERICA
XXI EDITION OF THE CONVERSATION SERIES
HOSTED IN HAVANA
TUESDAY, DECEMBER 17, 2024

Remarks of Robert L. Muse
Washington, DC

visits to once every three years and establishing a per diem of \$50 a day for all travel to Cuba. Bush won Cuba comfortably over Kerry in 2004.

Lesson learned: Reward your voters.

Result: Cuba is reconfirmed as an element of US domestic policies.

Barack Obama 2008-2016

Halfway through his second term (beginning in late 2014) Obama did something quite novel, he treated Cuba as a matter of *foreign policy* and launched a rapprochement.

Lesson learned: Electoral considerations don't matter when they don't matter.

Result: Good theatrics, but in the end a supposedly 'irreversible' policy of normalization of relations proved to be very reversible.

Donald Trump 2016-2020

Trump beat Hillary Clinton by 1.2% in Florida in 2016, with little to no commitment to taking a hard line on Cuba; indeed he thought Obama was not wrong in seeking normalized relations with Cuba; but of course “The Donald” would have gotten a 'better deal.' However, under the influence of his National Security Adviser Bolton and others he rescinded some of Obama's relaxations of the embargo. He went on to beat Biden by 3.5% in 2020 in Florida. In 2024 Trump beat Harris by 13%.

CUBA IN THE FOREIGN POLICY OF THE UNITED STATES OF AMERICA
XXI EDITION OF THE CONVERSATION SERIES
HOSTED IN HAVANA
TUESDAY, DECEMBER 17, 2024

Remarks of Robert L. Muse
Washington, DC

Lesson learned: Florida is irretrievably Republican territory for some years to come.

Result: We can therefore interrupt political consultants who say "Cuba is the third-rail in presidential politics in Cuba," with the retort: "No, it isn't."

Joe Biden 2020-2024

There has been speculation that Biden's Chief of Staff was opposed to a return to Obama's policy of normalization. I don't buy it, a chief of staff is in the end just that, a staffer. An old pol like Biden, elevated from the Senate after thirty-five years, is influenced by (i) constituent interests, (ii) former Democrat senatorial colleagues, and (iii) empowered advisers - in roughly that order, with the later being Blinken (Secretary of State) and Sullivan (NSC) both of whom are inner-circle Democrat operatives. In my opinion, it was the second source of influence – endorsed by the third – that mattered. Former Senator John Kerry was Secretary of State during Obama's rapprochement with Cuba. Not long before the election of 2020 he was quoted as saying that there was little reason to reprise Obama's initiative, because Cuba did not respond positively to the first – so why bother with a re-run?

Lesson Learned: A body at rest will remain in that state (Newton's First Law)

Result: Negligible in all respects.

Trump II 2024-2028

CUBA IN THE FOREIGN POLICY OF THE UNITED STATES OF AMERICA
XXI EDITION OF THE CONVERSATION SERIES
HOSTED IN HAVANA
TUESDAY, DECEMBER 17, 2024

Remarks of Robert L. Muse
Washington, DC

There are no electoral considerations in play with Cuba policy during Trump's second term or Vance's run in 2028. So what will it be? A guess based on experience and the psychology of Donald Trump: First, Trump owes Marco Rubio nothing, he can argue for draconian sanctions on Cuba, but Trump will decide in the end. Initially though we can expect a bombardment of Cuba from both Congress and the Executive Branch. However, there isn't much left to do, except extend the embargo to third-country nationals - that would certainly hurt, **if** Trump plays along. However, Trump is if anything a mercurial personality, how long before he becomes bored with a savage coercive strategy that alters nothing fundamental in the US - Cuba relationship? That is the question. Let's remember, he walked into North Korea in 2019 in company with Kim Jong Un.

Lesson Learned: A non-politician will be a “wild card” president.

Conclusion

What have we learned? Over the thirty-seven-year period I have discussed, only one President, Barack Obama, has genuinely approached Cuba as an exercise in foreign policy, rather than from a self-interested policy of political advantage, or from a position of reaction or simple indifference in the case of Biden and largely Trump I. As discussed, political electoral advantage is not an issue with Trump or his probable successor, Vance. So the question is, does Trump ultimately move on Cuba as a matter of foreign policy? If so, will he will depart from a predictable

CUBA IN THE FOREIGN POLICY OF THE UNITED STATES OF AMERICA
XXI EDITION OF THE CONVERSATION SERIES
HOSTED IN HAVANA
TUESDAY, DECEMBER 17, 2024

Remarks of Robert L. Muse
Washington, DC

beginning of redoubled sanctions to something much more dramatic; for example, a unilateral end to the embargo on a simple basis of "let's try it and see what happens." He is owned by no one – a rare thing in United States politics. So we shall see.