

The Brief Interlude of Normalization:  
What Worked, What Did Not, and How to Move Forward  
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The process of normalizing U.S.-Cuban relations announced ten years ago on December 17, 2014, was an historic break from the antagonism that had characterized relations since 1959. Despite the short time that remained in Barack Obama’s presidency and the legacy of distrust on both sides, significant progress was made:

- The United States and Cuba restored full diplomatic relations.
- The United States rescinded Cuba's designation as a state sponsor of international terrorism.
- The United States released three Cuba intelligence officers (of the original Cuban Five) imprisoned in the United States, and Cuba released Rolando Sarraff Trujillo, a Cuban national imprisoned for spying for the United States.
- On humanitarian grounds Cuba released Alan Gross, the USAID subcontractor imprisoned for actions against the integrity of the Cuban state, and 53 political prisoners named by the United States.
- Cuba agreed to expand internet access on the island.
- Cuba agreed to engage with the International Committee of the Red Cross and the United Nations on human rights issues.
- The United States agreed to welcome Cuban participation at the Seventh Summit of the Americas in April 2015, where President Obama and President Raúl Castro met face to face, the first such encounter since 1959.
- The United States and Cuba established a Bilateral Commission to improve diplomatic relations and cooperation, established 18 working groups on a wide range of issues, including claims and human rights, and signed 22 bilateral agreements to cooperate on issues of mutual interest.
- President Obama approved five packages of unilateral regulatory changes intended to increase travel, commerce, cultural exchanges, family engagement, and the flow of information to Cuba.
- The United States and Cuba signed a migration agreement that ended the U.S. wet foot-dry foot policy and the Cuban Medical Professional Parole Program, and Cuba agreed to allow the return of undocumented Cuban migrants and, on a case-by-case basis, migrants deemed excludable under U.S. law.<sup>1</sup>
- President Obama visited Cuba in March 2016, the first U.S. president to visit since Calvin Coolidge in 1928.

The pace of diplomatic progress was extraordinary and Obama’s relaxation of some embargo restrictions on travel, cultural exchange, and commerce stimulated a dramatic increase in the number of U.S. visitors to Cuba, a surge in cultural exchanges, and tremendous interest in

business opportunities among major U.S. corporations. Moreover, in both countries the popular reaction to the normalization process was enthusiastic, and international praise was unanimous.

These successes led U.S. Deputy National Security Adviser Ben Rhodes, who headed the U.S. negotiating team that produced the December 17 agreement, to predict that the new policy was “irreversible.”<sup>2</sup> Unfortunately, it was not. Two years was not long enough for it to put down sufficient roots to withstand the assault by a hostile president.

Some of the reasons for normalization’s lack of resilience were structural, built into U.S. law and beyond the ability of the president to change. But others were arguably the result of policy decisions made in both Washington and Havana that slowed the normalization process down, whether intentionally or not, and prevented it from building a durable political base of support. Understanding those policy decisions is the first step to avoid repeating the missteps that limited progress between 2014 and 2016, so that when the opportunity to resume normalizing relations presents itself in the future, it has the best chance for success.

### *The Structural Problem*

The fact that U.S. sanctions against Cuba are inscribed in law, particularly the 1996 Cuban Liberty and Democratic Solidarity Act, meant that Obama could not (or at least believed he could not) lift the embargo in its entirety. To be sure, Obama poked many holes in the embargo using his licensing authority, but with Republicans in control of Congress, he could not resolve the issue that was most salient for Cuba: repeal of the embargo. That may well have contributed to a certain skepticism among some Cuban leaders about Washington’s sincerity. Moreover, because all of Obama’s initiatives were, by necessity, undertaken using his presidential authority, they were vulnerable to reversal by a hostile successor, which is what happened.

### *A Lack of Urgency*

At various junctures, both sides could have moved faster and gotten even more done before the end of Obama’s term in office. By waiting until the last two years of his presidency to decide to normalize relations, Obama left very little time to demonstrate its advantages to skeptics both in Washington and Havana. Once the secret negotiations got underway in 2013, progress proved painfully slow. Both sides were reluctant to make the key concessions that eventually moved the talks to a successful conclusion. Naturally, it took time to build a degree of trust, but if the talks had concluded successfully at the end of 2013 rather than the end of 2014, the extra year to build on normalization’s successes might have made a difference.

In the months after December 17, both sides could have moved faster to put in place the infrastructure of normalization. The Obama administration issued five packages of regulatory reforms relaxing the embargo, but the last one was not announced until just three months before the end of Obama’s term. Had the administration been bolder, issuing more of the new regulations earlier, the changes would have had more time to take effect, especially on the commercial front.

Even so, there was a lot of enthusiasm among U.S. businesses about the possibility of entering the Cuban market and a large number of delegations visited Cuba in the two years after December 17. Unfortunately, only about two dozen contracts resulted, mostly in the telecommunications and travel sectors. Several concerns discouraged other U.S. businesses from engaging with Cuba: certain provisions of Cuban law, such as the indirect hiring of Cuban workers, and the very slow process of receiving responses to commercial proposals.<sup>3</sup> Some

businesses reportedly never received a response at all. Whether this was a result of Cuban negotiators being swamped by the deluge of proposals or the complexities of the approval process, the experience was discouraging for U.S. companies.

Finally, with U.S. presidential elections less than two years away, businesses were reluctant to make any significant investment of time or resources to build commercial ties with Cuba for fear a Republican president would cancel them—as President Trump did with Marriott’s hotel management contract.<sup>4</sup>

### *Bureaucratic Caution and Inertia*

Given the history of U.S. economic domination of Cuba in the first half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, it is understandable that some Cuban leaders may have been concerned that throwing open the door to U.S. trade and investment would risk creating a new dependency on both the U.S. economy and whims of Washington politicians. Carefully scrutinizing proposed business deals was a way to assure that they would align with Cuba’s own development priorities and not compromise Cuban sovereignty and independence. But it led to missed opportunities.

In Washington, meanwhile, every proposal to further relax the embargo was subjected to microscopic legal and political nitpicking inside the executive branch bureaucracy. Rather than pushing the limits of presidential executive authority, so that commerce had time to flourish before the end of Obama’s term, the Departments of Commerce and Treasury rolled out piecemeal changes. To break through the timidity of the Washington bureaucracy, the White House had to continually prod officials from cabinet secretaries on down that advancing relations with Cuba was a presidential priority, and that their marching orders were to find ways to get it done, not find excuses for why they could not. A general lack of familiarity with Cuba’s legal system in the U.S. government meant that some U.S. regulatory changes were incompatible with Cuban law.

Given the general assumption that Hillary Clinton would defeat Donald Trump in 2016 and that she would carry on Obama’s policy of normalization as she had pledged to do, Cuban and U.S. leaders alike probably believed that there was no need to move precipitously in either the diplomatic or commercial spheres. Progress could have been more rapid, as was demonstrated by how fast the pace of diplomatic activity stepped up after the November 2016 election when both sides rushed to put in place as many diplomatic agreements as possible during the last few months of the Obama administration.

### *Mutual Distrust*

There was obvious disagreement among Cuban leaders about the relative balance of advantages and risks from engaging with the United States. Some clearly felt that the risks of subversion—the Trojan Horse of U.S. soft power—outweighed the economic advantages of reducing sanctions—especially when most of the embargo remained in place. The skepticism of some Cuban leaders about President Obama’s sincerity was visible on December 17. Obama’s speech focused on the historic shift in U.S. policy from regime change to engagement with a goal of normalization; Raúl Castro’s speech was more subdued, focusing on the return of the remaining three members of the Cuban Five. Next day, the four column headline in *Granma* read simply “¡Volvieron!” (“They returned!”).

For six weeks after Obama’s and Raúl Castro’s announcement, Fidel Castro remained conspicuously silent, generating speculation that he must be gravely ill since nothing else could explain his silence on such a momentous event. He finally published a letter in late January 2015

reminiscing about his days at the University of Havana and reflecting on a wide variety of global issues.<sup>5</sup> Only in the last few sentences did he refer elliptically to December 17, writing, “I do not trust the policy of the United States,” and concluding, “The President of Cuba has taken pertinent steps in accordance with his prerogatives and faculties conceded by the National Assembly and the Communist Party of Cuba.” Not a ringing endorsement.

A year later, when Obama became the first sitting U.S. president to visit Cuba since Calvin Coolidge in 1928, Fidel was more openly critical. In an angry editorial on the front page of the Communist Party daily *Granma*, he took umbrage at Obama giving advice to Cubans on how to organize their politics and economy. Castro chided Obama for trying to “elaborate theories on Cuban politics,” and warned him against “the illusion” that Cubans would renounce the revolution to curry favor with the United States. “We do not need the empire to give us anything,” he concluded defiantly.<sup>6</sup>

Imbued with deep suspicion of U.S. intention reflecting a hundred years of Cuban history and a half century of his own experience, Fidel Castro never believed the United States would truly reconcile itself to a sovereign and independent Cuba, free of U.S. tutelage. “No one should entertain the slightest illusion that the empire, which carries the genes of its own destruction, will negotiate with Cuba,” he wrote in a 2007 reflection.<sup>7</sup> From his vantage point, Castro saw Obama as a wolf in sheep’s clothing, rolling a Trojan Horse of soft power subversion into Havana from the cargo hold of Air Force One. Other Cuban leaders shared his skepticism and his outspokenness legitimized their complaints, unleashing a cascade of criticism and a robust debate over relations with Washington.

Days after Castro’s missive, *Granma* ran another front page column by veteran journalist Dario Machado, who warned against “the danger posed by those who believe that with these lukewarm changes [in U.S. policy], the contradiction between the interests of U.S. imperialism and the Cuban nation has disappeared.” On the contrary, Obama was especially dangerous because of his charisma and stage presence, which enabled him “to disguise the strategic objectives of U.S. imperialism toward Cuba, Latin America and the Caribbean.” Reminding Cuban youth of past U.S. military aggressions, Machado concluded: “There is no doubt: Obama is the gentle and seductive face of the same danger,” aiming “not to cooperate with Cuba, but rather...to contribute to the fragmentation of Cuban society in order to recover U.S. hegemony.”<sup>8</sup> Even Foreign Minister Bruno Rodríguez, whose ministry led the negotiations with Washington after December 2014, criticized Obama’s trip as “a deep attack on our ideas, our history, our culture and our symbols” designed to sow dissension.<sup>9</sup>

The Trojan Horse<sup>10</sup> theory of Obama’s opening was not without evidence. Obama’s justification for his policy change—that the old policy of coercion had failed to achieve results, so it was time to try something new—implied that the goal of regime change was still U.S. policy, but would be pursued by other means. The ambiguity about the goal of Obama’s policy was real. On the one hand, he declared both on December 17, 2014, and in his speech to the Cuban people in March 2016 that the United States was offering “friendship” and respect for Cuba’s self-determination. “What changes come will depend upon the Cuban people,” he declared in the Grand Theater. “We will not impose our political or economic system on you.”

On the other hand, he was equally consistent in declaring that his policy aimed to empower the Cuban people. “I do not expect the changes I am announcing today to bring about a transformation of Cuban society overnight,” Obama explained in his December 17, 2014, address. “But I am convinced that through a policy of engagement, we can more effectively stand up for our values and help the Cuban people help themselves as they move into the 21st

century.”<sup>11</sup> The White House web site offered an even clearer statement: “Decades of U.S. isolation of Cuba have failed to accomplish our objective of empowering Cubans to build an open and democratic country.”<sup>12</sup>

The implementing regulations issued by the Treasury and Commerce Departments were even more explicit about the aim of the new policy. Secretary of the Treasury Jack Lew said that they put in place “a policy that helps promote political and economic freedom for the Cuban people.”<sup>13</sup> The Commerce regulations are entitled, “Providing Support for the Cuban People,” and the Treasury regulations declare their purpose to be “to further engage and support the Cuban people.”<sup>14</sup> Both give privileged status to activities that support “recognized human rights organizations” and “independent organizations designed to promote a rapid, peaceful transition to democracy,” activities that “promote independent activity intended to strengthen civil society” and “help promote their [the Cuban people’s] independence from Cuban authorities.”<sup>15</sup>

The long term goal of U.S. policy continued to be the promotion of a more democratic Cuba with a more open (that is, free-market) economy. The difference was that Obama’s policy of engagement hoped to achieve that goal by shaping Cuba’s environment in ways that channeled an internal dynamic of change in the direction Washington hoped to see it go, rather than by trying to coerce Cuba into compliance or to force sudden, violent regime change.

Cuban critics of normalization not only pointed out that Obama’s policy was still aimed at regime change by soft power, but that much of U.S. policy had not changed at all. The embargo remained in place despite Obama’s exceptions, Radio and TV Martí were still broadcasting, the so-called “democracy promotion” programs were still operating, trying to undermine popular support for the Cuban government, and Guantánamo was still under U.S. occupation. What had really changed?

Ironically, Obama’s critics in Washington made a parallel argument. The president had given the Cuban regime legitimacy by restoring diplomatic relations, they claimed, and had discouraged Cuban dissidents (although the Cuban dissident community was divided over the benefits of normalization). Relaxing the embargo to boost travel and commercial ties had given the regime “oxygen” to revive its economy, and the United States had gotten nothing in return—no improvement in human rights, no progress toward democracy, no willingness on the Cuba side to compensate Cuban Americans for their nationalized property. The diplomatic working groups on human rights and property claims only had time to meet once or twice before the end of Obama’s term—barely time for the two sides to stake out their maximalist positions before getting down to business. Their lack of progress became yet another talking point for U.S. opponents of normalization.

### *The Inertia of Vested Interests*

In both Washington and Havana, some of the criticism of normalization arose from vested interests. Powerful politicians in south Florida and New Jersey built political careers on their hostility toward Cuba, and the growth of democracy promotion along with TV and Radio Martí created an anti-Cuba industry financed by the federal government to the tune of tens of millions of dollars annually. As soon as normalization got underway, Congressional opponents tried to pass legislation preventing Obama from either cutting those funds, bringing Cuba Broadcasting under control of the Voice of America, or reprogramming democracy funding for less malevolent programs to foster authentic civil society engagement.

In Havana, the threat posed by the United States for more than half a century has had its political uses. One of Fidel Castro’s great gifts as a politician was his ability to grasp the core

values of Cuban political culture and, through his oratory, reflect them back to the public in ways that resonated deeply. The most important of these values was nationalism. "The Revolution has to fight; combat is what makes revolutions strong," Castro said in early 1961. "A revolution that does not confront an enemy runs the risk of falling asleep, of growing weak.... Like armies hardening themselves, revolutions need to confront an enemy!"<sup>16</sup> Washington obligingly provided that enemy, and that hostility was a perennial rallying cry to boost nationalist support for the government.

States facing existential threats from abroad are notorious for repressing dissent at home in the name of national security, treating critics as Fifth Columnists. Cuba is no exception. Although the political space available for criticism of the Cuban government has varied over time, vocal organized opposition to the socialist system itself has never been tolerated. Washington has given the Cuban government a ready-made justification for its intolerance of dissent by actively recruiting and supporting domestic opponents as part of its regime-change strategy. Finally, for half a century, Cuba's leaders have been able to blame the nation's economic problems on the U.S. embargo (although Raúl Castro resorted to that excuse much less often as he tried to address the economy's internal failings).

The normalization of U.S.-Cuban relations would reduce or eliminate the effectiveness of all these tried and true political strategies. "It's difficult enough to prepare for a war," said former Cuban diplomat Carlos Alzugaray, "How can you prepare for a declaration of peace? The idea of a siege mentality is embedded here."<sup>17</sup>

### *Culture Shock*

A surge in cultural exchanges that accompanied normalization produced some cultural consternation and political blowback, reviving memories of U.S. cultural dominance before 1959. The surge culminated in early 2016 with a flurry of unprecedented events right before and shortly after President Obama's trip. In early March, the DJ trio Major Lazer held a concert in Cuba, advertised in advance on the *paquete semanal*, that, to everyone's surprise-- including the performers-- drew 400,000 young people to an electronic music concert in Anti-Imperialist Plaza.<sup>18</sup> Shortly after Obama's trip, the Rolling Stones gave a free concert in Havana drawing half a million fans. A Hollywood production company came to Cuba to film *The Fate of the Furious*, the eighth film in the *Fast and Furious* franchise, while 10,000 curious spectators watched Vin Diesel race classic cars through the streets of Havana.<sup>19</sup>

In May, the first cruise ships from the United States arrived, disgorging hundreds of travelers who were met at the dock by xxx, reprising stereotypes of Cuba seemingly unearthed from the 1950s. That same month, the Kardashians arrived with a TV crew to film an episode of their reality television show and Chanel held its "Cruise 2016/17" fashion show on the Prado. VIPs sat along the curbs while super models displayed Chanel's latest fashions, including a line of brightly colored clothing featuring classic cars supposedly inspired by Cuba's "cultural richness." Cubans were held at a distance behind a police cordon, not that they could have afforded any of the new creations.<sup>20</sup>

This cultural onslaught produced critical rumblings among the Cuban population and uneasiness among some Cuban officials, satiating their appetite for such high profile cultural events.<sup>21</sup> U.S. officials reported a marked decrease in Cuban interest in cultural exchanges for the rest of the year. An unfortunate casualty of this retreat was the Smithsonian Institution's plan to feature Cuban culture on the Washington's National Mall at the 2017 Folklife Festival, a two week long extravaganza that draws over two million visitors annually.<sup>22</sup> That would have been

an opportunity to display authentic Cuban culture rather than the ersatz versions focused on rum, cigars, and classic cars.

### *Looking Ahead*

The normalization of U.S. Cuban relations will be a “complex and certainly long process,” predicted Foreign Minister Bruno Rodríguez at the ceremony re-opening the Cuban Embassy in Washington in 2015. “The challenge is huge because there have never been normal relations between the United States of America and Cuba.”<sup>23</sup>

When the process of normalizing relations eventually resumes, leaders on both sides should heed Rodríguez’s warning. It will be complex, difficult, and it will suffer setbacks along the way. They will need to “play the long game” as U.S. negotiator Ben Rhodes described Obama’s approach to foreign policy, a willingness to be patient and not expect quick results. Making compromises that domestic opponents see as concessions, and doing so without hope of immediate benefit, is hard for politicians, especially in the United States where intense partisan attacks follow every decision.

Keeping an eye on the prize is equally important. The secret negotiators who made December 17 possible initially spent months arguing over the immediate issue of a prisoner exchange rather than focusing on how compromise on that narrow issue could open the door to a much broader agreement that would be far more valuable for both sides. The breakthrough came when they widened the scope of their vision.

Cuba and the United States will continue to disagree on many issues, so both sides need to recognize the limits of what is negotiable. Cuba will never compromise its sovereignty or independence. Every Cuban leader since 1959 has made that crystal clear. The United States will not give up its right to advocate for human rights and democracy, values inscribed in international covenants to which Cuba is a party. However, there are a great many other issues dividing the two countries that can be discussed on the basis of mutual respect with the goal of reaching some sort of *modus vivendi*.

Each side needs to recognize that there are domestic political forces at work in both capitals, some of which will be either suspicious of normalization or outright opposed to it. Sometimes progress will be slower than either side would prefer because one or the other, or both, needs to shore up domestic support for the process before it can advance.

Motives are less important than outcomes. If Cuba had been less suspicious of Obama’s motives and quicker to grasp the opportunity that his opening presented, normalization might have made more gains than it did. Even if Obama’s strategy was, in fact, regime change through soft power, it would still have been less of a drag on Cuban economic development than continuation of the embargo.

Can Cuba be sure that the United States will not reverse course again and return to a policy of antagonism and regime change? It cannot, with certainty. The U.S. Congress changes every two years and the presidency changes every four or eight. But as Raúl Castro understood, normal relations with the United States can be an important driver of economic growth and development through increased trade, travel, and investment. A strong economy, in turn, is the best long-term guarantor of Cuba’s sovereignty and independence because it will make the social programs in health, education, and housing sustainable, improve the Cuban people’s standard of living, and be better able to withstand external shocks resulting from both hostile neighbors and natural disasters.

Why should any U.S. president endure the political criticism certain to follow any renewed attempt to normalize relations with Cuba? The strongest argument is the same as it was in 2014. The policy of hostility and regime has been a perpetual failure for more than sixty years, producing nothing positive for either U.S. national interests or the Cuban people, and has done serious harm to both.

December 17, 2014, proved that engagement benefits both countries, and that bold and determined leaders can make it happen. The deepening ties that bind Cuba and the United States—ties of family, commerce, culture, and the shared interests that come from living next door to one another—will eventually overcome the resistance of even the most recalcitrant politicians. As Henry Kissinger recognized half a century ago, “perpetual antagonism” between the United States and Cuba need not be normal.<sup>24</sup>

## Notes

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<sup>2</sup> Karen DeYoung, “Opening to Cuba is ‘irreversible,’ senior Obama aide says,” *Washington Post*, June 9, 2016. [https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/national-security/opening-to-cuba-is-irreversible-senior-obama-aide-says/2016/06/09/9143435e-2e8c-11e6-9b37-42985f6a265c\\_story.html](https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/national-security/opening-to-cuba-is-irreversible-senior-obama-aide-says/2016/06/09/9143435e-2e8c-11e6-9b37-42985f6a265c_story.html)

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<sup>4</sup> Nora Gámez Torres. “Trump administration cancels Marriott’s license to run hotels in Cuba,” *Miami Herald*, June 5, 2020. <https://www.miamiherald.com/news/nation-world/world/americas/cuba/article243305101.html#storylink=cpy>

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<sup>8</sup> Darío Machado Rodríguez, “¿Obama ‘el bueno’?” *Granma*, March 24, 2016. <https://www.granma.cu/opinion/2016-03-24/obama-el-bueno-24-03-2016-20-03-38>



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<sup>9</sup> Reuters, “Cuba Calls Obama Visit ‘an Attack’ as Communists Defend Ideology,” Reuters, April 18, 2016. <https://www.reuters.com/article/world/cuba-calls-obama-visit-an-attack-as-communists-defend-ideology-idUSKCN0XF29X/>

<sup>10</sup> “Proyecto del Departamento de Estado se parece sospechosamente a un plan de infiltración,” *Cuba Debate*, March 30, 2016. The article is accompanied by a picture of a Trojan Horse. <http://www.cubadebate.cu/noticias/2016/03/30/proyecto-del-departamento-de-estado-se-parece-sospechosamente-a-un-plan-de-infiltracion/>

<sup>11</sup> Barack. Obama, “Statement by the President on Cuba Policy Changes.” White House, Office of the Press Secretary, December 17, 2014. <https://obamawhitehouse.archives.gov/the-press-office/2014/12/17/statement-president-cuba-policy-changes>

<sup>12</sup> White House, “Charting a New Course on Cuba,” 2016. <https://obamawhitehouse.archives.gov/issues/foreign-policy/cuba>

<sup>13</sup> U.S. Department of the Treasury, “Statement by Secretary Jacob J. Lew on Cuba Policy Changes,” December 17, 2014. <https://home.treasury.gov/news/press-releases/j19720>

<sup>14</sup> Department of Commerce, “Cuba: Providing Support for the Cuban People: A Rule by the Industry and Security Bureau on 01/16/2015,” *Federal Register* 15 CFR Parts 736, 740, 746 and 748. <https://www.federalregister.gov/documents/2015/01/16/2015-00590/cuba-providing-support-for-the-cuban-people#:~:text=This%20rule%20amends%20the%20Export,activity%20and%20strengthen%20civil%20society>

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<sup>21</sup> Michael Weissenstein, “Vin Diesel, Chanel spark cultural backlash in Cuba,” Associated Press, May 20, 2016. <https://apnews.com/article/f3dfb4452ecb43eab06f55731a3d546a>

<sup>22</sup> David Montgomery, “Smithsonian cancels plan to feature Cuba at the 2017 Folklife Festival,” *Washington Post*, October 1, 2016. <https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/arts-and-entertainment/wp/2016/10/01/folklife/>

<sup>23</sup> Bruno Rodríguez, “Statement by Cuban Foreign Minister at opening of embassy in Washington, July 20, 2015,” *Granma*, July 20, 2015. <https://en.granma.cu/mundo/2015-07-20/statement-by-cuban-foreign-minister-at-opening-of-embassy-in-washington>

<sup>24</sup> “Cuba and the U.S: Road Map On Efforts To Improve Relations Revealed In Declassified Documents,” National Security Archive, January 22, 2009. <https://nsarchive2.gwu.edu/NSAEBB/NSAEBB269/index.htm>