



Written by [Warren Mass](#) on February 18, 2016

Obamas Will Travel to Cuba in March

President Obama and First Lady Michelle Obama will travel to Cuba on March 21 and 22, notes a February 18 White House press release. During the visit, continues the statement, “The president will work to build on the progress we have made toward normalization of relations with Cuba — advancing commercial and people-to-people ties that can improve the well-being of the Cuban people, and expressing our support for human rights.”



Among the events on the agenda for the historic presidential visit are a bilateral meeting with Cuban President Raúl Castro, the younger brother of and successor to former Cuban dictator Fidel Castro, who led the 1953-1959 revolution that made Cuba a communist nation. In addition to his position as president, Castro is first secretary of the Central Committee of the Communist Party of Cuba.

The last sitting U.S. president to visit Cuba was Calvin Coolidge, in 1928.

An article posted on the White House website provides details of the Obama administration’s “new course on Cuba.” The article notes that “decades of U.S. isolation of Cuba have failed to accomplish our objective of empowering Cubans to build an open and democratic country” and correctly states that “today, as in 1961, Cuba is governed by the Castros and the Communist party.”

According to [whitehouse.gov](#), the administration’s “new course” will, among other things,

Re-establish diplomatic relations

Our diplomatic relations with Cuba were severed in January of 1961. The President is immediately reopening discussions with Cuba and working to re-establish an embassy in Havana in the next coming months. The U.S. will work with Cuba on matters of mutual concern that advance U.S. national interests, such as migration, counternarcotics, environmental protection, and trafficking in persons, among other issues.

More effectively empower the Cuban people by adjusting regulations

The President is taking steps to improve travel and remittance policies that will further increase people-to-people contact, support civil society in Cuba, and enhance the free flow of information to, from, and among the Cuban people.

Facilitate an expansion of travel to Cuba

The U.S. is restoring up to 110 direct, commercial roundtrip flights a day. With expanded travel, Americans will be able to help support the growth of civil society in Cuba more easily, and provide business training for private Cuban businesses and small farmers. Americans will also be able to provide other support for the growth of Cuba’s nascent private sector.

While these objectives appear to be promising, they ignore the reality of life in a communist-controlled country, where all commerce is controlled by the government and large-scale private enterprise is practically nonexistent. The same might be said of the stated goal of enhancing “the free flow of



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information” in a totalitarian state where freedom is unknown and the flow of information is subject to government surveillance and control.

Under the heading “Human Rights and Civil Society,” the White House article presents several objectives that can, at best, be described as naïve. They speak of “continued strong support for improved human rights conditions and democratic reforms in Cuba,” and supporting universal human rights by “empowering civil society and a person’s right to speak freely, peacefully assemble, and associate, and by supporting the ability of people to freely determine their future.”

The apparent fascination with the word “empower” ignores the fact that people in a free society such as ours who seek to become “empowered” do not face harsh punishment from the government for asserting themselves, as is the case in Cuba. The writer might benefit from reading a report published by Human Rights Watch entitled “[World Report 2013: Cuba](#)”:

Cuba remains the only country in Latin America that represses virtually all forms of political dissent. In 2012, the government of Raúl Castro continued to enforce political conformity using short-term detentions, beatings, public acts of repudiation, travel restrictions, and forced exile.

Although in 2010 and 2011 the Cuban government released dozens of political prisoners on the condition that they accept exile in exchange for their freedom, the government continues to sentence dissidents to one to four-year prison terms in closed, summary trials, and holds others for extended periods without charge. It has also relied increasingly upon arbitrary arrests and short-term detentions to restrict the basic rights of its critics, including the right to assemble and move freely.

Such a repressive regime is not likely to “empower” its citizens and grant them a wide range of human rights simply because the U.S. government opens an embassy in Havana, allows more flights to and from the island, allows Americans to buy Cuban cigars and rum, and “supports” greater human rights in Cuba.

It is hard to find a product in an American store that is not made in China, yet what effect on human rights has massive trade with that communist nation accomplished? Human Rights Watch has also compiled a report entitled “World Report 2013: China” that notes:

Chinese people had no say in the selection of their new leaders, highlighting that despite the country’s three decades of rapid modernization, the government remains an authoritarian one-party system that places arbitrary curbs on freedom of expression, association, religion, prohibits independent labor unions and human rights organizations, and maintains party control over all judicial institutions. The government also censors the press, internet, and publishing industry, and enforces highly repressive policies in ethnic minority areas in Tibet, Xinjiang, and Inner Mongolia.

During an interview with Yahoo News last December, Obama said that the United States would “keep on pushing and prodding” Cuba on the matter of human rights, and that during his previous discussion with Raúl Castro he had urged the Cuban leader to let more foreign investors hire Cubans directly, rather than going through the government. The report cited unnamed experts who said that under the present system the government uses outside investments as a de facto patronage system, giving jobs at foreign-owned business such as luxury resorts to Communist Party loyalists.

“A real game changer would be a situation in which you have a direct employer-employee relationship. Because then the higher standards of a U.S. company or a foreign company would make a big difference,” Obama told Oliver Knox, *Yahoo News*’ chief Washington correspondent.



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Using his official Twitter feed on February 18, Obama promised to raise human rights concerns when he goes to Cuba, tweeting: “We still have differences with the Cuban government that I will raise directly. America will always stand for human rights around the world.”

In an [article last September](#), we quoted a statement made by journalist José Diaz-Balart, the news anchor of MSNBC’s *The Rundown*, observing that conditions in Cuba had only worsened since the United States restored diplomatic relations with the communist country last July 20. In response to a statement that Raúl Castro made to the UN General Assembly on September 28, in which he called for the United States to end its embargo on Cuba, Diaz-Balart, speaking on MSNBC’s *MTP Daily* on September 29, said,

You know, the embargo, if you look at how it was codified into law, it’s pretty basic and simple on how the embargo would be lifted.... It’s pretty simple how that would go away. If there is a call for free and fair elections, if political prisoners are released, if unions are allowed to organize and people can move freely within the country. If those three things happen in Cuba, then the embargo would cease to exist.... You call for democratic elections, you have a release of political prisoners, and have unions and the embargo’s over.

When *MTP Daily* host Chuck Todd asked, “Ever since the United States cut this deal and opened up diplomatic relations with Cuba, tell me what’s happened to political prisoners in Cuba,” Diaz-Balart replied, in part,

Well, the increase of repression has been clear.... Over the weekend, 70 people were arrested in Cuba. That includes Ladies of White [Damas de Blanco] and dissidents. The three dissidents that tried to approach the pope are still unaccounted for in prison. A lot of questions by Raul Castro, but what is going to cause a change in that government that’s been in power since January 1st of 1959?

The reason for the imposition of the U.S. embargo on Cuba in 1960 and the suspension of diplomatic relations between the United States and Cuba in 1961 was that the U.S. government finally recognized that the Cuban regime headed by Fidel Castro was both communist and brutally repressive.

This recognition came about two years after Robert Welch, at the founding meeting of The John Birch Society on December 8, 1958 (a month before Castro came to power) warned, “If you have any slightest doubt that Castro is a Communist, don’t. If he is successful, time will clearly reveal that he is an agent of the Kremlin.”

Welch founded not only The John Birch Society (JBS), but also *American Opinion* magazine, which was the forerunner to *The New American*. The JBS and both magazines have long warned against the folly of U.S. aid and trade with communist governments, which only serves to strengthen the control that such regimes have over their populations.

If Diaz-Balart’s assessment that conditions in Cuba have only worsened since the Obama administration has made a move to “normalize’ relations with Cuba, then it is obvious that the Raúl Castro regime, like all other communist regimes, will only continue to take advantage of any signs of weakness on our part.

Photo of Cuban and American flags on dashboard of vintage American car in Havana, Cuba: AP Images

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