

Why it's time to end the Cuban trade embargo

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UNITED STATES CONGRESSMAN
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I recently traveled to Havana, Cuba as part of a five-member Congressional team on a trade mission to begin talks to lift the United States embargo against Cuba. As a farmer, former Kentucky Commissioner of Agriculture, and representative of a large agricultural district, I was supportive of reopening trade with Cuba long before I ever actually visited Cuba. After spending five days meeting with Cuban government officials, small business owners, and various Cuban citizens, I am now strongly supportive of lifting the embargo, or the “blockade” as the Cubans call it, and intend on making it a major legislative priority of mine in the 115th Congress.

The biggest surprise I had from visiting Cuba was how many tourists were already visiting the country. There are now 110 airline flights each day into Cuba. Most of the tourists are from other countries, but many are from the US. I was also surprised to see how many small restaurants were owned by individual Cubans and the quality of food that the restaurants were serving. It was not surprising to find the majority of the agricultural products imported by Cuba to feed their population and their booming tourist industry are from China. China, Canada, and Europe are Cuba’s major agricultural trade partners.

Cuba has a population of over 11,000,000 and is located 90 miles south of Florida. To put that into perspective, Kentucky's population is only 4,400,000 and I travel 125 miles north from Tompkinsville to the Louisville Airport every Monday morning to fly into Washington. In recent years, the US has eased many decades of restrictions against Cuba. The US is currently exporting \$150 million worth of agricultural goods to Cuba, but if the embargo is lifted the estimated value of US exports skyrockets to an estimated \$2.2 billion.

Cuba was a booming economy throughout the 1800's and all the way up until 1959. In fact, my grandparents traveled to Havana in 1958 for a Caribbean vacation. Then in 1959, Fidel Castro led a revolution which overthrew the government. Castro seized control of every private investment in Cuba, most of which were American interests, and transitioned the government to a Socialist state. The U.S. government responded and rightfully declared an embargo against Cuba. In 1961, President Kennedy launched the failed Bay of Pigs Invasion. In 1962, Cuba and the Soviet Union came to the brink of a nuclear war with the United States.

Through the Fidel Castro years, Cuba's economy tanked and the Cuban people suffered. Fidel Castro's Socialist Cuba relied heavily on the Soviet Union to subsidize its failing economic system until the Soviet Union collapsed in 1991. After the Soviet collapse, Cuba entered what the government calls its "Special Period" which is similar to our American Great Depression. That was when tens of thousands of Cubans fled their country on rafts to Florida, Mexico, and the Caribbean. As Fidel Castro's health deteriorated, his brother Raul Castro assumed his office in 2008. In February of 2018 a new Cuban leader will supposedly be elected.

The foreign policy position of every American President from Eisenhower to Obama has essentially been to shut off Cuba's economy through an embargo, thereby starving its people and hoping the people would rise up and overthrow the Castro Regime. However, what would transpire over the years with the embargo is that the Castro Regime blamed the blunders of the Cuban economy on the American embargo. Thus, the regime remained in power despite horrible economic conditions and standards of living for Cuban citizens. In other words, U.S. policy toward Cuba actually helped Castro remain in power and keep Cuba a socialist state.

Lifting the US embargo against Cuba is an overall win-win. It is a win for foreign policy because countries that the US trades with are countries with which we have good relations. Similarly, countries we ban trade with are the ones where conflict often arises. Noting Cuba's proximity to the US, the last thing we need is for China or Russia to establish its own Guantanamo Bay Military Base pointed right

at us. It is also a win for trade, especially agricultural trade.

Full, free agricultural trade with Cuba would be a great deal for American farm families because Cuba is no threat to American agriculture. The crops that Cuba needs to import from America include corn, soy, wheat, lumber, bourbon, beef, and poultry – all of which cannot be grown in Cuba in any measurable quantity. These are all major crops in Kentucky. The agricultural crops Cuba could potentially export to America include coffee, tropical fruits, rum, and premium cigars which are commodities already being imported to America from other countries.

Opponents of lifting the embargo argue that we should not trade with a socialist country led by a Castro. I will argue that Cuba is a country in transition. The 2016 election signaled a strong desire by the American people to change the way Washington does business in every form and fashion. The people voted for a leader who campaigned on renegotiating bad trade deals and putting Americans first. Lifting the outdated and obsolete Cuban trade embargo would be a great deal for American workers – particularly American farmers.

President Trump has the ability to change the course of history in Cuba as well as open up a major new market for American goods. Donald Trump campaigned on renegotiating bad trade agreements in the past, such as NAFTA and TPP. He also said that he would renegotiate trade agreements bilaterally between countries instead of multilaterally, as has been the case in the past. I agree with this new way of thinking toward trade, and I encourage President Trump to negotiate a better deal in Cuba – one that would benefit both the United States and the Cuban people.

Rep. James Comer is the Congressman for the first district of Kentucky.
