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Obama Continues Misdirection in U.S. Policy Toward Cuba

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On September 5, President Obama chose to once again endorse the misguided economic embargo against Cuba by signing a [1-year extension](#) of the application of the Trading with the Enemy Act. In a statement for the Secretaries of State and of the Treasury, Obama labeled the move "in the national interest of the United States." He did not, however, provide further explanation as to why the United States should be interested in artificially extending an already prolonged Cold War in the Americas, especially while it faces actual security concerns in Eastern Europe and the Middle East. Not surprisingly, the decision received little to no attention in the mainstream U.S. press.

The renewal of the embargo is only one of a number of misguided policies toward Cuba that have come from the Obama administration in the past year. Just over a month ago, the Associated Press (AP) pulled back the curtain on a [USAID program](#) to fund young Latin Americans to travel to Cuba and "identify potential social-change actors," all under the guise of health and civil society initiatives such as a workshop to promote HIV-prevention. Four months before that, a [report](#) revealed that USAID had funded the creation of a Twitter-like social networking platform called ZunZuneo in Cuba to gather information on individuals who could potentially be mobilized for anti-government activities.

As if the mere existence of these programs amidst the backdrop of Obama's continued commitment to the embargo was not enough, the U.S. government has refused to acknowledge any wrongdoing and steadfastly maintains that its Cuba policy is in line with the goal of spreading freedom. A [press release](#) by USAID matter-of-factly stated that its work in Cuba "is not secret, it is not covert, nor is it undercover," but that it does contribute to the agency's mission to "promote resilient, democratic societies." Obviously, though, these programs were secret, covert and undercover - just ask the Cubans who had no idea their friends were working for the United States. State Department Spokesperson Jen Psaki even more audaciously stated during a [press briefing](#) on August 4 that "the USAID ... have a longstanding history of supporting democracy and human rights."

The string of poor policy decisions and even worse PR coming from the government is especially frustrating given Obama's own signals about the potential for a much needed reset in U.S.-Cuban relations at the start of the Obama administration. After 50 years of hostile relations with Cuba, newly inaugurated President Barack Obama [promised](#) in April 2009 a "new beginning" that would be characterized by greater engagement with the Cuban government. That same month, his [announcement](#) of an

easing of the U.S. embargo's travel and remittance restrictions indicated a possible transition in the United States' attitude towards Cuba, a welcome change for those who had been advocating for a relaxation of tension for decades. Though major policy changes were not implemented during Obama's first term, his [handshake with Cuban leader Raúl Castro](#) at Nelson Mandela's memorial service in December 2013 still had many hoping that Obama was committed to fostering more cordial relations with his counterpart in Havana.

President Obama was not alone in voicing an interest in casting off antiquated policies and improving relations with Cuba. In fact, a growing number of high-profile individuals in the United States have publicly demonstrated their opposition to continued hostility (and not just [Beyoncé and Jay-Z](#)). Former Republican Governor of Florida turned current Democratic candidate for [Governor Charlie Crist](#) announced in February 2014 that the embargo has "done nothing in more than fifty years to change the regime in Cuba." A win for Crist this November will surely provide greater impetus, and political safety, for Obama to consider overhauling U.S. policy. Presidential front runner [Hillary Clinton](#) also writes in her new book *Hard Choices* that the embargo has "only succeeded in giving [Fidel] a foil to blame for Cuba's economic woes" and that, during her tenure as Secretary of State, she privately urged President Obama to rethink the United States' Cuba policy, apparently to no avail at least at this writing. Clinton seems to recognize that, by presenting herself as a supporter of major policy changes, she can gain the favor of a new generation of Cuban-Americans and of a number of wealthy Cuban-Americans of both parties who have made clear to the Obama administration that they want to participate in Cuba's future, starting now.

Support for normalization of U.S.-Cuban relations is now even reflected among a majority of everyday Americans. A February 2014 [study by the Atlantic Council](#) found that 56 percent of Americans nationwide support changes to the current policy. In Miami-Dade County, Florida, the traditional stronghold of anti-Castro sentiment and base of support for some of the most staunchly pro-embargo politicians in Congress, the statistic is 65 percent in favor. Indeed, it seems that political forces from above and below are at last coalescing around the same conclusion: that it is time to end the Cold War hostility and pursue closer relations with Cuba.

Beyond rapidly falling public support within the United States, there is little reason to believe that a policy of continued hostility will be successful in promoting U.S. economic, commercial, and political interests with regards to Cuba. In 55 years of plots to bring about regime change in Cuba, ranging from efforts to invade the island to [fanciful assassination attempts](#) against its leaders and the embargo to strangle its economy, not one has managed to do anything remotely productive to overthrow the Castro brothers or reassert U.S. economic dominance on the island. Rather, these ill-conceived policies allow the regime to point to the constant threat of its northern neighbor as justification for continued entrenchment. Upon learning about the most recent USAID program, the Cuban government condemned the United States for its failure to cease "hostile and interventionist plans against Cuba," and so far the Cuban people have been given little reason to disagree.

Of course, U.S. policy toward Cuba is more complex than simply neo-Cold War economic and political subterfuge. The United States government does engage in some trade with Cuba, especially in food and medicine, and these actions do advance national interests. The recent policy gaffes suggest, however, that small steps in the direction toward normalization do not necessarily signify a larger sea change in U.S.-Cuban relations. Indeed, the big takeaway from the past few months is that the Obama administration is at least presently unwilling to expend the political capital required to ease tensions with the United States' long-term nemesis. Hopefully, as Obama nears the end of his second term in office, he will be courageous enough to break with the status quo and take real action to build a cooperative, mutually advantageous U.S.-Cuban relationship.

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