
Meeting Raúl: a Night of Nearness and Hope for Cuba and the US

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Apart from that, the presence of Raúl Castro for the first time at the United Nations, and the possibility that the United States votes against the embargo, or abstains from the annual denouncement of the policy in the General Assembly, are facts that can't be taken lightly.

The Cuban president has had high-level encounters with U.S officials as well as other international leaders. An extremely important moment was the meeting between Raúl Castro and ex-president Bill Clinton where both spoke about the joint medical cooperation for the benefit of the Haitian people. Hopefully, this collaboration will multiply and, one day, Cuban emigrants can participate with specialists of the humanitarian efforts from the island in that field, as well as in healthcare, education, sports, or any other area.

This past Sunday, September 27th, President Raúl Castro held an encounter at the Cuban Mission to the United Nations with Cuban-Americans and American citizens from across the nation. Of those who attended there were movie stars like Harry Belafonte and Danny Glover; journalists like Amy Goodman from the acclaimed program "Democracy Now"; members of prestigious institutions like Latin America Working Group, headed by Mavis Anderson, and Elena Freyre and Julio Ruiz from the Foundation for Normalization of Relations U.S.-Cuba (FORNORM). Miami's pro-normalization cadre was represented by journalists and activists like Alvaro Fernandez from *Progreso Semanal*/Progreso Weekly; publisher and radio host Max Lesnik (*Replica*, *Radio Miami*), and radio broadcasters Eddie Levy and Edmundo Garcia, who all have contributed to creating plurality in a community where one voice was imposed for many years. Ellen Bernstein, from Pastors for Peace, an organization that has done much for Cuba,

was also present.

There were also lesser-known actors such as travel agents, cultural promoters, academics, who, without asking for anything in return, have paid a high price for paving a path of normalcy for both nations. Our opinions may be diverse but we coincide on one central theme: Cuba is a sovereign country and it's not the duty of the United States, nor, any other country, to impose solutions or preferred Cubans. That perspective was the common factor that connected all present: to have contributed to the improvement of relations between Cuba and the U.S. throughout many decades in a consistent and lasting manner without claiming protagonism. In my case, I attended as Co-Director of Cuban Americans for Engagement (CAFE), an organization of Cuban-Americans spread out over twelve states comprised of Republicans, Democrats, and Independents who are all in favor of a change in American policy towards Cuba and a better relationship between Cuba – its society and government—and the Cuban diaspora.

Raúl Castro entered into the hall and didn't ask for microphones or podiums. On the contrary, he spoke with everyone who was present with absolute patience and humility. Practically surrounded by the swarm of people that wanted to shake his hand, he advanced by small steps, followed by the multitude in the rather small space that radiated with the collective glow of history that had been gathered there for just two hours.

I greeted the Cuban president and I thanked him for his kindness for having spoke with every one of the attendees. He received me with a kiss on the cheek, like with everyone else, without eschewing the Cuban familiarity that is so missed by one who lives away from the island. When I mentioned Cuban Americans for Engagement he turned towards Juanita, the interpreter, for help with English. She corroborated: "CAFE, the group that has been working towards normalization..." Raúl, without letting go of my hand, congratulated me, saying: "You have given a tremendous impulse to this. Thank you for everything you have done."

CAFE has advocated for important openings by the U.S. towards Cuba and with the Cuban government and its relations with emigrants. We desire a relationship between both nations based in international law and the relationship between Cuba and its emigrants based on the Universal Declaration of Human Rights. We work towards attaining these objectives with a constructive attitude, depending on dialogue, a clear understanding of our rights without the trappings of ideology, and a culture of free expression that is bolstered by our patriotism.

I thought, as I left, about all the protests of the youth of my generation; of our complaints and happiness; in our disappointments and our hopes; in our desire to travel and live in an interconnected world. I also thought about the enormous crisis that the world is facing — the refugees, great displacements of peoples, the collective suffering.... I tried to place our plight, that of Cuba, within that general framework. I felt hopeful.

Leaving the mission I saw many people looking towards the sky. There was an eclipse, coinciding with a phenomenon called a "supermoon" which is produced when a full or new moon is at its closest point to Earth. For me, I felt as if that night New York and Havana, the United States and Cuba, were much closer.

Translated from the [original Spanish](#) version by Benjamin Willis.
