

01-11-1999 Breaking the Blockade

“Our goal is to encourage the development in Cuba of peaceful, civic activities that are independent of the government and that will help the Cuban people prepare for the day when their country is **once again free.**” -- Secretary of State, Madeleine Albright, January 5, 1999 (emphasis added).

What is not clear is what the good Secretary means by “free.” Does she refer to good old days when Cuba was free to be enslaved by Spanish colonialism? Or does she perhaps refer to those heady days of yore when Cuba was condemned to languish under the boot of Batista’s dictatorship? “Once again free” is a curious notion for a small island and people whose only taste of freedom since the days of Columbus began four short decades ago.

Regardless of the Secretary’s grasp of reality, President Clinton did recently announce that he was authorizing the easing of some of the minor details of the criminal blockade against Cuba maintained for the last 37 years. The steps announced by Clinton include: increasing charter passenger flights to and from Cuba, allowing expanded payments to Cuban families by U.S. residents, establishing direct mail service with the island, and permitting the sale of U.S. food and agricultural supplies to non-governmental bodies. He also told the Baltimore Orioles that they could arrange a series of exhibition games with the Cuban national team, here and there.

The Cubans were not impressed. The Economy Minister, Jose Luis Rodriguez, called the measure crumbs, “With this sort of crumbs you can’t develop a country nor fix any problem in the world.” Foreign Minister Roberto Raibana said the measures “don’t really go to the root of the problem, a blockade that is unjust.” And legislative leader Ricardo Alarcon said that these paltry changes were a “deceptive maneuver” to deflect global opposition to the blockade.

What is it about Cuba that so torments the US government? The principle is quite clear; the Cuban people have the right to self-determination. The blockade is an effort, condemned by nearly every other country in the world, to squash that independence. Where is the mystery? US policy toward Cuba is simply wrong, legally and morally. It is that clear.

Yet some people here seem to go on and on about how the US must force changes in the Cuban government, how our policy should be to send illegal anti-government propaganda by radio and TV, and make every effort to make the Cuban people as miserable as possible so that they will have no choice but to give up their independence in order to survive.

The fact of the blockade itself shows that the concern of the US government and the right-wing exile community is not people, not human rights or human dignity. As Philip Brenner, professor of International Relations at American University in Washington, DC told the AP, “The new measures actually weaken the rationale for the 37-year-old US

blockade by implicitly admitting it has hurt ordinary Cubans while failing to undermine Fidel Castro's government.”

And that really is the policy isn't it, finding ways to increase the suffering of ordinary people? Cuba can be self-determining as long as it is willing to pay the price that comes with freedom – freedom from American imperialism. And that price is the blockade, the blaquero. It was the same with Chile when they dared to be free in the early 1970's. And when that blockade failed the CIA was sent in -- and you know the rest.

In the end it is about money. Cuba wants to keep its fair share for medicine and housing, jobs and food. The right-wing exiles want all of the money for themselves, their fancy houses and cars, jewels and servants. They don't care about hurting people especially if those people continue to stand up for themselves and resist domination.

Clinton's changes are cowardly and hypocritical, as is the entirety of the U.S. government's policy towards Cuba.

But the writing is on the wall. The embargo will end. Business people here know they are losing money to Canadian, Spanish, and other competitors. The new calls for lifting the embargo are coming from conservatives in the Congress. At some point, probably soon, Cuba will win this war and it will finally and for the first time in its history be free. Not free to be victimized by another Batista (which Albright seems to want) but really and truly free to live as they choose to live.