

Trump's New Cuba Policy: Bad for Cuba and Migrants

written by Dan La Botz | January 30, 2025



On his return to the presidency on January 20, Donald Trump rescinded his predecessor Joe Biden's short-lived removal of Cuba from the State Sponsor of Terrorism (SSOT) designation. The SSOT designation will further isolate Cuba diplomatically and economically.

Biden only removed Cuba on January 14. Cuba was originally designated as SSOT in 1982. As the U.S. State Department explains, "Cuba was designated as a State Sponsor of Terrorism in 1982 because of its long history of providing advice, safe haven, communications, training, and financial support to guerrilla groups and individual terrorists." Perhaps it would be more accurate to say that Fidel Castro and the Cuban government offered support to young revolutionaries fighting against reactionary governments, civilian dictators, and military juntas—so long as those groups reciprocated by adhering to Cuba's political line.

The Cuban Revolution of 1959 had inspired revolutionary guerrilla groups throughout Latin America, and the Argentine-Cuban revolutionary Ernesto Che Guevara and the Cuban government of Fidel Castro encouraged and supported them. French intellectual Régis Debray popularized the concept of guerrilla warfare in Europe and beyond. Within a decade, however, the guerrilla movements had been crushed by military coups in Chile (1973), Uruguay (1973), and Argentina (1976), and in the 1970s in the Central American nations of El Salvador, Guatemala, and Honduras dictators and military juntas defeated the guerrillas there. Only Nicaragua's Sandinistas were victorious, and only for a few years. Idealism and heroism were not enough to win. The guerrilla organizations generally had no base among the working class or the peasantry and their violent tactics often alienated the rest of society. Debray himself criticized the guerrilla warfare idea and listed its faults in his later book *Critique of Arms*. The moment passed and in the 1990s, Cuba stopped supporting guerrilla groups and hasn't done so now for over 30 years. In any case these guerrilla organizations weren't terrorists if terrorism means the use of political violence against non-combatant bystanders either deliberately or as a result of gross negligence. In general, they fought oppressive states and their military and police.

There was another issue, however, a big one. The U.S. government's opposition to Cuba from the early 1960s to the 1990s was also once motivated by Cuba's alliance with the Soviet Union and the Communist Eastern Bloc. In May of 1962, Russian Premier Nikita Khrushchev and Cuban leader Castro agreed to placing nuclear missiles in Cuba, leading to the Cuban missile crisis. While the missiles were withdrawn, Cuban and Soviet ties grew stronger. By the 1970s Cuba had been completely structurally and politically assimilated to the Soviet Union, a totalitarian one-party state

controlled everything and secret police who rotted out opponents. Cuba supported the repression of the Czechoslovak Prague Spring, a movement for democratic socialism, in 1968. And it also backed the Polish Communist government's crackdown on the Solidarity union movement of 1980 that was also fighting for democracy. The United States supported all sorts of other dictatorships in Latin America and elsewhere, but Cuba's alliance with the Soviet Union justified a variety of embargos, trade restrictions, and other measures, including attempted assassinations of Castro. But of course, the Soviet Union fell in 1991, and the Communist Bloc disintegrated and are not an issue today.

The U.S. government also keeps Cuba on the SSOT list because of Cuba's "subversion of U.S. justice." This refers to Cuba having given sanctuary to a number of Black radicals of the 1960s and 70s, some of them Black Panthers, who were involved in violent incidents that included murder, among them Assata Shakur, Ismael La Beet, and Charles Lee Hill, all now in their late 70s and 80s. Some felt they could not get a fair trial in the United States. The U.S. suspects or criminals being harbored in Cuba include some CIA agents who defected. Cuba no longer has political relationships to groups like the Panthers, and these individuals no longer pose any threat to the United States. Certainly, Cuba's having offered them refuge 30 or 40 years ago has nothing to do with supporting terrorism then and there is no such issue today.

Just before Trump came to power, the Cuban government, negotiating with Pope Francis, but also implicitly with the Biden administration in its last days, agreed to the release of 553 prisoners. Most had been arrested in July 2021 in the massive marches of thousands protesting high prices and, in some cases, demanding democratic rights and an end to Communist rule. Apparently 100 have already been released, but given Trump's hardline on Cuba, what will happen to this amnesty now? Neither Trump nor the Cuban government can be trusted to see to their freedom, and Pope Francis has only moral suasion. As Stalin once remarked cynically, "How many divisions does the Pope have?"

Ironically, another U.S.-Cuban relationship is developing. Trump ordered the Pentagon and the Department of Homeland Security to prepare the U.S. base and prison at Guantanamo, Cuba (Gitmo) to receive 30,000 migrant prisoners. It was at Gitmo that the United States imprisoned 780 people, most from Afghanistan, Saudi Arabia, Yemen, Pakistan, and Algeria, and tortured many of them. This does not augur well. The location of the immigrant prison on a military base in Cuba but not Cuban territory, will make it difficult to monitor their conditions and provide them legal representation.

Finally, Cuban immigrants from Cuba, Nicaragua, Venezuela and Haiti who were living in the United States under a temporary humanitarian parole program set up by the Biden administration that allowed them to live and work here for two years, are being targeted for deportation as revealed by an Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE) document that became public last week. Cubans had once been a privileged and protect immigrant population, but no more. Now they are just "illegals" like the others—though obviously no human being should be called "illegal" and treated as a pariah.

Terrorism is a problem, state terrorism that is, and Trump is the terrorist.

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