

U.S. Politics and the Financing of Political Groups in Cuba

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Editors' Note - We recognize that some U.S. readers will be familiar with some of the history, organizations, and other issues presented here, but we publish this translation of the article as it originally appeared in *La Joven Cuba* [Young Cuba] so that a U.S. audience can get a sense of this important discussion taking place in Cuba.

Author's Note - This is a translation of an article that appeared in Spanish on February 17, 2021 in *La Joven Cuba*, a left-wing critical blog and one of the most important in Cuba, as a contribution to the ongoing debates among Cuban critics, dissidents and oppositionists about U.S. financing of Cuban political groups. The Cuban government has so far failed to entirely control the Internet, which remains the main outlet for critical political views in the island. - SF

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The attack on the Capitol in Washington on January 6 of this year, highlighted the existence of important extreme right-wing forces in the United States ready to strike down the constitutional order on behalf of their racism and anti-immigrant resentment. This was the main reason why a broad spectrum of individuals and institutions normally disinclined to participate in political protests joined hands in a categorical and very public rejection of the attack. These people were part of a group that included the influential conservative congressional representative Liz Cheney, who occupies the third place in the Republican hierarchy in the House of Representatives, and who shares the imperialist and conservative agenda of her father, super "hawk" Dick Cheney who, as the vice president under George W. Bush, played a very important role in the invasion and destruction of Iraq. It also includes the very powerful and conservative NAM (National Association of Manufacturers), the umbrella organization of the most important U.S. industrial corporations, who also publicly and in hard-hitting terms repudiated Donald Trump for having incited the attack.

NAM, Cheney and their allies have been part of the choir singing paeans to Trump, among other things, for his having significantly reduced their taxes, and eliminated, with a stroke of the pen, many of the rules protecting the environment, the security and welfare of the workers, and the civil rights of minorities. As I said, they joined to defend the U.S. constitutional order; but not to defend democracy, an entirely different thing. The constitutional order certainly includes elections and

important democratic rights. But these conservative forces now united in the defense of that order have used and continue to use the constitution to promote their own economic and political interests, not to defend and much less to expand the democratic rights of all. In fact, they have been part of the forces trying to limit those rights.

In the last decades, and even more so in the last few years, as the racial and ethnic composition of the country has become more diverse and therefore less white, a great democratic struggle has been taking place to protect the people's right to vote. Taking advantage of the fact that the federal and state elections in this country are generally administered by the states, the white conservatives that govern in most of them have resorted to all kinds of tricks to reduce minority suffrage. These include reducing the number of voting locations and ballot boxes in minority neighborhoods, the days and hours during which the right to vote may be exercised; purging the electoral rolls of citizens who for one reason or another may not have voted in one or more previous elections, denying the right to vote to former felons, and especially what in the United States is called "gerrymandering."

This term refers to the practice used by politicians who control state legislatures to draw the lines of the electoral districts (a task that only a few states assign to independent commissions) with the purpose of minimizing the possibilities of the opposition—most times involving the Democratic Party—especially that of the ethnic and racial minorities and liberals. It is a very old practice that primarily consists in concentrating within the smallest possible number of electoral districts certain groups, like African Americans and citizens of Latin American origin, who tend to vote for the Democratic Party. This results in a smaller number of representatives elected by those minority groups, compared with the greater number elected by the white Republicans who are distributed in a greater number of electoral districts. Thus, in Wisconsin, for example, Democrats have to obtain a substantially greater proportion of votes than a simple majority to obtain control of the state legislature.

The NAM has never said a word to defend the democratic rights of those minorities. And the Cheneys - father and daughter - have in fact supported, along with their fellow conservatives, those anti-democratic practices.

If the members of this alliance formed to defend the constitutional order are not interested in defending democracy inside the United States, they are much less interested in opposing the systematically interventionist purposes of U.S. foreign policy, be it in Iraq, Afghanistan, Yemen or in Latin America. U.S. imperialism has counted not only with the support of the extreme right, but also with a broad range of conservatives and liberals.

The case of the Vietnam War is very illustrative. Very few of the members of the "Establishment"—Republicans as well as Democrats (Lyndon Johnson, the president who most expanded the war, was a Democrat)—opposed that war until two things happened: 1) it became increasingly evident that there was little probability that the U.S. would vanquish the Vietnamese resistance and win the war, and 2) the movement against the war and against the military draft, then the most important source for recruitment into the armed forces, continued to grow rapidly. This movement, together with the African American militant movement in support of racial equality, created an untenable internal situation in this country. It was only then that the principal newspapers, television stations and other media, along with other forces of the "Establishment" began to demand the end of the U.S. armed intervention in Vietnam, which for a time involved the presence of over half a million troops.

What NAM and the other forces backing the status quo in the US care about above all is the *stability* that the constitutional order has sustained for more than two centuries (with some important exceptions, like the Civil War of the 1860s). *Predictability* and *certainty* are key

requirements for capitalist investment, as well as the existence of an independent and trustworthy legal system independent from the government-of-the-day to insure the enforcement of contracts. These characteristics of the system are sacred to big capital and its supporters. That is why if, on the one hand, the capitalists and rich Americans celebrated and benefited from the tax and regulatory policies of Trump, on the other hand, they progressively withdrew their trust from him due to his unpredictability, arbitrariness, his threats to the electoral system, and his closeness to the extreme right groups stoking political insecurity and instability in the country.

It was no accident that 60 percent of the monetary contributions of big capital went to Biden and not to Trump in the 2020 general elections. It is true that there have been situations of crisis where a good part of big capital has become desperate enough to support the extreme right, as in the case of the German Weimar Republic in the late twenties and early thirties. But the existing situation in the U.S.A. is far from being as extreme as that of the Germany of the Great Depression so, at least for now, most of American big capital has not needed, nor seems to want to support movements of the extreme right.

Civil Society and the events of January 6

Not surprisingly, a large number of civil society organizations categorically condemned the attack on the Capitol, including the ACLU (American Civil Liberties Union), numerous labor unions and even the conservative American Legion, a major organization of US veterans. Other organizations joined in the condemnation, such as Freedom House and the NED (National Endowment for Democracy). But these organizations depend on the U.S. government for its finances; they are therefore not part of civil society, a term that by definition only includes independent organizations and groups not associated with the state.

Organizations such as Freedom House and especially the NED (founded by a law approved by the US Congress in 1983) are part of the “soft power” strategy implemented by the US government to project its influence in other countries, including its conception of what democracy is and should be, and which at the very least implicitly excludes any socialist, anti-imperialist and radical notions. The “soft” strategy is, by its very nature, aimed at persuading, and operates in the cultural and ideological realms. It differs from the “hard line” strategy that distinguishes the CIA’s and the US armed forces, as in the case of its interventions in Latin America, such as the overthrow of the democratically elected governments of Jacobo Arbenz in Guatemala in 1954, and of the Chilean Salvador Allende in 1973. That was also the case of the Bay of Pigs in 1961, as well as of the numerous, decades-long terrorist attacks that took place on Cuban soil.

To implement its hardline projects in Cuba, Washington has channeled a great deal of support to a variety of groups and individuals through the Cuban American National Foundation. This is an organization that, throughout its since its inception has supported many anti-Castro groups, including terrorist groups. Needless to say, that the distinction between the “soft” and “hard line” strategies also applies, *mutatis mutandis*, to the operations of the Cuban government. The strategies of, for example, the ICAP (Instituto Cubano de Amistad con los Pueblos-Cuban Institute of Friendship with Peoples) are of a different kind than those of the Cuban State Security, although both state organizations aim at perpetuating the anti-democratic regime ruling over the island.

American Civil Society and Cuba

It is very important to distinguish organizations such as the NED and Freedom House, which are financed by the American government, from those that are not and can therefore be considered as legitimate organizations of U.S. civil society. This is the case, for example, of the *Open Society Foundations* led and financed by the liberal billionaire George Soros, and of the Human Rights

Watch, the principal human rights organization in the United States. These organizations are independent of the US government financially, as well as organizationally and in their general political orientation. That does not mean, however, that they never coincide with US government policy. But the fact that they have coincided in several occasions is due, for the most part, to their liberal (in the American sense of the term) ideology and politics which is not anti-imperialist, although in numerous occasions they have strongly criticized US policies.

That means that the collaboration of democratic anti-imperialist Cubans with this type of US independent organizations does not automatically detract from their commitment to the sovereignty and self-determination of the Cuban nation. Yet, it is possible that there will be political differences that will negatively impact their collaboration with these independent organizations. Thus, for example, in my book *Cuba Since the Revolution of 1959: A Critical Assessment*, I criticized Human Rights Watch for its proposal, in its 2009 annual report, to have the US liberalize its economic blockade of Cuba in exchange for having the Cuban government implementing democratizing measures in the island. To promote such an agreement, Human Rights Watch proposed that before softening the Cuban blockade, the U.S. obtain a commitment from its Latin American allies, Canada and the European Union to collectively pressure the Cuban government to immediately and unconditionally free all its political prisoners.

The problem with this proposal is not that we are opposed to the liberation of Cuban political prisoners or to the democratization of the island. Quite the opposite. The problem is, that the “exchange” policy proposed by Human Rights Watch presupposes that the United States has the legal and moral right to impose conditions to liberalize and eliminate a blockade that is illegal and immoral in itself. The logic of this “exchange” also implies that the US blockade exists because the Cuban political system is antidemocratic, which is a bad joke when we consider the long history of the political, military and economic support that the United States has given to very bloody pro-capitalist dictatorships.

In addition, the “exchange” logic perversely justifies the position taken by supporters of the Cuban government claiming that the abolition of internal repression in Cuba depends on the abolition of the U.S. blockade. This position assumes that the Cuban one-party state modeled after the USSR exists as a result of the US blockade. This implies that the Cuban revolutionary leaders were a kind of political and ideological *tabula rasa* who adopted their political point of view as a mere reaction to the foreign policy of the United States, and who did not have their own political and ideological preferences, including their own convictions concerning the political and economic systems that they considered desirable.

The above-mentioned problem with the Human Rights Watch report only suggests that any collaboration with any independent organization of civil society in the U.S. will depend on the political nature of concrete projects related to Cuba. The issue is to find out with which organizations it is possible to work without infringing, in any way, upon Cuban sovereignty and self-determination. For example, a few years ago the *Open Society Foundations* provided material support to the Catholic social democrats associated with the publication, in the island, of *Cuba Possible*. This publication tried to maintain a critical but not openly hostile political stance vis-à-vis the Cuban regime, and thus play the role of a “loyal opposition.”

It is not yet known whether the *Open Society Foundations* —or, for that matter, any other independent organization of US civil society—will be willing to also support an openly oppositionist Cuban group with a decidedly democratic and pro human rights politics, who in addition stands on the left, is clearly opposed to imperialism and to the reestablishment of capitalism in Cuba. In any case, however, we must bear in mind that the material support of U.S. civil society organizations is only a short-term solution. In the longer run, it will be necessary to organize progressive Cubans

abroad to support the Cubans struggling inside the island for a truly emancipatory democracy, as José Martí did with the Cuban tobacco workers in Florida during the decade of the 1890s.

The politics of this article does not in any way involve any attempt to excuse the Cuban government and its conduit, the official media. That media will of course ruthlessly attack any opposition, independently of its specific politics and, as we well know, will lie as often as it considers it necessary. However, it is not what the Cuban government thinks and says about us, but what the Cuban people think of us, that should be the center of our attention. That is why it is crucial to present ourselves before that people as a totally independent voice, free of obligations or debts to the great foreign powers, and absolutely committed to Cuba's national independence and sovereignty.