

“CUBA: ASSESSING THE ADMINISTRATION’S SUDDEN SHIFT”

TESTIMONY OF
ROBERTA S. JACOBSON
ASSISTANT SECRETARY OF STATE
BUREAU OF WESTERN HEMISPHERE AFFAIRS
U.S. DEPARTMENT OF STATE
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Chairman Royce, Ranking Member Engel, and Members of the Committee:

Thank you for the opportunity to testify today on our new approach to U.S.-Cuba policy. I know many of you have a deep interest in U.S. policy towards Cuba and have closely followed the President’s announcement on December 17 and subsequent events, including my meetings in Havana two weeks ago. I appreciate the Committee’s engagement on issues related to Cuba and the Western Hemisphere and applaud your strong commitment to democratic values, human rights, and expanding social and economic opportunity in the Americas.

I also want to thank the Committee for its assistance in welcoming the long-overdue return of Alan Gross to his family. During Mr. Gross’ five long years of detention, the Administration worked closely with many members of Congress – from both chambers and from both parties – to secure his release. As the President and the Secretary have said, we are also grateful for the essential roles of Canada, Pope Francis, and the Vatican in reaching an agreement that made Mr. Gross’ freedom possible.

Our previous approach to relations with Cuba over a half century, though rooted in the best of intentions, failed to empower the Cuban people and isolated us from our democratic partners in this hemisphere and around the world. Additionally, the Cuban government has used this policy as a rationale for restrictions on its people. As a result, unfortunately and unintentionally, those most deprived were the Cuban people.

The President’s initiatives look forward and are designed to promote changes that support universal human rights and fundamental freedoms for every

Cuban, as well as changes that promote our other national interests. They emphasize the value of people-to-people contact and very specific forms of increased commerce. We are already seeing indications that our updated approach gives us a greater ability to engage other nations in the hemisphere and around the world in promoting respect for fundamental freedoms in Cuba. It has also drawn considerably greater attention to the actions and policies of the Cuban government.

From the beginning of this Administration, our approach has been to implement policies toward Cuba that support the Cuban people in freely determining their own future – their own political and economic future. Because ultimately, it will be the Cuban people themselves who drive political and economic reforms. That is why we lifted restrictions to make it easier for Cuban Americans to travel and send remittances to their families in Cuba, and opened new pathways for academic, religious, and people-to-people exchanges. These changes created powerful new connections between our two countries. The steps we are implementing now build on this foundation by increasing travel, authorized commerce, and the flow of information to, from, and within Cuba. The regulatory changes we announced will increase the financial resources to support the Cuban people and the emerging Cuban private sector. They also enable U.S. companies to expand telecommunications and internet access within Cuba. U.S. policy will no longer be a barrier to connectivity in Cuba.

This Administration is under no illusions about the continued barriers to internationally recognized freedoms that remain for the Cuban people, nor are we under illusions about the nature of the Cuban government. When we sat down with our counterparts in Havana, we were clear that our governments have both shared interests and sharp differences. From mail service to counter narcotics to oil spill mitigation, we owe our people a diplomatic relationship that allows an effective pursuit of their interests. On these types of practical issues, we agreed to continue dialogue and increase cooperation. At the same time, I raised with the Cuban government our concerns about its harassment, use of violence, and arbitrary detention of Cuban citizens peacefully expressing their views. I met with dissidents, entrepreneurs, and independent media voices to talk about what they need from their government and from us.

I talked with my Cuban counterpart about several elements that presently inhibit the work of our U.S. Interests Section, including travel restrictions on our diplomats, limits on staffing and local access to the mission, and problems receiving timely shipments to the mission. The successful resolution of these issues will enable a future U.S. Embassy to provide services commensurate with

our other diplomatic missions around the world and on a par with the many foreign diplomatic missions in Cuba. We began a useful discussion and intend to meet again this month.

Having just seen our U.S. diplomats in Havana in action, I would like to take this opportunity to salute their tireless work to advance U.S. interests on the island by conducting educational and cultural diplomacy, monitoring significant political and economic developments, and promoting respect for democracy and human rights, including engaging with Cuba's independent civil society. These dedicated public servants have done their jobs under often very difficult circumstances. Our diplomats unite families through our immigration processing, provide American citizen services, and issue visas for qualified visitors to the United States. Our Refugee Processing Center provides assistance to victims of political repression. Our public diplomacy officers work in partnership with a range of journalists, including those from civil society, and provide hundreds of Cubans each week with uncensored internet access through our three Information Resource Centers. Our consular officers issue tens of thousands of travel documents annually to Cubans traveling to the United States for the purposes of emigrating or visiting friends and family. These efforts will continue and expand once we establish diplomatic relations with Cuba.

We have only begun the official talks on normalizing relations – which will take considerably longer than the first step, which is the re-establishment of diplomatic relations. But even while we do so, we will continue, both directly and through diplomatic channels, to encourage our allies to take every public and private opportunity to support increased respect for human rights and fundamental freedoms in Cuba. We will continue to use funds appropriated by Congress to support the exercise of political and civil liberties in Cuba, facilitate the free flow of information, and provide humanitarian assistance. We also look forward to increased engagement to empower the Cuban people through authorized contact with Members of Congress, U.S. government officials, and American travelers. We encourage Members visiting Cuba to expand their engagement with the independent voices in Cuban civil society and, whenever possible, to engage effectively on human rights and democracy with the Cuban government.

We will continue our discussions with our oversight and appropriations committees as we move toward a new relationship. We appreciate that there is a diversity of views in the U.S. Congress on the new direction towards Cuba. However, we hope that we can also work together to find common ground towards our shared goal of enabling the Cuban people to freely determine their own future.

We appreciate your attention to these important issues.

Thank you and I welcome your questions.