



Advocacy for Human Rights in the Americas

**Testimony of Geoff Thale
Program Director
Washington Office on Latin America (WOLA)**

**House Foreign Affairs Committee
Subcommittee on Africa, Global Health, Global Human Rights,
and International Organizations**

February 5, 2015

My name is Geoff Thale, and I am the Program Director at the Washington Office on Latin America, WOLA.

WOLA is a U.S. non-profit, non-governmental organization that does research and advocacy to promote human rights in the Americas. Since 1974, WOLA has monitored issues of human rights and democracy in Latin America and has provided information and analysis to congressional offices, presidential administrations, and the general public about conditions in the region and the impact of U.S. policy on human rights. Through strategic collaborations, we partner with courageous people working on social change—advocacy organizations, academics, religious and business leaders, artists, and government officials—and together, we advocate for more just societies in the Americas.

In 1995, I founded WOLA's Cuba program and have directed it ever since. I travel to Cuba every year and have done so since the mid-1990s. I have accompanied multiple congressional delegations to Cuba and have written and spoken extensively about U.S.-Cuba policy and about developments in Cuba itself. I meet with a wide range of Cubans when I visit, including academics, Catholic and Protestant church leaders, government officials, and government critics. I have met with figures such as the late Oswaldo Payá and with well-known human rights activist Elizardo Sánchez. On a recent trip, I met with a young restaurant owner in Matanzas who is representative of an emerging sector of small businesspeople with their own interests and priorities. I have worked professionally on issues of U.S. foreign policy, human rights, and democracy in Latin America for more than 30 years.

The question before us today is whether the United States has squandered an opportunity to promote human rights in Cuba by normalizing diplomatic relations and undertaking a series of reforms that will increase travel and trade. WOLA believes that when it comes to promoting human rights in Cuba, principled engagement, not unilateral isolation, is the best path forward. Far from squandering an opportunity, the new posture toward Cuba opens new paths to improve the rights situation and living conditions of Cubans in a way that the previous policies simply could not. The new policy provides new opportunities to forward U.S. values and interests. Opening new avenues of engagement through travel and trade for U.S. individual citizens, churches, academic and cultural institutions, and businesses will enhance the prospects for freedom of expression and reform on the island.

Human Rights in Cuba: Different Approaches

My colleagues on this panel have talked about their own situations and about the human rights challenges on the island. They have lived there and can describe their experiences far better than I or other foreign observers can. My expertise is focused on human rights and U.S. policy, and how U.S. policy can most effectively foster human rights improvements.

There's no doubt that Cuba has serious human rights problems. It has only one legal political party. Cuba falls short on international human rights standards on freedom of speech, freedom of the press, and freedom of association. As others on this panel have said, regime opponents are harassed and subjected to arbitrary short-term detentions. These are serious problems to which we should not be indifferent. Cuba should end its restrictions on political parties, freedom of speech, and freedom of assembly.

Perhaps as important to its citizens as the conditions listed above is Cuba's dismal economy. Cuba is a country whose economy is stagnant, and one where many people, especially the young, are yearning for more opportunity. Modest economic growth has led to increases in inequality, and Afro-Cuban families and youth have benefited the least from the changes underway.

To be clear, the picture in Cuba is not uniformly a grim one. Life expectancy is high, reflecting relatively good public health and medical care; literacy levels are high, reflecting universal public education. The country has made some progress on legislation to prevent discrimination based on sexual orientation. For all its very real problems, Cubans do not face the problems that many citizens face in countries such as Saudi Arabia, or other repressive regimes.

The United States and the international community certainly should play a coordinated and constructive role in pressing Cuba to respect and foster human rights. The question that I will examine today, in my capacity as an analyst of U.S. foreign policy and its effect on human rights, is how best to do so, and more specifically, how our new approach of engaging with Cuba will be more effective than our past approach of isolation.

Isolation

The truth is that the last 55 years of embargo have clearly shown that our attempts to isolate Cuba completely failed to improve human rights on the island. The embargo created—and continues to create—hardships for normal Cubans, but it has not forced the Castro regime to reform, nor has it led to a sudden democratic transition in Cuba. In fact, the tensions between the United States and Cuba have long provided the Cuban government with a pretext to crack down on dissent. The U.S. embargo and hostile stance toward Cuba create a “siege mentality” on the island that is trumpeted by official propaganda and used to rationalize limits on freedom of expression.

In the meantime, the Cuban government has begun a transition to a new generation. While it's true that Raúl Castro remains in power, he has announced that he will step down in 2018. His successor, the 54-year-old Miguel Díaz Canel, represents the post-revolutionary generation that will soon be in charge. In addition, a series of economic reforms are underway in Cuba that aim to jumpstart the stagnant Cuban economy. The government has begun to shift large numbers of workers to a newly emerging private sector and incorporate some market mechanisms into its highly centralized and inefficient economic planning system. These economic changes are shifting the foundations of Cuban society, as well as the fundamentals of the relationship between Cubans and their government, for the first time since the 1959 revolution.

None of this is to say that Cuba is about to become a democracy. But it is important to note that these developments are enormously significant in a country in which little has changed in the past five decades.

So as Cuba begins a slow and halting evolution, where is the United States? Under our old policy, the United States—both its government and its citizens—was largely relegated to the sidelines. With little travel and trade and limited diplomatic contact, the U.S. government's concerns could be ignored by Cuba. After more than 50 years without relations, we had none of the relationships or tools of soft power with which to influence Cuba. And U.S. citizens interested in engaging with the Cuban people—be they academics, religious groups, or cultural organizations—were stymied by a labyrinth of regulations and restrictions.

The case for engagement

The normalization of relations with Cuba has been portrayed by some as a series of concessions to the Cuban government. Critics have called it a bad deal, saying that the U.S. betrayed its principles while getting nothing in return from the Cuban government.

But normalizing relations doesn't mean we have taken human rights issues off the agenda with Cuba. In fact, the new policy of conducting direct, high-level talks about a broad range of issues will present greater opportunity to effectively raise human rights concerns.

In fact, every substantial release of political prisoners in Cuba has been linked to periods of engagement, not to increased sanctions. For example, President Jimmy Carter publicly expressed an interest in easing tensions with Cuba, and the Cuban government responded by engaging in a dialogue with Carter on political prisoners—a subject the Cubans had resisted in the past. The negotiations resulted in the release of hundreds of political prisoners to the United States. In 1998, Pope John Paul II visited Cuba and publicly called for political prisoners to be released. In the following weeks, 300 prisoners, including political prisoners, were freed. And in 2010, after decades of acrimony, the Archbishop of Havana, Cardinal Jaime Ortega, and Raúl Castro engaged in series of constructive, mutually respectful discussions about the treatment of dissidents, Church-state relations, and economic and social challenges in Cuba. The Spanish Foreign Ministry, at the time the chief advocate pushing for improving the European Union's relations with Cuba, supported the talks. Ultimately, the dialogue resulted in the release of 110 prisoners, including the last of the 75 dissidents arrested during the “Black Spring” in 2003.

Earlier this month, we learned that 53 prisoners whose cases the United States raised with the Cuban government had been released as a component of the most recent U.S. discussions with Cuba. Short term detentions, though down from their height last year, continue, and we have heard that two of the recently released prisoner have suffered a short term detention. However, our new policy allows the State Department to directly address these and other human rights challenges with the Cuban government.

Other governments have found that engagement strategies have produced benefits. Many of the economists inside Cuba who advocate for internal reform are people who studied abroad, particularly in Canada. Spain's persistent dialogue has yielded movement on political prisoners. Norway's engagement with Cuban civil society has helped support public debates about human rights issues. European church groups have sponsored Cuban partners who run workshops and debates about controversial issues in Cuban society. While engagement is not a silver bullet, the historical evidence is that the Cuban government responds better to dialogue than to ultimatums. The human rights discussions that the United States and other countries have with Cuba will not transform Cuba overnight; however, they may produce some movement on political prisoners, and they open opportunities for dialogue and for more robust relations with Cuban society. They also lay the groundwork for relationships in the future as Cuba evolves.

Beyond dialogue with government officials, the shift in U.S. policy is likely to be beneficial to reformers inside the Cuban official system—in the universities and the churches, among students and the younger generation, in the new private sector—that favor greater openness. As mentioned above, hostility between the United States and Cuba—that is, our old Cuba policy—is used as a justification for crackdowns on internal dissent. As those tensions slowly

dissipate, we expect to see internal dialogue and public debate grow in Cuba. Reform-minded individuals and groups will be more empowered to speak and act in this new context.

People-to-people exchanges and Cuban-American family travel have helped Cuban families stay connected with their relatives in the United States and receive much-needed economic support. Increased travel to Cuba also supports the growing private sector; many U.S. travelers stay in privately run bed-and-breakfasts, eat in private restaurants, and take private taxis. These travelers put money directly into the hands of ordinary Cubans. People-to-people travelers also engage a broad range of Cubans in dialogue with people from the United States about politics, the economy, press freedom, health care, and a range of other issues. These dialogues help encourage new thinking in Cuba and expose Cubans to the outside world. Again, our old policy put unnecessary restrictions on Americans' ability to travel to Cuba to make connections with ordinary Cubans.

The new Cuba policy will also allow for U.S. travelers to provide technical assistance, training, and goods to Cuban entrepreneurs and cooperatives, who often lack basic inputs and business know-how. Increased remittances will permit individuals, families, and organizations to set up small businesses, NGOs, and other organizations that will function in a newly open space for small business and other groups in Cuba. The growth of these organizations and this political space is an important and positive step, and it will inevitably produce movement in Cuba for greater change and more openness.

A key part of the new policy is to allow U.S. telecommunications companies to operate in Cuba, thus expanding internet access on the island. Increasing internet access within Cuba will help break down barriers to communication and expand citizens' ability to get information and engage in debate.

The reforms the U.S. has made will allow greater flows of non-family remittances and create a general license for sending building supplies to Cuba. This will allow our own church communities to deepen their ties to Cuban churches.

Family visits and remittances, assisting a growing private sector, expanding cultural and religious contacts, helping Cubans connect to the outside world—if the United States is interested in helping ordinary Cubans and promoting democratic values, why would it be U.S. policy to restrict any of these types of activities?

This kind of engagement will not, of course, magically transform Cuba overnight. What it will do is open contact and dialogue with the whole spectrum of Cuban society. That includes the Catholic church, which has supported this new approach, with the Protestant churches and the Jewish community. It includes the small business owners who are opening bed and breakfasts and restaurants, and performing other service jobs. It includes the university professors, and the students, who want to talk informally about their society and about ours. It includes the medical workers and health care professionals and the scientific researchers.

In that kind of dialogue and engagement, which will develop over time as the new U.S. policy is implemented, lies the future of Cuba.

As I've said before, change will not come overnight. My colleagues on this panel and others like them will continue to face difficulties and challenges. But this is the beginning of a long-term process to build bridges between the American and Cuban people. We shouldn't be naïve in our

expectations about the political leadership in Cuba. But over time, engagement will help empower Cuban citizens and open political space in Cuba.