

Keith Bolender speaking notes for Cuban Futures and UK Tour 2015

Well, it's been a rather interesting year in Cuba-American relations.

We all know about Obama's and Raul's announcement this past December, so I'm not going to go into what led to it, or why it happened when it did – except to say that in my opinion Obama made the announcement when he did because of the increasing pressure from the rest of Latin America in support of Cuba's attendance at the Caribbean conference in Panama this past April. Obama knew that the United States was becoming increasingly isolated in Latin America and it was harming America's relationship and influence in the region. As well as combined with Obama's own conviction, and sense of legacy -- that finally he decided that the relationship with Cuba had to change.

So what I'd like to do tonight is just go over what has changed since that announcement, what's projected to take place in the immediate future, and the long-range expectations of ending the embargo and travel restrictions, and to the establishment of actual normalization –which we don't have yet.

And I will be presenting it from the Cuban perspective of this normalization process, and what they expect to occur in the next year or so. As well as addressing the concerns some may have that the normalization process may bring more damage to the Cuban Revolution than anything positive, even to the point of jeopardizing the Revolution itself.

But before I start I have to comment on the most emotional part of the December announcement, the freeing of the final three of the Cuban Five. So much effort and work, from organizations such as yours, helped make sure the three were finally freed. And I had the personal honor of being able to interview all five of them this past May, as part of my next book

So let's go over what has been accomplished since the December announcement

1 – Establishment of the embassies in Washington and Havana --- an important first step to launch this new relationship of mutual respect. The embassies

legitimize all the further steps needed for true normalization and make negotiations for such things as direct mail service, regular commercial flights and the many other economic and political issues easier to resolve

2 – The elimination of Cuba from the states that sponsor terrorism list – this is so important as – Cuba can now access international monetary institutions, no banks penalized for doing business with Cuba; companies more comfortable investing in Cuba. Being on the list was particularly galling to Cuba because of the unknown history of terrorism against its citizens, more than 3500 killed by Cuban American organization in Florida, Cubana Airlines, Luis Posada Carriles, covered in my first book --

Here's a specific example of what being off the list means -- Cuba is interested in re-vitalizing efforts to find oil. Now that they are off the list of state sponsors of terrorism, Cuba can now import foreign made products with up to 25 per cent US origin content or technology, previously forbidden under the restrictions of any country under the list. In October there's a conference in Havana with American oil experts, at which time there will be discussions on the use of international offshore oil rigs that contain large percentages of US technology that the Cubans can now use. And that increases their chances of finding oil, an important matter for the Cuban economy, despite the low oil prices these days. So Cuba can bring in products, materials and technology with US content that they were forbidden to while they were under the specious terrorist list. And they will be able to arrange international financing and investment to pay for these vitally need materials for infrastructure and improvements to such areas as tourism, factory production, roads and health care.

Along with the removal off that list, Cuba was also given an improved status of another completely arbitrary US designation, that of human trafficking. Cuba was improved from Tier 3 to Tier 2 on the State Department's listing. Tier 3 classification applies to countries that fail to comply with U.S. minimum standards; Tier 2 "Watch List" applies to countries that merit continued scrutiny. Cuba's response was a shrug, noting yet again that the US has no business rating other countries ranking on human trafficking, no more than they have compiling a

terrorist state list. The Americans need to clean up their own house before complaining about anyone else's. The only human trafficking between Cuba and the US is a result of the Cuban Adjustment Act, which entices Cubans to hire transporters at thousands of dollars to get them into the US where they receive all sorts of benefits – and that's entirely the fault of the Americans.

3 – Expansion of travel for Americans with the easing of the license requirements – they only need a general group license with less bureaucratic process to travel to Cuba -- and Obama is now saying that individual Americans can apply for the general license and simply fill out a form attesting they are abiding by the license requirements. They can book trips directly, and not have to go through the high cost travel agencies that control the licensing process through group tours. Americans will still go to Havana first, then the beach, and mostly through those structured group programs that can be expensive. The president also plans on allowing US citizens to use American credit cards while in Cuba; it's supposed to be happening now but the process has been delayed.

But the Americans are coming – and we can debate the good and bad about a few million Americans in Cuba every year. The one thing I do know is that the Canadians won't be happy.

4 – Increased American visits to Cuba have already resulted in a positive response from the US travel industry. Agreements are expected for regularly scheduled flights between a number of US cities and Havana including Los Angeles. American Airlines, JetBlue, Delta and many other airlines are hoping to get in on the new business. Carnival cruise lines has announced a cruise to Cuba, Marriot hotels and dozens of other travel organizations are looking to the island as an important new market. Cuba has projected to build 50 to 60 new hotels in next five years, mostly as beach resorts but a number of new Havana hotels as well. Will McDonald's be far behind?

Non tourist companies like Caterpillar, Colgate-Palmolive and Chubb have also been actively lobbying in Washington to remove restrictions. They argue opening trade will encourage political change and embrace of capitalism in Cuba – and Ill

address that a little later. Netflix and Air-bnb have already opened up shop there, somewhat prematurely but they want to get in before the rest.

5 – Here’s an accomplishment that may seem like the continuation of the same old US hostility. Obama two weeks ago re-signed the annual continuation of the Trading With the Enemy Act against Cuba. This act is the legal underpinning of the embargo and travel restrictions, and has been enforced against Cuba since the early 1960s. The Act, which goes back to 1917 during WWI, can only be implemented against a country that the US is at war with or facing national security threat. So why would Obama re-sign the Act, when he’s supposed to be in favor of ending American hostility against Cuba and supports normalization?

Well, it’s counter-intuitive to think what he did is a positive sign for the normalization process, but it is and I’ll explain why.

The Act gives the president the power to oversee or restrict any and all trade and travel between the United States and the country it is used against. And Cuba is the only country the Act still applies to. So while it may seem to say the US still considers itself to be at war with Cuba, or considers Cuba to be a national security threat, it is the flexibility the Act gives to the President that is the key here.

Obama has used his presidential authority to weaken the embargo and travel restrictions, which is possible only under the provisions of the Act.

If he didn’t re-sign the Act, then all of the legislation that covers the embargo and travel restrictions would be completely under the control of Congress – when President Clinton gave that in 1996 when he signed the Helms-Burton Act. Anti-Cuban congressional legislation does not provide any flexibility to alter or diminish the embargo – only the President can do it under the TWEA – and that presidential authority supersedes congressional power. TWEA is the preeminent legal authority over Cuban legislation, and so Obama had to hold onto it.

So Obama had to sign the Act for another year, in order to keep his authority to continue to weaken the embargo and allow more Americans to visit Cuba under relaxed licensing requirements. Only until the anti-Cuba legislation in Congress is

repealed will the president no longer need to re-sign the act. And that may take a few more years, which I'll address later.

In fact failure to renew "the exercise of certain authorities" under TWEA would probably turn back every move Obama has taken to weaken the embargo. That might have meant the reversal of his allowing Cuban-Americans to visit the island without restrictions, for more remittances to be sent back, to expand US travel under easier licensing provisions, and to encourage American businesses to start exploring relations with Cuba. Not signing would have put the US-Cuba relationship back 20 years.

Obama had to renew the embargo under TWEA, so he can keep the power to continue watering it down. He can't live without TWEA because it is both the embodiment of the embargo and the source of his power to weaken the embargo's grip on travel, remittances, and trade.

So while Obama not re-signing the TWEA might have been some symbolic gesture to the normalization process, it would have meant giving up his powers to weaken the embargo and move the normalization process ahead. And in the long run that's more important. The re-signing technically means the US considers Cuba to still be a national security threat, and for sure Cuba might feel the same way about the US, and until normalization is complete that will probably continue. Cuba has been dealing with American hostility for 50 years, and as a result has developed a siege mentality in order to protect itself and its citizens, something my second book examined in depth, and how it has affected Cuban society and the individual.

Proof of the importance of Obama re-signing the TWEA came last week on sept 18 when the president announced his latest moves to lessen the embargo and travel restrictions – which he was able to do under the authority given to him by the TWEA:

The rules will allow American companies to open locations and hire workers in Cuba, facilitate financial transactions between the nations, and remove limits on the amount of money that can be brought to the island nation. While that may

encourage trade from the US side, the Cubans will still have to pay up front and in cash for everything they buy from American companies -- there is no authorization for credit. So while the Cubans welcome any steps that help move the normalization process along, these latest measures are not that impactful and we're still a long way off from ending the embargo.

With this latest announcement came another clear indication of America's intent -

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Jacob J. Lew, the Treasury secretary, said the new rules could lead to "constructive change for the Cuban people." "By further easing these sanctions, the United States is helping to support the Cuban people in their effort to achieve the political and economic freedom necessary to build a democratic, prosperous, and stable Cuba." Again, the Americans just can't understand that the Cubans made their political and economic choice more than 50 years ago, and the country has been stable ever since. If the Americans want to have a prosperous Cuba, then end the embargo now, end the ridiculous framing of these changes in order to bring 'democracy' to Cuba—which is simply perceived as a new way to impose 'regime change.' And the Cubans know that, and I'll address that later.

Now if you want to have something that may be a bit more symbolic, wait a few more weeks when the annual UN vote to end the embargo comes up again in October. Will the US continue to vote against ending the embargo, or will they finally admit in front of the UN that it has been a failure. There is no legislative consequences here, only insight into America's real attitude towards normalization. My opinion is that they will abstain, and the only other country that votes with the US, Israel, will vote against the embargo as well. But then, you never know.

6 – Another accomplishment is the change in attitude about Cuba in American political circles, there has been substantially more public support for normalization. There has also been a change in media coverage from the American mainstream press; for the most part it has been better, but many of the old myths and anti-Revolutionary propaganda remain – and that's a subject for

my third book. But at least Cuba is in the news now, and the majority of the coverage has been positive.

In conjunction with this, Obama's move has definitely weakened the pro-embargo lobby and the anti-revolutionary Cuban-American congressmen. And that is a very good thing. It has emboldened those politicians and businessmen who always thought the embargo should be ended, but were reluctant to publicly state it for fear of the condemnation they'd receive from the pro-embargo side.

Those who favor normalization can voice it, that opinion is legitimate now and in fact is becoming the majority – look at the number of congressmen who have visited Cuba since announcement, and the corporate heads coming out in favor. The pro-embargo lobby is weaker and will be irrelevant in the next few years; just listen to the hysteria the announcement has caused from the right wing Cuban-American congressmen – presidential candidate Ted Cruz claimed that Obama had somehow 'unconditionally surrendered' to the Castros by announcing the opening of the embassy. Ileana Ros-Lehtinen, Republican from Florida and one of the harshest critics of the President's Cuban policy, reacted immediately by stating that opening an embassy in Cuba "will do nothing to help the Cuban people and is just another trivial attempt for President Obama to go legacy shopping." The more ridiculous their comments are, the easier it is to completely marginalize their influence over Cuban policy. They know they are losing the fight to keep the embargo, and they know they will lose their political influence and financial support when full normalization happens, and they are desperate in their attempts to remain relevant. The ending of their influence over Cuban policy will be one of the most worthwhile consequences of Obama's announcement, and it can't come soon enough.

And to finish what has been positive about the announcement -- the United States has finally recognized the legitimacy of the Cuban government and, consequently, of the legality of its international policy, which has important consequences for the development of future negotiations. The long historic differences that remain can be resolved in a more mutual respectful attitude, instead of the 50 years of US trying to impose its will. Not that they won't

continue to try regime change, but the new relationship means Cuba can respond more effectively, and have its position respected.

A concern some have is that the pro embargo side will try some provocation to derail the normalization process, like they did in 1996 when Clinton was moving towards a closer relationship with Cuba; leading to the illegal over flights of BTTR, resulting in shutdown and passage of Helms's Burton law. I doubt it will happen this time, the whole process is in the open, and both sides are seriously working towards normalization. There are more direct lines of communication now available to make sure the process isn't threatened if the radical section of the pro-embargo side tries something.

OK, so what HASN'T happened yet,

1 – The embargo and travel restrictions are still in place, under Congressional control since 1996 when President Clinton gave them that power, after BTTR shutdown and Helms Burton Act. So the embargo and travel restrictions can only be fully legally ended by Congress, and that won't be easy as long as it's controlled by a small group the Republicans who are opposed to anything Obama does, and afraid of the new normalization process. There are many Cuban solidarity groups focusing their energies on the anti-embargo movement now that the Cuban Five are free

But it is in Congress where full normalization will take place, and I'll focus on that situation in a minute. And always in regards to the embargo, remember it is a two-way street – the embargo doesn't just mean no US goods can be purchased, but no Cuban goods can enter into the American market, so the biggest market remains 90 miles off shore and completely off limits. No cigars, no rum, and no important Cuban medical technology. And the restrictions that prohibit commercial ships from docking in US ports for six months if they visit Cuba are still in place. And as mentioned before, Cuba still has to pay in cash and up front for anything purchased from the Americans, conditions that discourage trade and remind everyone the embargo is still in place.

2 – The travel restrictions, though eased, are still in place, as mentioned above – so Americans' who want to come to Cuba purely for tourist reasons still can't – and is that good thing? The ending of all travel restrictions for US tourists also remains in the hands of Congress, and there is speculation that these will end before the lifting of the embargo. I agree, getting rid of the travel restrictions will be an easier task.

3 – There has been no ending of the funds for anti-Cuba propaganda, such as Radio and TV Marti, and in fact more millions are being spent this year. And the Obama administration says they have no intention of ending the Cuban Adjustment Act, which gives special financial and social incentives for Cubans who enter into the US, above what any other immigrant would receive. Including fast track to US citizenship. If only Donald Trump knew about this, it would end as soon as he became president – course there may be other problems he'd bring

4 -- What's also remained the same is America's goal of regime change – Obama, which Hillary Clinton has seemingly agreed with, noted the new relationship was a change in strategy, that 50 years of punishing Cuba in order to promote the 'change' that the US wanted, wasn't working. So instead of the stick he's trying the carrot. Many have concerns that the normalization process is simply a Trojan Horse to be used to achieve US political strategy of regime change, through the flooding of US tourists, money, capitalism and the allure of American materialism. Part of that is based on the hope that those influences from normalization will create a rift between the Cuban population and their leaders, making the political and economic changes the Americans want to impose upon Cuba easier to achieve.

Is America's new approach simply a different way to effect 'regime change?'
Actually, it shouldn't matter, I don't care. The main thing is to end the embargo and travel restrictions, restore normal relations and see what happens. Some are afraid that America's new friendship approach might have negative consequences for the Revolution, but I think we have to put our faith in the Cuban people and their ability to be ready for this new approach -- they've managed to survive 50 years of American hostility, let's give them a chance to survive American

friendship. The Cuban leadership has been waiting and planning for this to happen for many years, and I've talked to enough of them to be sure they will deal with this new American strategy. And don't forget, normalization will be of incredible economic benefit to the Cubans.

I'm convinced Cuba will benefit from normalization in whatever form it comes. There is such expectation that American tourists will change the Cubans, by introducing them to the wonders of the modern technological world. My opinion is exactly the opposite will happen – the more Americans come, the more they will learn about Cuba and all the misconceptions they had. Most Cubans are well aware of the modern technical world, they are very sophisticated, and in fact the Cubans can teach the Americans how their society works, the good and bad, and let the American realize how they have been punishing the Cuban people with no justification, for the past 50 years. It will be the Americans who will learn so much more from the Cubans, not the other way around. And one of the first things they'll learn about is the packette, and find out that the Cubans know all about American culture, iphones, laptop computers, American Idol, McDonalds and all the other blessings the US has bestowed upon the world. And again, we can discuss the good and bad about that, but it is reality.

Americans will find out Cuba has a vibrant culture, a developing private economy, friendly and well educated people, technological achievements and a population that in the vast majority wants to improve their lives by supporting their government and the economic reforms –and not by having the United States tell them what type of social-economic system they have to have.

They will see the economic reforms of the past few years taking positive affect in the country, where there are hundreds of thousands of Cubans working in the private sector, developing a new mixed economy where they don't have to be so dependent upon the government. And the key to these reforms is that these private employees still maintain the support for the revolution and social justice programs, without the social disruptions of radical neo-liberalism. Just a few weeks ago official Cuban government figures showed 31 per cent of employed

young people work in the private sector, a vitally important development to ensure the future of the revolution.

So let's now take a quick look at what's happening in Congress and when and how the embargo might end –

After Obama's announcement there was an immediate reaction from the far-right congressmen who promised to shut down the new relationship. Senator Lindsey Graham of South Carolina promised he'd use all the powers of his office to block funding for the U.S. embassy in Cuba. Yet last month he had to watch the State Department budget bill that he wrote be approved by his own Subcommittee and pass easily through the full Senate Appropriations Committee without any restrictions, meaning the embassy funding was in place. This happened simply because he couldn't get the votes. The long time hardliners had to watch in silent anger as the US embassy officially opened in Havana in August, knowing they couldn't do a thing to stop it. And even attempts to prevent the naming of an Ambassador, again through withholding Congressional funding, will be easily circumvented by the President.

Congressmen are fast defecting to the anti-embargo side. A number of mid west Senators have come out in favor of ending trade restrictions to Cuba, thinking about getting in on the millions Cuba spends each year to import food. Long time anti-embargo congressmen like Republican Jeff Flake and Democrat Patrick Leahy are reaching out and gaining new allies since the announcement made it a lot easier for the anti-embargo side to express their opinion publicly.

Flake is also pushing legislation that would end the travel ban on U.S. citizens and legal residents to Cuba; it's backed by more than 40 other senators, including a half-dozen Republicans. Another bill, by Democratic Senator Amy Klobuchar, that would end the Cuba trade embargo has 17 co-sponsors.

Notably, these measures are backed by Republican Senator Rand Paul. He's one of the 2016 presidential hopefuls, and a few months ago sparred with another hopeful, hard-right Cuban-American Marco Rubio, saying Rubio was "acting like an isolationist who wants to retreat to our borders and perhaps build a moat."

Rubio has said of Paul: "He has no idea what he's talking about." – a standard response from those Cuban-American congressmen who try to dismiss anyone who has a rational opinion about Cuba. They try to denigrate anyone who is not "Cuban" as not knowing what is happening in Cuba; meanwhile Rubio has never been to Cuba and hasn't a clue what's going on there. He's one of the worst of the lot, as he tried to tell everyone that his parents fled the Revolution, when in fact they left in 1956, fleeing the Batista dictatorship.

Just a bit more about Rubio :

He calls the Cuban government "immoral" and communist, and he doesn't think Americans should vacation there or do business with the island. He has an entire section of his presidential campaign website dedicated to Cuba where he calls President Obama's concessions "flat out dangerous."

The only good thing is that now that Rubio is running for president, he had to vacate his senate seat, and there's a good chance it will be a Democrat who takes it in 2016. With Rubio out of the Senate, it will be one less influential pro-embargo extremist we'll have to worry about. And so the side in favor of continuing the same old policy against Cuba will lose one of its most important supporters in congress, making the odds in passing legislation ending the embargo and travel restrictions all the better

OK, enough about Rubio --

One of the most encouraging things from Congress came in July when the Senate appropriations committee, controlled by the Republicans, voted to end travel restrictions and ease some trade barriers. The committee recommendation has to go to the full Senate for a vote, and then to the House of Representatives for their vote, before it has a chance to pass as law.

I doubt it will happen but it is a good sign that there is bipartisan support and an indication of where Congress could go in the near future. Another positive aspect of this is the committee voted after meeting with Cuban-American representatives who favor ending the embargo, a good indication of the support normalization has in the moderate Cuban-American community.

So there are positive developments that there is bipartisan support for ending the embargo and travel restrictions. That's the good news The bad news is that those bills that are going through Congress to end the embargo and travel restrictions will most likely not be passed into law because of the Republican control of both the House and Senate.

So if the difficulty in getting them passed now is that this Congress is in the hands of the Republicans, what has to change to turn that around?

Well, the next elections are in 2016, and the hope is that both the Presidency and the Congress will be controlled by the Democrats. The perfect scenario would be for Hillary Clinton to win the presidency, Democrats take over congress and those democrats who are pro-embargo like Florida's Debbie Wasserman-Schultz are either not re-elected or will have their anti-Cuban voice ignored. If Hillary Clinton wins the presidency it will be a great deal better than any Republican. She has publicly come out against the embargo and has made it part of her campaign platform, even if she may see it as a way to implement regime change in Cuba. Her winning is important as she would continue to use presidential authority to carry on the dismantling of the embargo and trade restrictions.

But again, the final nail on the coffin has to come from Congress, where only they can put the legal, complete end to the embargo and travel restrictions

So that's what has to be overcome in CONGRESS, However, besides the embargo and travel restrictions, there are other issues still to be resolved before real normalization takes place:

Such as –

1 Guantanamo Bay, will the US ever hand it back, forget about closing the prison, the Cubans want the whole naval base and land back. Don't think you'll see that happen for many years, the US wont easily negotiate that return.

2. The definition of "trafficking in confiscated property," a term utilized to ignore Cuba's right to nationalization and its relations with third parties;

Since 1964, the Foreign Claims Settlement Commission, an independent branch of the Justice Department, has recognized 5,913 claims against Cuba over the seizure of American-owned property after the revolution. The claims were worth about \$1.9 billion at the time; today, they total about \$7 billion with interest adjustment.

Under U.S. law, the embargo on Cuba cannot be lifted until the settlement of the U.S. legal claims is resolved. With no conceivable way for the impoverished nation to issue such huge payouts in a lump sum, Cuba analysts say, diplomats are likely searching for some other, longer-term agreement.

On the Cuban side, there's the matter of a lawsuit filed against the United States in 1999 holding the U.S. embargo responsible for devastating Cuba's economy to the tune of \$117 billion and counting..

How will this be resolved, not as big an issue as most expect, a majority of company claims are off the books years ago from tax write offs they were given. There are claims still outstanding, but some are being resolved now and the rest I don't think will be an impediment to normalization. Personal claims may be more complex, but can be negotiated similar to what was done during East-west Germany unification.

3 -- One of the subjects that is consistently raised during the negotiation sessions is human rights violations in Cuba. What are the American's talking about? Well they have always criticized Cuba for their supposed abuses to freedom of press, assembly, and treatment of dissidents. Those are civil rights restrictions, based in such large part in the need for the Cuban government to protect itself and its citizens from American hostility, a subject I covered in my second book –Cuba under Siege. It is the United States that imposes their own definitions on human rights in order to justify it anti-Cuban propaganda.

Human rights, which are providing security, education, health, housing, food – the Cubans do better than most developing countries and match up favorably in many areas with the United States. So when the Americans attempt to raise human rights issues, the Cubans have always justifiably come back and told the

Americans to solve their own human rights problems before criticizing anyone else. America has more than their share of problems with their pervasive prison culture, police brutality, a for-profit health care system, high education costs and the widening gap between rich and poor. The United States is becoming an oligarchy ruled by a few billionaires to the detriment of the vast majority of the population. It is a society where money rules the rulers. And let's not get into US foreign policy, such as illegally invading other countries. So the Americans have a lot more to take care of human rights abuses in their society, and let the Cubans solve their own problems. When America normalizes relations then let the Cuban's continue to advance their society as planned.

So there's still so much to work to do. What will happen in the next few years? More and more high profile people will publicly support normalization,. Previous regime change supporters like Carlos Gutierrez, former US Secretary of commerce under George W Bush; and sugar magnate Alfonso Fanjul, both Cuban-Americans, have come out and supported normalization. When the pro embargo side loses such former allies like these two, you know they are fighting a losing battle

So I think there is more reason to be positive than negative in the hopes of true normalization happening in the next five years, if not sooner. The main thing is that this process has begun and won't stop, regardless of the political party in power in the US.

But true normalization won't be a reality until these NOT normal things are corrected –

It's normal for two neighboring countries, separated by a mere 90 miles of water, to have diplomatic relations. It's not normal for the United States to impose an economic, financial and commercial blockade against Cuba.

It's normal for US citizens to travel to Cuba and engage in "people to people" contact, but it's not normal that the Office of Finance and Assets Control (OFAC) limit it to licensed organizations, thus making travel to Cuba prohibitively expensive and inconvenient for many Americans.

It's normal for Washington to permit businesses in the US to engage in commerce with private individuals in Cuba, but it's not normal to make it illegal to do business with state enterprises on the island.

It's normal for the United States to want a second consulate in Cuba to better serve the public, but it's not normal that it uses its diplomats to intervene in Cuba's internal affairs.

It's normal for the United States Embassy in Havana to provide an open-door policy for Cubans. It's not normal for its diplomats to organize, direct and employ as salaried dissidents a few Cubans of their choosing.

It's normal for Washington to contribute to the entertainment of the Cuban people with radio and television programs. It's not normal for it to maintain a multi-million dollar budget to fund Radio and TV Marti as propaganda instruments.

It's normal for Washington to want a reputation as a great defender of human rights. It's not normal for the United States to imprison without due process or civil rights dozens of persons in Guantánamo, as well as torturing them in Cuba.

It's normal for the United States to have an embassy in Cuba, even a large one, located in prime real estate on the famous Malecón overlooking the bay in Havana. It's not normal for the United States to occupy, against the wishes of the Cuban people, a large swath of Cuban territory in the province of Guantánamo.

It's normal for Washington to condemn terrorism. It's not normal that it protect in Miami dozens of terrorists, including Luis Posada Carriles, who have committed heinous crimes against civilians in Cuba.

It's normal for the US to do business with Cuba, but it's not normal for the US to intervene in her internal affairs.)

To wrap up things tonight, I want to make the point that Obama's decision to enter into this new relationship is very much based on America's political belief

that the power of economics will change Cuban society. But this economic calculation may also help drive the normalization process; as members from states who want to trade with Cuba will be embolden to pass legislation ending the embargo.

And private commercial entities will also take their self-interest and use that to end the travel restrictions – which we're seeing that happen already when Carnival cruise lines, Marriott hotels go to Cuba. The US chamber of commerce, a conservative organization, has long supported the end of embargo as a way to get US businesses into the Cuban market.

This economic aspect worries some pro-Cuban supporters, they think Cuban socialist will be undermined due to the overwhelming influence of American commercialism flooding an unsuspecting Cuban population.

I'm sure many Americans are expecting that to happen, that regime change will come in the guise of Apple computers and McDonalds burgers. If McDonalds comes to Cuba, the Cubans will welcome it, and then will incorporate it into Cuba culture so before long you'll see McPan con lechon y yucca frita. And that's the genius of the Cuban reality, they'll take what American brings and create new, uniquely Cuban experiences. And the Americans won't know what hit them.

So let's give the Cubans a bit more credit. I think they are ready, willing and able to face American style commercialism and capitalism. Their investment laws are still in place to ensure the Americans – or anyone else -- don't control Cuba again. If, however the revolution is so weak it can't stand up to normal relations with America and all it involves, then the revolution will end. But I believe the revolution will be strengthened, not weakened, and is more than ready to accept all what American commercialism will bring (and most young Cubans already know about it, use it and are very sophisticated about it –my young relatives in Cuba know more about the new cellphones than I do). Of course there will be changes, some positive, some negative.

But it's for the Cubans to figure out, to adapt and evolve. Raul has said Cuba must move into a 21st century socialism -- and it can only be achieved with the

normalization of relations with the United States. No one knows where that will lead and how it will change Cuba; but it has to happen. It's an exciting time for Cuba, but it is also a cautious time as they move to implement more economic reforms, and will be facing a Revolution without either Fidel or Raul in the next few years. But let's have confidence the revolution is secure, accept the positive and the negative that will result from the current reforms and normalization process, and support the Cuban people.

But the concern remains that normalization will have a negative effect on Cuban society and culture... there will be changes, but the Cuban identity established by the revolution, the sense of true national sovereignty created by the revolution, well that will never be eroded, that will always remain. The US threat will be gone and while some may think America's hostility has created the condition of the defense of revolution through popular unity against the common American enemy, and there is certain validity to that, it will be much easier to advance Cuban society, culture and the revolution without American aggression. Cuban social, humanistic projects will continue, and fortify, when they no longer have to be threatened by American hostility and its regime change strategy.

One of the biggest challenges Cuba faces to make sure this new relationship does strengthen the Revolution -- is in changing the mentality of a certain segment of the population who have been used to doing things the same way for 50 plus years. This change is aimed at the hardliners who think allowing normalization to occur is a big mistake, or that opening the internet is simply a way for America to penetrate anti Cuban propaganda easier. This issue of changing the mentality is already being addressed by the top Cuban politicians, including vice president Miguel Diez-Canal.

And while normalization has its perils, continuing hostility means continued economic stagnation, bureaucratic rigidity and the continued difficulty in solving the island's problems. Let the Cubans deal with the difficulties that will arise with normalization, and let them use it to their benefit to advance the island's economy and society. And I have confident they will be able to deal with the challenges, they've been dealing for 50 years with American hostility, let's be

assured they can deal with US friendship. Cuba has faced many challenges the past 50 years – normal relations with America will be yet another one. I'm sure they are ready and prepared to meet and overcome the challenges American friendship will bring, as much as they overcame the challenges American hostility has brought.

My final point concerns the real root of the whole problem – America's long history of interfering in Cuba's internal affairs, of telling the Cubans what type of society they have to have.

Don't expect the Americans will stop themselves from framing the process in terms of 'bringing change to Cuba' – or 'giving Cubans opportunity for political freedom to choose their own leaders'. They just can't get it through their heads that choice was made in 1959, that when the United States says political freedom -- they mean the right to vote for who the Americans want in power, with multiparty democracy just one of the best ways to ensure those manipulations.

And the Americans sure don't care about democracy, ask Guatemala, Chile or Iran, or Egypt, or Palestine, or a host of other countries who voted inappropriately – according to America -- or against American interests. All the US wants is a political structure in Cuba that will be easier to manipulate, under the guise of 'freedom' and 'democracy' – and they do believe the normalization process is the path to achieve those ends.

Thankfully the Cubans have heard this propaganda for 50 years and are more than ready to deal with it. I'm not at all afraid of the revolution being compromised by American 'friendship'. They've had 50 years of coping with American aggression, at the cost of developing and advancing Cuban society. Hopefully they'll have a chance to deal with American normalization, as that will mean the end of hostility. The problems and complications that friendship will bring will be much easier for Cuba to overcome, and in the long run a much better opportunity to develop the type of society the Revolution wanted. I look forward to the day full normalization becomes a reality, it will bring a great deal of positive things for the Cuban people, and that's remains the most important aspect to all of this.

