

SF Examiner
A-2B-1993 pA17

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The self-defeating blockade of Cuba

ALL POLITICAL policies, decisions and acts are rife with irony and internal contradictions and, often, inherent silliness. Few policies of the United States government exhibit this better than its self-defeating economic blockade against Cuba.

The blockade, begun in 1961, ostensibly seeks something from the Cubans.

Before traveling here, I called Washington to ask what exactly it is we want from this nation as the quid pro quo for ending the blockade.

The officer on the State Department's Cuba desk replied that the United States seeks recovery of, or compensation for, some \$1.8 billion (in 1961 dollars) worth of property once owned by U.S. citizens and confiscated by the post-revolution Cuban government. In current dollars, at a "conservative 6 percent interest, that works out to something between \$5 billion and \$6 billion," he said.

A curious requirement, I think, given that the United States also has an economic embargo against Vietnam. Our Foreign Claims Settlement Commission is trying to get the Vietnamese to ante up \$99,471,983.51 — plus interest — for U.S. property "seized" in the 1970s.

Yet the Bush administration created diplomatic space last year to open up trade and tourism with Vietnam; Bank of America has opened an office in Hanoi.

Here's the irony of the U.S. economic stance vis-a-vis Cuba:

Despite presidential denials, the U.S. goal for 30 years has been to get rid of Fidel Castro and Cuban socialism. But during the past decade, the policies of the Reagan-Bush administrations — and the right-wing sector of the South Florida Cuban American community — have done more to keep Castro and his leadership in power than anything else we could have done.

My impression, after attending

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an academic conference here, is that today's economic realities in Castro's Cuba are harsh.

A bar of soap, if it can be found, costs 12 to 15 percent of a professor's monthly salary. There are, by party fiat, no farmers' markets, and the continuum of vegetables (available mostly in restaurants) runs only from cabbage to cucumbers with an occasional green tomato for variety.

Yet the Cubans don't blame these difficult times directly on Fidel.

Rather, they believe, "He and the party may be screwing up, but at least we Cubans, not the Americans, not the Russians, are trying to make our own destiny."

And here's the internal contradiction:

Socialism, and centralized control, is an ideology more easily sold in a climate of scarcity. Then it is obvious to a people that extreme measures must be taken to distribute what little milk or soap or cooking oil is available. Such is the case in Cuba.

CAPITALISM can only work when there are goods to sell. So long as the embargo forces scarcity in Cuba, there is no opportunity for capitalism to take root.

The silliness?

The Germans, the Italians, the Dutch, the British are all moving into this market of 11 million people with investments in everything from hotels to oil exploration. Yet the United States and the Republican policy makers, always quick to raise high the banner of capital-



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ism, chose to let this potentially profitable market slip away.

We can only hope the Clinton administration has the courage to ignore the implications of a reported \$375,000 contribution the Clinton campaign received from the Cuban American community in Miami. (The Bush-Quayle ticket got at least 72 percent of the 1992 votes of the South Florida Cuban American community.)

We can only hope the new administration will move to eliminate at least one ironic, self-contradicting and silly political policy by quietly pushing Congress to lift the embargo and begin to normalize relations with Cuba.

Nothing will co-opt a socialist revolution faster than the availability of consumer goods. Only with the end of the blockade will capitalism, and democracy, have a chance — and a reason — to bloom.