

President Carter's Speech in Cuba

The following speech was made in May, 2002 at the University of Havana by former U.S. President Jimmy Carter and broadcast on Cuban state TV and radio:

I appreciate President Castro's invitation for us to visit Cuba, and have been delighted with the hospitality we have received since arriving here. It is a great honor to address the Cuban people.

After a long and agonizing struggle, Cuba achieved its independence a century ago, and a complex relationship soon developed between our two countries. The great powers in Europe and Asia viewed "imperialism" as the natural order of the time and they expected the United States to colonize Cuba as the Europeans had done in Africa. The United States chose instead to help Cuba become independent, but not completely. The Platt Amendment gave my country the right to intervene in Cuba's internal affairs until President Franklin Roosevelt had the wisdom to repeal this claim in May 1934.

The dictator Fulgencio Batista was overthrown more than 43 years ago, and a few years later the Cuban revolution aligned with the Soviet Union in the Cold War. Since then, our nations have followed different philosophical and political paths.

The hard truth is that neither the United States nor Cuba has managed to define a positive and beneficial relationship. Will this new century find our neighboring people living in harmony and friendship? I have come here in search of an answer to that question.

There are some in Cuba who think the simple answer is for the United States to lift the embargo, and there are some in my country who believe the answer is for your president to step down from power and allow free elections. There is no doubt that the question deserves a more comprehensive assessment.

I have restudied the complicated history (in preparation for my conversations with President Castro), and realize that there are no simple answers.

I did not come here to interfere in Cuba's internal affairs, but to extend a hand of friendship to the Cuban people and to offer a vision of the future for our two countries and for all the Americas.

That vision includes a Cuba fully integrated into a democratic hemisphere, participating in a Free Trade Area of the Americas and with our citizens traveling without restraint to visit each other. I want a massive student exchange between our universities. I want the people of the United States and Cuba to share more than a love of baseball and wonderful music. I want us to be friends, and to respect each other.

Our two nations have been trapped in a destructive state of belligerence for 42 years, and it is time for us to change our relationship and the way we think and talk about each other. Because the United States is the most powerful nation, we should take the first step.

First, my hope is that the Congress will soon act to permit unrestricted travel between the United States and Cuba, establish open trading relationships, and repeal the embargo. I should add that these restraints are not the source of Cuba's economic problems. Cuba can trade with more than 100 countries, and buy medicines, for example, more cheaply in Mexico than in the United States. But the embargo freezes the existing impasse, induces anger and resentment, restricts the freedoms of US citizens, and makes it difficult for us to exchange ideas and respect.

Second, I hope that Cuba and the United States can resolve the 40-year-old property disputes with some creativity. In many cases, we are debating ancient claims about decrepit sugar mills, an antique telephone company, and many other obsolete holdings. Most U.S. companies have already absorbed the losses, but some others want to be paid, and many Cubans who fled the revolution retain a sentimental attachment for their homes. We resolved similar problems when I normalized relations with China in 1979. I propose that our two countries establish a blue-ribbon commission to address the legitimate concerns of all sides in a positive and constructive manner.

Third, some of those who left this beautiful island have demonstrated vividly that the key to a flourishing economy is to use individual entrepreneurial skills. But many Cubans in South Florida remain angry over their departure and their divided families. We need to define a future so they can serve as a bridge of reconciliation between Cuba and the United States.

Are such normal relationships possible? I believe they are.

Except for the stagnant relations between the United States and Cuba, the world has been changing greatly, and especially in Latin America and the Caribbean. As late as 1977, when I became President, there were only two democracies in South America, and one in Central America. Today, almost every country in the Americas is a democracy.

I am not using a U.S. definition of "democracy." The term is embedded in the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, which Cuba signed in 1948, and it was defined very precisely by all the other countries of the Americas in the Inter-American Democratic Charter last September. It is based on some simple premises: all citizens are born with the right to choose their own leaders, to define their own destiny, to speak freely, to organize political parties, trade unions and non-governmental groups, and to have fair and open trials.

Only such governments can be members of the OAS, join a Free Trade Area of the Americas, or participate in the Summits of the Americas. Today, any regime that takes power by unconstitutional means will be ostracized, as was shown in the rejection of the Venezuelan coup last month.

Democracy is a framework that permits a people to accommodate changing times and correct past mistakes. Since our independence, the United States has rid itself of slavery, granted women the right to vote, ended almost a century of legal racial discrimination, and just this year reformed its election laws to correct problems we faced in Florida eighteen months ago.

Cuba has adopted a socialist government where one political party dominates, and people are not permitted to organize any opposition movements. Your constitution recognizes freedom of speech and association, but other laws deny these freedoms to those who disagree with the government.

My nation is hardly perfect in human rights. A very large number of our citizens are incarcerated in prison, and there is little doubt that the death penalty is imposed most harshly on those who are poor, black, or mentally ill. For more than a quarter century, we have struggled unsuccessfully to guarantee the basic right of universal health care for our people. Still, guaranteed civil liberties offer every citizen an opportunity to change these laws.

That fundamental right is also guaranteed to Cubans. It is gratifying to note that Articles 63 and 88 of your constitution allows citizens to petition the National Assembly to permit a referendum to change laws if 10,000 or more citizens sign it. I am informed that such an effort, called the Varela Project, has gathered sufficient signatures and has presented such a petition to the National Assembly. When Cubans exercise this freedom to change laws peacefully by a direct vote, the world will see that Cubans, and not foreigners, will decide the future of this country.

Cuba has superb systems of health care and universal education, but last month, most Latin American governments joined a majority in the United Nations Human Rights Commission in calling on Cuba to meet universally accepted standards in civil liberties. I would ask that you permit the International Committee of the Red Cross to visit prisons and that you would receive the U.N. Human Rights Commissioner to address such issues as prisoners of conscience and the treatment of inmates. These visits could help refute any unwarranted criticisms.

Public opinion surveys show that a majority of people in the United States would like to see the economic embargo ended, normal travel between our two countries, friendship between our people, and Cuba to be welcomed into the community of democracies in the Americas. At the same time, most of my fellow citizens believe that the issues of economic and political freedom need to be addressed by the Cuban people.

After 43 years of animosity, we hope that someday soon, you can reach across the great divide that separates our two countries and say, "We are ready to join the community of democracies," and I hope that Americans will soon open our arms to you and say, "We welcome you as our friends."