“El genocidio más largo de la historia:” The Cuban Embargo and 
a Generation of Failed Policy

by

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Chapter 1: Introduction

On January 1st, 1959, Fidel Castro rode victoriously into Havana to assume political control of Cuba and begin a new era in the history of the country and the entire western hemisphere. Almost 58 years later, on November 25th, 2016, Castro died of natural causes, a survivor of countless assassination attempts by United States intelligence services. Today, his Cuban Communist Party still remains in charge of all economic and political affairs on the island. The U.S. government made clear its opposition to the Castro regime within months of his victory, and by 1962 had placed a comprehensive embargo on the import of all Cuban goods to the U.S. and the export of American products to Cuba. In the following pages, I will evaluate the economic embargo placed on Cuba in the hopes of forcing Castro from power, attempting to explain why the policy, which is still in place to this day, has failed so completely in forcing regime change. This introductory chapter will review the academic literature covering sanctions and the circumstances under which they may be successful, as well as briefly summarize the history of U.S. foreign policy towards Castro’s Cuba.

A History of U.S.-Cuba Relations After 1959

Throughout the 1950s, the dictator Fulgencio Bautista ruled Cuba with a regime riddled with corruption as well as social and journalistic repression. A young lawyer educated at the University of Havana, Fidel Castro originally sought to fight the Bautista regime through the political process, running for elected office with the Cuban People’s Party (Britannica). But, after realizing that normal legal strategies were useless in actually achieving sustained political change, Castro made the decision to lead an armed revolution against the government. In 1953,
Castro, his brother Raul, and other young revolutionaries led an attack on the Moncada military barracks in Santiago de Cuba, the island’s second largest city. The attack was quickly and brutally quelled by Bautista’s forces, but the Castro brothers escaped execution, were freed from prison two years later, and subsequently fled to Mexico, where they began planning a full scale revolution.

In 1956, the Castros, Che Guevara and Camilo Cienfuegos crossed over from Mexico aboard the now iconic fishing vessel, Granma, and landed in Cuba’s eastern Oriente province, now the province of Granma, named after the same boat. Originally a group of 80, Castro’s followers were decimated by government forces and less than two dozen escaped into the wooded mountains of the Sierra Maestra. Against all odds, the revolutionaries waged successful minor battles against Bautista loyalists, gradually recruiting fighters and allies amongst the rural peasants of eastern Cuba. For over two years, Castro led an intense guerilla war against the Cuban army that ultimately resulted in Bautista abdicating his position in the presidential palace and fleeing to the Dominican Republic. Suddenly, Fidel Castro controlled Cuba and the course of the country’s history was altered forever.

The United States and the Bautista regime had enjoyed a friendly relationship, with U.S. companies controlling vast amounts of wealth in Cuba, and American tourists frequenting Cuban resorts, casinos, and beaches. Given U.S. investment on the island, political and business leaders were displeased with the instability that the revolution had brought to the island. They were especially wary of the new regime and its leader, whose popularity was partially based on his repudiation of U.S. influence and imperialism in Cuba. Despite these reservations, the U.S. at first tried to work with Castro’s government. In February 1959, Philip Bonsai was appointed at the new U.S. ambassador to Cuba, and he optimistically stated his hope to build a relationship
with the new government and “get to know Fidel Castro personally” (“Cuba: Turning Tough”).

On February 23rd, 1959, a group of 10 Cuban revolutionaries, including military commander Camilo Cienfuegos, came to the United States, arriving in New York, where a crowd of 1500 people greeted them. Cienfuegos told reporters, “This is not a political trip. It is just to show our friendship” (Alden). The future of U.S.-Cuba relations showed promise.

But Castro dealt coldly with U.S. engagement efforts, if not with outright hostility. He viewed the United States as an imperial power and colonizer of his homeland. When the U.S. began imposing commercial restrictions, state-run Radio Progreso stated that the Cubans were “‘willing to live on roots’ if necessary to defeat the ‘monstrous Yankee imperialism,’” echoing Castro’s critique of the U.S., which has remained the Cuban government orthodoxy in the decades since (Phillips). Castro did not trust the U.S. government and wanted to fundamentally restructure the economic relationship between the two countries. Although Ambassador Bonsai sought negotiations with Castro on various issues, little progress was made. Instead, Castro moved quickly to nationalize industry, including American-owned factories as well as hotels and other businesses, enraging the United States. In addition to economic concerns, “American public opinion was soon shocked by the execution of several hundred Bautista supporters” (Schreiber 390). U.S. President Dwight D. Eisenhower was hesitant to intervene directly in Cuba, but became increasingly opposed to Castro’s machinations as the revolutionary leader sought new economic and political ties with the Soviet Union, the Cold War enemy of the United States, and relations between Cuba and the United States quickly deteriorated further. Starting in 1959, Castro began nationalizing all foreign assets in Cuba and raised taxes on U.S. imports (Timeline): “By seizing these assets, the Cuban revolution transformed the island’s international relations, dramatically reducing the influence of the United States. Eventually the regime would
openly declare itself Marxist and align with the Soviet Union, the arch-enemy of its former partner” (Feinberg 2).

In July 1960, the Eisenhower administration finally acted, cancelling much of the remaining annual Cuban sugar quota, its first step towards cutting off relations with Cuba and its new revolutionary government. Then, in October, the administration banned all U.S. exports to Cuba, “except medicines, medical supplies, and food products receiving no governmental subsidy” (Schreiber 387). By this point, Castro’s government had already nationalized U.S.-owned businesses and property valued at $1.25 billion, and in response to the U.S. export prohibition, went on to nationalize the remaining $250 million-worth of U.S. property on the island (Phillips).

On April 17th, 1961, a group of CIA-trained Cuban expats, several thousand strong, attempted to invade Cuba at the Bay of Pigs, on the island’s southern coast. The invasion was planned and funded by the United States intelligence and military services, though the U.S. went to some lengths to disguise its involvement. The invaders were roundly defeated with a large number killed and the rest taken hostage. It was a profoundly embarrassing event for the new Kennedy Administration, but for Fidel Castro it was a significant blessing. The United States had, for all intents and purposes, invaded the sovereign nation of Cuba in an attempt to unseat him as president. He was now fully justified in his anti-U.S. position and he gained further credibility with the Cuban people. In the years that followed, the CIA would attempt to assassinate Castro in a myriad of creative ways, further hardening the divide between the U.S. and Cuba.

While the Eisenhower Administration had taken significant steps toward sanctioning Cuba, it was under President Kennedy that the most influential events and policy changes took
place. Following the Bay of Pigs, the Kennedy Administration announced the establishment of a full embargo against Cuba on February 3rd, 1962 (Timeline). In Presidential Proclamation 3447, titled *Embargo on All Trade with Cuba*, Kennedy said:

[I] hereby prohibit the importation into the United States of all goods of Cuban origin and all goods imported from or through Cuba… and direct the Secretary of the Treasury to carry out such prohibition… and further, I hereby direct the Secretary of Commerce… to continue to carry out the prohibition of all exports from the United States to Cuba” (American Presidency Project).

In explaining the need for the new embargo, Kennedy stated “the present Government of Cuba is incompatible with the principles and objectives of the Inter-American system; and, in light of the subversive offensive of Sino-Soviet Communism with which the Government of Cuba is aligned” (American Presidency Project). Thus the embargo was born, and it has now remained in place for over 55 years.

The tumultuous period that began with Castro’s revolutionary victory solidified the new status quo for relations between Cuba and the U.S. Though both sides periodically attempted to restore a working relationship over the next fifty years, the mutual hatred between the two governments was explicit. Castro lamented Kennedy’s death in 1963 then returned to decrying the evil imperialism of the U.S. and strengthening ties with the Soviet Union. The CIA unsuccessfully attempted to assassinate Castro numerous times throughout the 1960s, and eventually abandoned the effort. The U.S. had now established a stringent, comprehensive embargo against Cuba and in less than five years the two neighbor nations had effectively grown
a world apart. Vietnam became the U.S. primary foreign policy priority and Cuba was forgotten in some quarters, but all the while the embargo remained in place.

In the late 1970s, Jimmy Carter attempted to restore some form of a diplomatic relationship but preliminary talks broke down. In 1991, the Soviet Union collapsed, robbing Cuba of its one and only consistent and substantial source of aid and commerce. Cuba was desperate, and Castro went before his country’s people and proclaimed the new era a “Special Period” of Cuban brotherhood and cooperation. He was putting a positive spin on a truly dark time for Cuba, and indeed throughout the Special Period thousands of Cubans died of hunger as the country was brought to a standstill. Rather than stepping in to relieve the immense pressure on the Cuban economy, U.S. policymakers saw an opportunity and doubled down on the embargo.

In 1992, President George H.W. Bush signed the Cuban Democracy Act, which sought to “seek a peaceful transition to democracy and a resumption of economic growth in Cuba through the careful application of sanctions directed at the Castro government and support for the Cuban people,” by punishing countries who did business with Cuba by removing or limiting foreign aid, banning ships that had traveled to Cuba within 180 days from doing business in the U.S. and sharply restricting remittances sent back to Cuban families from relatives in the U.S. (GovTrack, Treasury). “The statute bars vessels that have exchanged goods with Cuba in the previous 180 days from docking at U.S. ports and prohibits foreign subsidiaries of U.S. businesses from trading with Cuba. The legislation also limits the amount of U.S. currency traded with Cuba. The act does, however, offer a path to normalizing relations that is conditioned on Castro’s government making significant economic and political reforms” (Timeline).
Bill Clinton assumed the presidency in 1992 and at first he sought better relations with Cuba. He reached an agreement, known as “wet foot-dry foot,” with the Cuban government stipulating that any Cuban refugees rescued at sea would be returned to Cuba but if they managed to reach the U.S. mainland they would be given preferential immigration treatment and an expedited path to citizenship. Further cooperation and the easing of diplomatic tensions seemed plausible, as “Castro and President Bill Clinton had exchanged exploratory messages, using the Colombian novelist Gabriel García Márquez as an envoy (Anderson). However, when the Cuban Air Force shot down two U.S. civilian aircrafts attempting to drop anti-Castro leaflets over the city of Havana, all efforts to establish bilateral relations were abandoned in favor of further sanctions against the Castro regime. In 1996, Clinton signed the Cuban Liberty and Democratic Solidarity (Libertad) Act of 1996, commonly known as the Helms-Burton Act. This law codified the embargo into law, requiring an act of Congress to bypass its requirements (Timeline). Helms-Burton penalized foreign companies for doing business in Cuba, and most importantly, stated that sanctions could not be lifted until Fidel and Raul had both left office, Cuba has moved toward free elections and free press, and released political prisoners.

After the passage of Helms-Burton, the virtual wall between the U.S. and Cuba was higher and thicker than ever before. Yet again, all efforts to foster cooperation between the two sides had been thrown aside. Though certain loopholes in the embargo were created through the Trade Sanctions and Export Enforcement Act of 2000 to allow American agricultural companies to export to Cuba, Helms-Burton essentially solidified the legislative structure of the embargo. The embargo is therefore composed of five specific statutes: The Foreign Assistance Act of 1961, Sections 5 and 16 of the Trading With the Enemy Act, the Cuban Democracy Act of 1992,

Without wading into the most specific elements of each of these laws, it is most important for the purpose of this project to show what exactly motivated the embargo, how it was justified and explicitly what was, and remains to be, its purpose. The Foreign Assistance Act, in response to Castro’s nationalization of U.S.-owned companies in Cuba, focused primarily on prohibiting the U.S. government from granting foreign aid to Cuba or any other country in similar circumstances until steps were taken to repay debts to American citizens. However, this was before the embargo had gone into effect. President Kennedy’s insistence that the Cuban government itself had gone astray, the deep anti-Castro sentiment that continues to permeate U.S. culture even after his death and the CIA’s repeated attempts on his life are evidence enough that the embargo was primarily intended to remove Castro from office.

In the 1990s, when the embargo was significantly strengthened, both landmark statutes explicitly cited regime change as their primary objective. In the Cuban Democracy Act of 1992, Congress stated: “It should be the policy of the United States – 1) to seek a peaceful transition to democracy and a resumption of economic growth in Cuba through the careful application of sanctions directed at the Castro government and support for the Cuban people” (Cuban Democracy Act). Helms-Burton describes itself as “An Act to seek international sanctions against the Castro government in Cuba, to plan for support of a transition government leading to a democratically elected government in Cuba, and for other purposes,” with the primary purpose of the law “to assist the Cuban people in regaining their freedom and prosperity, as well as in joining the community of democratic countries that are flourishing in the Western Hemisphere” (Cuban Liberty and Democratic Solidarity Act of 1996). There should be no doubt that both
officially and unofficially, American leaders have desired the removal of Fidel and Raul Castro from power. This was the purpose of the embargo when it was first established, when it was strengthened at the end of the 20th century and it remains the purpose of U.S. sanctions against Cuba to this day.

Today, the embargo that was put into place in the 1960s is still in effect. Although executive actions taken by President Barack Obama have increased travel between the U.S. and Cuba, allowed for Cuban-Americans to send more money home to their families, and lessened restrictions in industries such as tourism, telecommunications, and agriculture, trade between the two countries is still extremely limited. Despite dire economic consequences in Cuba and drastic and continued restructuring of Cuba’s trade relationships over the last 58 years, the embargo has failed to meet its objective: Raul Castro remains in power as his brother’s successor, and the revolutionary Communist Party retains complete power in Cuba.

This project seeks to answer the core question: Why has the policy of sanctions directed at Cuba, with the intended objective of forcing a regime change, failed over the last 57 years? It will also address a related question: Why do countries stick to broken policies? These questions will be answered in a single-case study of the American economic embargo against Cuba. The intellectual framework for the case study is based on the existing academic literature on whether and under what conditions sanctions can be effective, as well as the reasons for maintaining sanctions even in light of failure.

The Effectiveness of International Sanctions as a Political Tool

Historically, the policy of international economic sanctions has been met with mixed results, achieving relative success in countries such as South Africa, while failing in Haiti and
North Korea, among other places. The academic literature presents several schools of thought regarding the efficacy of sanctions. Scholars roughly break down into two camps, pro-sanctions or anti-sanctions, but there is significant crossover between those two groups. In general, scholars from both schools regard sanctions with a certain level of skepticism. Hufbauer, Clyde and Elliot published a study that remains the core piece of empirical evidence on sanctions. This study showed sanctions working effectively in 34% of cases analyzed. This figure is widely accepted by experts, though both sides present specific circumstances under which sanctions are more or less effective. Daoudi and Dajani echo the conclusions of Hufbauer et al., claiming that although sanctions may not completely accomplish their stated aims on their own, the outcome is still positive if the sanctions are at least partially successful. They stress that sanctions can be especially effective in the longer term when employed together with other methods. Elliot, individually, states that sanctions do have a mixed record, citing ‘recent’ successes in South Africa, Iraq, and Serbia but noting that in other cases they have failed. She defends her work from attacks by stating that in reality there is much agreement between the traditionalist and revisionist scholars. And this does, indeed, appear to be the case. Even scholars who express serious concerns with the policy of sanctions appear unwilling to reject them out of hand, saying that under certain circumstances they might be useful. As Jentleson writes, “sanctions thus can neither be written off nor turned to as a default option” (163). Galtung claims that though sanctions may fail in the short term, over the long term they may be more indirectly successful. And even Robert Pape, one of their staunchest critics, concedes that sanctions may be useful when combined with the use of force (106). This wary acceptance of sanctions from more critical scholars is quite similar to the arguments put forth by revisionist scholars who are favorable towards sanctions as policy instruments. Hufbauer, Clyde, and Elliot describe sanctions as
generally useful, but only when tailored specifically to the situation. This is the basic view promoted by Susan Allen and David Baldwin, who argue that sanctions, though not necessarily effective in a general sense, are more often successful than alternative policies and come with far lower costs, especially relative to outright warfare.

Though it tends to occupy scholars, the question of whether or not sanctions work is largely irrelevant to this investigation. In truth, as Elliot argues, there is a significant level of agreement between the theoretical schools. In general, we can say that scholars regard sanctions with a certain level of skepticism. Even the most positive assessments of sanctions recognize that they accomplish their objective far less than half the time. Most importantly, within both schools there may be compelling explanations for why sanctions may fail in some cases and succeed in others. The hypotheses used in this project reflect a synthesis of opinions from all areas of the intellectual debate on sanctions.

One school of the literature argues that countries targeted by sanctions experience “political integration” whereby the existence of an external threat allows for the ruling regime to rally the populace around a common nationalist cause (Galtung; Olson; Pape). This area of theory supports the first of three hypotheses explaining the failure of sanctions against Cuba, which states that the Castros have successfully framed U.S.-imposed sanctions as an attack on Cuba, helping to win popular sympathy and support. Pape says, “most modern states… resist external pressure. Pervasive nationalism often makes states and societies willing to endure considerable punishment rather than abandon what are seen as the interests of the nation…” (Pape 93). The political integration argument suggests that regimes are able to adopt the fight against international sanctions into their own party platform and use it to, in fact, highlight the importance of their remaining in power.
In a second school of thought, experts point to the ability of powerful international sponsors to eliminate the effects of sanctions and support a regime. This explanation is tied to a second hypothesis holding that the embargo’s effect has been weakened by the widespread support Cuba has received from the rest of the world. Jentleson writes: “Historically, the most frequent cause of the failure of sanctions has been other states acting as alternative trading partners for the target state” (132). Kryvoi points that out that while sponsors mitigate the economic costs, the continued existence of sanctions caused the target regime to rely ever more heavily on the sponsor. This can have serious adverse effects as multilateral cooperation becomes more and more difficult, and in many cases regime repression increases. Both in terms of the sanctions’ success and the state of negotiations and human rights, third-party sponsorship of the targeted regime can have serious adverse effects.

Another explanation for why sanctions fail suggests that sanctions only affect the most vulnerable in society, but do little to weaken those in power. This supports the third hypothesis considered in this project, which states that the embargo has been ineffective because it targets the population as a whole, rather than putting direct pressure on the individuals in power. Bierman, Hendrickson, and Pape all note that ruling elites are able to protect themselves from more broadly aimed policies by forcing the burden of sanctions onto their political opponents and marginalized groups. Because of the disproportionate effect they have on the poor. Olson states that the success of sanctions is determined by the “relative deprivation” in the target country as a result of the policy. This argument holds that the adverse economic effect is not experienced equally, so the political effects from economic sanctions depend on which groups in society are affected the most and how much power those groups have. For this reason, several scholars argue that sanctions specifically targeting powerful individuals in and around the ruling
regime are most successful. Allen calls for targeting the foreign assets of leaders, arguing this method is far more successful than broader economic sanctions, and avoids harming the general populace. This argument addresses the concerns that Pape, Hendrickson, and Bierman all raise regarding the unjust effects sanctions can have on the poorest members of society, while avoiding powerful decision makers. Kryvoi also says that targeted sanctions are preferable because they do not punish the general population, whose human rights the sanctions are intended to protect.

Other explanations have emerged from the literature but will not have a significant role in this study. One is the suggestion that the type of regime in place in the target nation is a key indicator of sanctions’ eventual success. Brooks argues that trade and financial sanctions should be effective against a democracy, but counterproductive in authoritarian states because they strengthen regime constituencies and weaken the middle class. Jentleson states that authoritarian regimes are, in general, more difficult to depose through the use of sanctions than democratic ones. Comparison of sanctions targeting democratic versus authoritarian regimes would be helpful in a study involving multiples cases with different regime types, but is largely irrelevant in this single-case study. Also, the vast majority of sanctions cases involve authoritarian regimes, because the international community generally considers the actions of true democratic governments to be legitimate.

Some theories have little demonstrated support in the literature, and thus will not be considered in this project. Reasoning that sanctions are intended to inspire some form of popular rebellion or uprising against the ruling regime, Allen highlights the importance of some previous existence of freedom of association in the target country. She says the public in the target country will only act if there is already some degree of openness in the society, thus allowing
them to organize a movement for change. This stance makes intuitive sense, however there is a
dearth of similar arguments in the literature. It is also difficult to apply this explanation without
identifying what level of freedom of association is significant enough to prepare a people for
popular uprising, and what level of historical freedom is relevant.

Finally, there are two areas of analysis that have not yielded clear hypotheses, but will be
important to consider as this project progress. First, it is important to consider the nature of the
objectives of sanctions regimes, and the manner in which they are measured. Scholars such as
Kryvoi, Daoudi and Dajani, Jentleson, and Baldwin all agree that the specific objectives are
vitaliy important, as sanctions must have modest aims. Daoudi and Dajani claim that although
sanctions may not completely accomplish their stated aims by themselves, the outcome is still
positive if the sanctions are at least partially successful. They stress that sanctions can be
especially effective in the longer term when employed together with other methods. However,
sanctions cannot accomplish their intended objectives if those aims are overly ambitious: “the
basic parameter of greater effectiveness for limited objectives over extensive ones still holds.
Sanctions at their most are a strategy of measured coerciveness. The ‘fit’ between strategy and
objectives therefore is most congruent with respect to objectives that are limited in scope”
(Jentleson 166). Baldwin meanwhile stresses that as complete success or complete failure is
unlikely, success should be measured by degree. And because some tasks are more difficult than
others, the effectiveness of sanctions should be judged relative to this scale. It is important in any
study of sanctions that the specific objectives of the sanctions are clearly defined and understood,
as they are the first determinant of success. Regime change is perhaps the most dramatic and
difficult to achieve of all possible objective of a sanctions program. In comparing various cases
of sanctions, or analyzing a lone case the relative success of the sanctions must be measured against the difficulty of the objectives themselves.

Secondly, the political importance of an issue within both the imposing country and the target country can help inform other hypotheses. Ang and Peksen introduce the concept of *issue salience*, wherein the effectiveness of sanctions is determined by the salience of the issue as perceived by the sender. If the sending country deems an issue important, the sanctions are more likely to succeed. If the issue is highly important in a target country, it is much likely to comply. The sanctioning country must focus on an issue that is not important enough to unify around in the target nation (Pape; Galtung). Jentleson also stresses the importance of considering domestic incentives, as well as political constraints, when analyzing the potential imposition of sanctions. If political considerations do not play a role in the initial institution of the policy, they could still cause that policy to fail later on. Olson continues in a similar vein, arguing that sanctions are highly public, and the motive of imposing them should be found in the sender’s interests, rather than based on compliance from the target. All three of these scholars suggest that sanctions will not be successful unless there is a strong domestic motivation to impose them. The question of issue salience is important not only as a potential explanation for sanctions effectiveness, but also to inform the political integration hypothesis and potentially the third hypothesis on domestic political pressure listed in the following discussion of entrenched failing policies.

**Reasons for Political Stubbornness and the Entrenchment of Failed Policies**

In regard to the question of why countries maintain broken policies, this project will also consider three potential explanations focused specifically on sanctions. One is the assertion that economic sanctions are in fact most valuable as a political statement showing a nation’s
commitment to an issue or ideal (DeKeiffer; Kryvoi). DeKeiffer argues explicitly that making a political statement is the primary purpose of economic sanctions. He says that “economically,” sanctions are seldom successful, a view that many scholars, across the ideological spectrum, would reject, based off the clear economic damage inflicted in multiple targeted countries. But DeKeiffer places significant alternative value in sanctions, stating that sanctions can be worthwhile merely to show a nation’s commitment to an issue or ideal, and to publicly stake out a political position. Shaffer and Jilani call this the “signaling value” of sanctions, arguing that the true value of sanctions is in their ability to demonstrate the power of the state that employs them. They claim that sanctions can signal commitment to an issue domestically, and show disapproval to the targeted regime, which is the first significant step toward compelling change. Kryvoi echoes this line of thought, saying that sanctions show commitment by country to a cause, and act as a powerful deterrent showing other regimes that there will be undesired consequences to repressive tactics in the future. Kryvoi also mentions that sanctions keep an issue relevant, and show that international actors do still care, even if change is not occurring rapidly. The emphasis on the signaling value of sanctions could help to explain why countries continue on with sanctions policies that are not fully accomplishing their aims. Further research on the political decisions made in specific cases will help to illuminate the thought processes of government leaders in continuing to enforce failing sanctions programs.

One obstacle to lifting sanctions that have already been imposed is the possible political repercussions of such a decision. Although policies may be failing to achieve any sort of positive effect, lifting the policy may cause further problems, thus making it preferable to keep a failing policy in place rather than removing it altogether. Using this reasoning, an explanation for the secondary question suggests that although there is a cost to maintaining failing policies, the cost
of repealing the policy and handing the targeted regime a symbolic victory is considerably higher. As with signaling value, the public relations aspect of policy decisions can be extremely significant. Several scholars point out that once sanctions are imposed, backing down and lifting sanctions is problematic because it signifies a loss and hands the targeted regime a victory that could be damaging to future negotiations and worsen the situation in the target country (Kryvoi; Bohning).

The third hypothesis to be considered on the secondary question is that public opinion and domestic political pressure causes governments to keep policies in place even when they are not effective. Several scholars state that public opinion has a direct effect on foreign policy decisions (Beal and Hinckley; Yankelovich). Beal and Hinckley emphasize the importance of public opinion polls in the formation of a political agenda. They argue this importance actually grows after a presidential election, relative to the months before it. Yankelovich suggests that public concerns over issues that affect individuals personally, such as economic opportunity, may play a significant role in the design and implementation of foreign policy.

I have chosen to focus on Cuba in a single-case study. I will test each hypothesis against the Cuban case and compare Cuba to other countries targeted by sanctions in the 20th century, such as South Africa and Haiti, where sanctions were at least partially successful, lasted for a shorter period of time, and were the product of greater international collaboration. Gerring states that case studies are “intensive” analyses that produce results applicable in a more general sense. Cuba is uniquely deserving of such intensive study because unlike other cases, the target regime has withstood pressure while the other nation has begun to acknowledge failure and lift elements of the policy. Explaining such a significant failure will be useful in evaluating the potential for the success of sanctions regimes in other countries and understanding how leaders should
balance them with other tools. Moreover, despite recent modifications the Cuban case is a blatant example of a failed policy left unchanged over a long period of time.

Scholars have expressed significant criticisms of sanctions, and even in the most positive cases only conditional praise. But despite this academic criticism and an uneven history of success, sanctions have never been more popular as policy instruments. The academic literature lacks sufficient case studies of truly failed sanctions regimes. This project aims to bring academic and political views on sanctions closer into alignment.

Besides the academic significance of this project, there is very real political, and by extension humanitarian, significance as well. The American election as well as Fidel Castro’s death suggest we are at a critical point in U.S.-Cuba relations. Especially in the event that the new American administration attempts to reverse President Obama’s actions toward Cuba and chart a new strategy or revert to strict enforcement of the embargo, understanding exactly why the embargo has failed will be crucial towards attempting to change it and designing a more successful policy.

I argue that the failure of the embargo can be most adequately explained by a combination of two factors, the integration of the embargo into the anti-American political narrative in Cuba as well as conflicting international priorities. U.S. imperialist intervention in Cuba dates back to before the war of independence from Spain. Freedom from U.S. hegemony was one of the revolution’s most important themes, and regardless of support for Fidel Castro’s socialist experiment, the desire for true Cuban independence is a nearly universal feeling on the island. The streets of Havana are filled with billboards decrying the unfairness of the embargo and hand painted patriotic slogans of Cuban unity. This is merely a sample of the extensive
efforts undertaken by the government to rally nationalist support around the regime in combatting the embargo.

Despite public support in the face of crippling sanctions, the country still would not have been able to survive economically without the support of the Soviet Union, and later Venezuela. And when the Soviet Union collapsed, forcing Cuba into the “Special Period” of extreme poverty, economic cooperation with European nations was necessary to fostering at least some recovery. While other sanctions projects have included broad international cooperation, the U.S. has been alone in its effort to sanction Cuba and force the regime from power. The third hypothesis seems to be less applicable to the Cuban case, because the very nature of the socialist ruling regime has meant that government officials have not had significant wealth held abroad that could be the target of sanctions. While targeted sanctions are useful in theory, it is unlikely there was a simple way by which the United States could go after individuals in and around the ruling Cuban regime.

On the secondary question of this project, in the context of my case study I conclude that all three explanations have played at least a minor role in the United States’ policy stubbornness toward Cuba, with the third being the most significant. The concept of signaling value is relevant to U.S.–Cuba relations because of Cuba’s ties to the Soviet Union at the height of the Cold War. Throughout the 20th century, and especially in Latin America, the United States took every opportunity to demonstrate strong opposition to leftist politics. But after the fall of the Soviet Union, containment policies became less important and one would think that sanctioning Cuba would have become less important. So too with the second explanation: repealing sanctions and delivering the Castro’s a victory would have been especially damaging for the United States during the Cold War, though less so later on. Public opinion seems a more compelling
explanation, and increasingly so over the last 20 years. The muscular foreign policy preferences of the American public traditionally favor standing up to rival nations in every situation, and do not look kindly on giving in to a foreign government without significant concessions, even despite ideological preference. And perhaps most importantly, nowhere is anti-Castro fervor and support for the embargo stronger than in the Cuban-American communities of South Florida. Florida is the largest and most important swing state in presidential elections, and therefore conservative Cuban-Americans have outsize influence on policy.

In the following chapters I will evaluate the relevant significance of each of the three hypotheses mentioned above to explain why the embargo has failed to enforce regime change in Cuba. Secondarily I will determine, in light of the existing theory, why the U.S. has maintained its broken policy for so long, and by extension what factors inspired recent policy moderation and the consideration of further change. Chapter 2 will test the first hypothesis that Cuba underwent political integration as the Castro’s used the embargo to strengthen their support. Chapter 3 will analyze the second hypothesis, which suggests that international sponsors and the lack of other collaborators in the U.S.’ attempts to sanction Cuba caused the embargo to fail. Chapter 4 will examine the hypothesis that the embargo failed because of its broad, unspecific targeting. Chapter 5 will address each of the three hypotheses on the treatment of failed policies and will state my overall conclusions.
Chapter 2: An Enemy Fosters Unity

From the highways of Havana to the streets of Santa Clara and the alleyways of Santiago, Cuba’s roads are adorned with billboard after billboard celebrating the accomplishments of the Castro Revolution. Some honor individuals who have been enshrined as heroes, like Camilo Cienfuegos and Che Guevara, others feature slogans like “Patria o muerte” (“homeland or death”). During my time on the island, the billboard that left the strongest impression on me showed a large noose, and the words, “El Bloqueo, el genocidio mas largo de la historia,” which translates to: “The Embargo, the longest genocide in history.” The embargo may not belong in the same conversation as history’s worst genocides, but such language embodies the Castro regime’s preferred rhetoric for discussing the United States’ policy of isolation towards Cuba and its communist government. Instead of fomenting revolution, the embargo has been a long-term rallying cause for Cubans to support the regime out of nationalist indignation. The literature on the effectiveness of sanctions gives us the term “political integration” to help explain sanctions’ failure in certain cases and this phenomenon is clearly present in Cuba, where citizens (at least those who have stayed on the island) have shown greater affection for their leaders in the face of international attacks. Instead of allowing economic instability stemming from the embargo to cause the people to turn on his government, Fidel Castro proactively framed U.S. attempts to influence events, and especially the embargo, as attacks not just on his government but on Cuba as a whole. For this strategy to be successful, he relied on the enduring nationalist pride of the Cuban people and not-so-distant memories on the island of the United States’ quasi-occupation and years of northern hegemony. Propaganda, through the public display of
billboards and the state-run press has perpetuated the characterization of the embargo as genocide and has played a crucial role in the Castro regime’s successful retention of power.

Why the Embargo Should Have Succeeded

While Fidel Castro was plotting and carrying out the revolutionary fight in the 1950s, the American and Cuban economies were becoming increasingly intertwined and reliant on one another. In its 1951 report on the Cuban economy, the International Bank for Reconstruction and Development stated: “few countries are so dependent on international trade as Cuba. In fact, unless it is realized to what extent the island is a one-crop export economy, it is impossible to understand the basic problems of further economic development” (Truslow 723). This fact made Cuba especially vulnerable to the potential devastation caused by sanctions that would disrupt trade and the necessary flow of goods and currency into the country. At this point, the United States had closer economic ties with Cuba than with any other country in the world: it was the only nation with which the United States had a “reciprocity treaty involving exclusive preferential tariff treatment” (Alvarez). In the 1950s, Cuba’s total exports to the United States averaged roughly $780.4 million, while imports were far lower at $277.4 million, but still substantial. This trade inequity was caused by the vast amounts of sugar that the U.S. purchased each year from Cuba in transactions that supplied Cuba with the money it needed to acquire goods from other parts of the world and to invest in domestic development projects. The sugar trade with the U.S. provided an estimated 80% percent of Cuba’s hard foreign currency, and U.S. corporations controlled a substantial portion of the sugar industry in Cuba (Haney 13). The extent of interconnectedness between the two economies increased significantly throughout the 1950s, further deepening Cuba’s reliance on the U.S. American investment in Cuban public
utilities, which numbered $271 million in 1950 and rose to $344 million by 1958. Mining investments grew from $70 million to $180 million and investments in the petroleum sector increased from $20 million to $90 million. 70% of Cuban imports and exports were linked to the U.S., and American tourists were flocking on the island in droves (Pruessen 40).

The philosophy behind the embargo recognized the importance that U.S. investment had in Cuba and the policy was designed to have a massive economic impact, an aspect at which it has succeeded. The embargo began by cutting off the annual sugar quota that the U.S. would purchase, immediately reducing Cuba’s only significant source of foreign currency. Soon afterward, it extended to all commerce between the two countries. The process of disconnecting the two countries was extremely abrupt, and almost immediately it drastically changed the Cuban economy. Since the initial imposition of the embargo, the U.S. has intentionally tightened the chains around Cuba at times when it has been most vulnerable. Congress passed the Cuban Democracy Act in 1992 just as aid from the Soviet Union was drying up. The drastic economic shift forced by the restrictions the embargo placed on trade and the opportunistic nature of American alterations to the sanctions policy has caused massive upheaval to Cuba’s economy and hardships for its people.

When economies suffer, public opinion tends to sour against the politicians in power, and thus it is noteworthy that the Castro regime staved off significant political opposition. Though there are differing opinions as to the importance of economic performance to government approval ratings, excluding all other variables, tangible economic success is undeniably a political boon for leaders in power. Inversely, when an economy struggles and job opportunities and wages decrease, the public becomes less content with its situation, and inevitably some of that discontent is directed toward political leaders, who are presumed to be at least in some
respects responsible. Following this logic, we would expect that with the level of economic contraction and the effects of the embargo on Cubans’ way of life, the Cuban public would be unhappy with the Castro regime, which presided over this economic collapse. Strategically, it is hardly ridiculous that U.S. leaders thought, back in the 1960s, that by disrupting the Cuban economy so drastically they would incite a popular rebellion against Castro.

Nonetheless, despite discontent with the Revolutionary leadership, the embargo has been unsuccessful. It is undeniable that since 1959, Fidel Castro has drawn the ire of millions of Cubans who have blamed him for changes to their personal financial situations and that of their homeland. But the number of malcontents has never been enough to unseat Castro from his throne of power. American military leaders naively expected that the attack at the Bay of Pigs would inspire thousands upon thousands of Cubans to take up arms against their new leaders. In the years since, many Cuban citizens have chosen to flee their country but never has a significant group come together to push the regime out of power.

U.S. Imperialism in Cuba

To understand why the majority of Cubans have not turned against but rather gravitated toward the Castro regime in the face of stiff sanctions, it is essential to first consider the long history between the United States and Cuba. Cuba was for several hundred years a Spanish colony, but U.S. influence on the island steadily increased through the 19th century. Ronald Pruessen writes:

Cuba has always played a key role in U.S. global expansion… (32) For American leaders, Cuba was always wrapped about with the strategic calculations inherent to early
Monroe Doctrine formulations – the early nineteenth-century conviction that the security of the infant republic required tough watchfulness regarding the potential of Old World colonizers to expand or reassert control in the Western Hemisphere (36).

As a near neighbor, and the biggest sugar producer in the Caribbean, Cuba was a natural trading ally for the United States, which also had a self-stated special claim over her that Spain did not possess. The Monroe Doctrine, a key tenet of U.S. foreign policy through the 19th century, stated strict opposition to further colonial actions by European powers in the Western Hemisphere, and suggested to U.S. leaders that Cuba more rightfully belonged to them than it did to Spain. After the U.S. intervened in the eleventh hour of Cuba’s revolution against Spain in 1898, the North Americans dictated the terms of the peace treaty process and shaped the new national Constitution. Central to the new relationship between the two countries was the Platt Amendment. This amendment to a 1901 U.S. Army appropriations bill stipulated the terms under which the U.S. would end its occupation of Cuba that had been in place since the end of the fighting with Spain. It stated eight conditions to which the Cuban government would have to adhere in order to ensure the transfer of power to the sovereign Cuban nation. The U.S. insisted that it continue to indefinitely hold the right to intervene militarily in Cuban politics to ensure “a government adequate for the protection of life, property, and individual liberty” (State.gov). Also important was the condition that required the Cuban government to “sell or lease territory for coaling and naval stations to the United States,” which resulted in American control of the Guantanamo Bay naval base, an ongoing obstacle in bilateral diplomatic relations and a prominent symbol of U.S. hegemony on the island. The United States government pressured Cuban political leaders to incorporate the conditions of the Platt Amendment into the
Constitution of the fledgling republic, making U.S. foreign policy priorities legally binding on the island. Although some Cuban leaders attempted to reject the new restrictions, they ultimately bowed to pressure and instituted the conditions into the new constitution. The Amendment was ultimately made obsolete by the cancellation of various treaties by the two countries in 1934, but the precedent of U.S. involvement in Cuba had been set, and efforts to manipulate the affairs of the sovereign state remained entrenched in the memories of the Cuban people as an insult to their country. In conversations I had with many young Cubans regarding the embargo and the shared history between the United States and Cuba, individuals showed a keen understanding of colonial history and an insistence that the history is still relevant to this day. Yasmani Olmo Lopez, a student in the School of Philosophy, History and Sociology at the University of Havana, says that to understand Cuba’s politics “you must look at the history of Cuba, and see that we were a colony for 408 years. Later, when the Republic of Cuba was established in 1902, we were not the real decision makers in our politics, we were always subjected to the designs of the presidents and businesspeople of the United States. This is to say that those first Cuban presidents were corrupt *entreguistas*, uninterested in the problems of the country, among many other issues.” (translation my own).

U.S. actions in Cuba since the end of the war in 1898 have patronized and insulted the Cuban people, suggesting that they are unable to effectively govern themselves or assert their own cultural independence, all while laying claim to resources and material goods that are clearly solely Cuba’s property. Such behavior naturally engenders indignation and resentment from people who take pride in their heritage, their citizenship and their ability to chart an independent course into the future. The United States has never treated Cuba as an equal, but instead as at best an inferior younger sibling, and at worst nothing more than an object to be
exploited. Such disrespect is not easily forgotten, especially when the societal effects of colonialism are so visible to this day, and considering that the United States has routinely exhibited similar behavior in other countries. The sins of American hegemony in Asia, the Pacific Islands and Latin America are a constant, and personal, reminder to Cubans of the United States’ affinity for direct intervention in the affairs of sovereign nations while pursuing selfish aims.

American greed certainly motivated efforts to maintain influence over the island, but in many cases justification came from the assertion that without U.S. assistance and oversight, the Cuban people would be unable to govern themselves. “Inherent to the modernizing, civilizing mission was a condescending attitude that proved especially galling to Cubans – not only at the turn of the twentieth century but continually thereafter” (Pruessen 43). As Fidel Castro was rising to prominence in the 1950s, despite president-turned-dictator Fulgencio Bautista’s numerous human rights violations, the U.S. supported Bautista’s government out of convenience, and Cuba was a playground for American corporations and mobsters. After Bautista returned to power in a coup in 1952, American investment on the island increased dramatically, reaching the great levels of interdependence noted earlier. The extent to which the two countries were tied, with one country extracting such great value from the other, inspired Fidel’s calls for nationalism and freedom. And the symbiotic relationship between Bautista and the United States allowed Castro to fight simultaneously against brutal dictatorship and anti-Cuban imperialism, while promoting an image of Cuban independence.
Anti-American Sentiment in Modern Cuban Culture

In the decades since the Revolution, the Castros have referred, both implicitly and explicitly, to the history of U.S. dominance on the island, including the ongoing occupation of the Guantanamo Bay naval base, which many Cubans consider a flagrant violation of national sovereignty. Casting the embargo as consistent with over a century of U.S. aggression and interference, has helped to position the United States in the public consciousness as the true enemy of the Cuban people. “The Cuban state has used historical evidence of U.S. desires to control the island to portray the Revolution as a fight for autonomy from U.S. power and imperialism. The use of history, as well as history itself, has perpetuated antagonism between the United States and Cuba” (Seidman). Cubans feel that their political leaders are suffering alongside them, and they feel loyalty to the regime on account of shared experiences and a shared enemy. Cubans are taught this history in school, and they soak it up in cultural spaces, like the Museum of the Revolution, throughout their lives. And what they are taught is not abstract, but is inescapably visible to them every day of their lives. Yasmani Lopez says:

From the time we are children they teach us about the embargo in school, the affects that it has on everyone and in all sectors of life. There is no human activity in Cuba that the embargo does not affect, and moreover we are an underdeveloped country; perhaps not poor but certainly with serious economic problems. My family has talked to me about this subject but its effects touch us every day and for this reason it’s not necessarily something we talk about a lot in family life because it’s something that we are all completely familiar with.
Lopez and others see and experience suffering, and they turn to the embargo as the obvious, and only true culprit. Yet he likely understates the importance that his early education had in shaping his worldview. The connection between the effects of the embargo and the inherent cruelty of American policies is not one made naturally, but one that is nurtured. First, Cuban children and young adults must come to know the history of U.S. foreign policy, and see it through a lens that is fundamentally negative. The tradition of this sort of academic instruction dates back to the first days of the Revolution, when students “learned how to bear arms and sing anti-American songs and slogans, while boys practiced military drills,” according to Yvonne Conde, who left Cuba as child in 1962 (Weber). Indoctrination at an early age is essential to turning a people against the most dominant country in the world, especially when that country actively promotes its prevailing economic philosophy and its way of life.

Attending a semester of classes at the University of Havana, I got a brief glimpse at the worldview that Cuban education describes. Each year, Cuban university students studying History or Philosophy are required to take a Political Economy class. In the first year, the course focuses on Capitalism, specifically its failures, such as the periodic recessions that have affected capitalist economies. I was enrolled in the second year of Political Economy, in which the focus in the construction of socialism. Yet here again, the focus was not so much on the practical administration of a socialist economy. Instead the Professor spent a considerable amount of classroom times responding to various criticisms of socialist Cuba with descriptions of the levels of starvation and homelessness in the world due to the “neoliberal,” capitalist economy. This sort of highlighting of suffering supports the belief of many in Cuba, which appears to be mostly accurate, that while no one is wealthy all Cubans are given the necessary means to survive, such as adequate food and a home. Another class, entitled *Tendencies of Contemporary Capitalism,*
gives a basic overview of capitalist principles and history while also stressing the same boom-and-bust cycle of capitalism. Of the five key learning objectives listed in the course syllabus, three read: “1) To establish the difference that exists between the structural systemic crisis of capital, and the cyclical crises, 2) To demonstrate that neoliberal policies are a response, and a way to administer the structural crisis of the capital system, and 3) To evaluate the impact of the structural crisis and the neoliberal management of it, on the situation of workers.”

Nowhere in a class on capitalism in Cuba do we find a built-in focus on the power of investment, or discussion on the technological advancements in the private sector that improve the quality of human life. The argument I make on this front is not that one side or the other is correct, indeed in the United States criticism of the fundamental tenets of capitalism is often unrightfully shut down and stigmatized. But the singular philosophy immediately visible in the Cuban curriculum suggests a way of thinking that is drilled into the minds of Cuban students from an early age. Though these examples are more economic than political in their focus, implicitly political thought is clearly present in these lessons. The University of Havana does not have a Political Science, therefore students in History and Philosophy focus as much on “politics” as any other students, and built into these economic lessons are a clear repudiation of colonialism and globalism, not just in their economic meanings, but their political significance as well. The connection between the United States and capitalism, and similarly socialism and Cuba ranges from unsubtly coded to blatantly explicit. There is little doubt as to which powers are represented, and when the philosophy of capitalism, the United States’ greatest export, is attacked, rejection of U.S. international intervention grows.

For a more explicitly political example of the education of the Cuban populace, we can look to the celebrated cultural monuments around the country. The most prominent of Havana’s
many museums, the Museum of the Revolution, was formerly Fulgencio Bautista’s presidential palace, and now houses a scene-by-scene review of the revolutionary struggle in the 1950s, as well as state building efforts in the 1960s and beyond. To be an American and to walk through the museum is to immerse oneself in an entirely different worldview. It is, in many ways, an experience of seeing a war through the enemy’s eyes. The early days of the revolutionary government are associated only with advancements in health care and education and never with violent reprisals against Bautista loyalists or mass exodus of unhappy Cubans. Though Cuba outpaced many Latin American countries in both healthcare and education, the Museum and its official history paint the results achieved by the new government in both areas to be drastic and immediate. It states that by 1962, the Castro regime had achieved universal literacy throughout Cuba. There is no mention of the fact that the literacy rate was already close to 80%, impressive relative to other Latin Americans countries at the time (Gomez). The gains that Cuba has made in education have been impressive, but the framing of those earlier successes represent a general exaggeration of the Revolution’s benefits. And these stories, overstated as they may seem, resonate with Cuban people, even today. Yasmani Lopez says: “When the Cuban Revolution triumphed (1959), it began to change to country’s situation; education, health, sports, culture, housing were achievements that would go to everybody, while before it was not like this.”

In the Museum of the Revolution, there is only one mention of Cubans leaving the island, in an exhibit on *Operation Peter Pan*, a joint effort by the Catholic Welfare Bureau and the U.S. State Department to fly unaccompanied children from Cuba to the U.S. to live with family members or to be placed in new homes. These children were free to go and they were sent away at the behest of their parents, who worried about the direction of their country and many of whom did not have the money to make the trip on their own (Weber). But there is a distinct level of uncertainty
surrounding what occurred, and the Castro regime and its Museum of the Revolution tell a different story. The exhibit paints the operation as little more than a CIA theft of Cuban children, alleging that a misinformation campaign and scare tactics led to the parental panic that inspired sending children away to a foreign country. In the same room, various plaques describe the numerous attempts on Fidel’s like by the CIA throughout the 1960s. The Museum is propaganda, it is an alternative history, though perhaps no less accurate than the histories told in the United States. And truth, here, is beside the point. The history shown in the museum and in similar museums around the country is the official story of Cuba. The Revolution of the 1950s and 1960s is the inevitable continuation of the revolutions of the 1870s and 1890s. Fidel, Raul, Che and Camilo are the heroes who brought Cuba back to its citizens, and the United States is the constant villain, there at every turn to incur on the will and the independence of the Cuban people.

When the U.S. began its attempts to unseat Fidel Castro, they fit perfectly into the pattern of American intervention that had played out for decades in Cuba. The countless assassination attempts of the Cuban president during the 1960s showed the Cuban people that their northern neighbor would go to any means necessary to assert its dominance. Fidel was not afraid to disseminate stories of these assassination attempts in order to more clearly position the U.S. as the enemy of his government, and importantly, Cuba itself. Despite hundreds of assassination attempts, Castro “wasn’t in the least fearful for his life… if he were to become a victim of the United States this would simply enhance his radius of influence in Latin America and throughout the socialist world” (Daniel). There was inherent value for him in being a target of the United States. Indeed, he was martyr who never had to give up his life. He was Cuba, and attacks on him were attacks on the country. Cubans were forced to pick a side, and if Fidel were fighting for
them then they would stand by him as well. The embargo became yet another attack on the homeland. This framing of the embargo in the public consciousness and the cultivation of an “us versus them” mentality in Cuba have been made possible by the widespread dissemination of propaganda.

This chapter began by recognizing the provocative messages printed on billboards across Cuba that glorify the Castro regime, the socialist cause and Cuban nationalism, as well as decry the abuses and evils of imperialism and, specifically, *el bloqueo*. Though this public art is perhaps the most obvious form of propaganda, it is hardly the only one. Like any proper authoritarian regime, the Castros have used propaganda extensively and effectively, and the embargo has always served as a central target. One aspect of 21st century Cuba that makes it unlike nearly anywhere else in the world is the complete lack of advertisements and corporate symbols. In place of commercialism, buildings and billboards are adorned with propaganda that glorifies the Revolution and the Communist Party. “With Castro came bright political murals instead of the garish advertisements for condensed milk and casinos” (Thorpe). These murals are decorated with slogans like “The Revolution Continues” or “Popular Unity,” and serve to remind the Cuban people of the need for ongoing struggle for independence.

Cuban citizens have limited access to international media sources, and rely instead on the government for all news and analysis. In 2000, Colin Grey reported on Cuba for the Canadian outlet Southam Newspapers, and described the media climate as heavily restricted.

There are a few weeklies, 10 or so regional newspapers, as well as the state-run radio and television stations. Tourists may get CNN or VH1 in their hotel rooms, but Cubans do not have access to them, nor are they allowed to visit the rooms unless they are staff or have
some other reason for going. Cubans are only allowed access to the Internet if they need it for work. Many see American movies, but in private homes where they are charged to watch contraband VHS copies (Grey).

Although the island and its people are less cut off from the world now than they were 16 years ago when Grey visited, Cuba stills ranks poorly in terms of internet access and has no independent news sources. There is no CNN for normal Cubans, and even when people are able to get online, some websites are blocked. Because of the lack of information available to the Cuban people, the average citizen’s media consumption consists of state television and the official Communist Party daily newspaper, Granma. Cuban news sources try to uphold an image of objectivity, but editorial judgment is clearly slanted, with overt references to U.S. imperialism and celebration of Cuban revolutionary pride. As an example, on a randomly selected day in April 2017, at the bottom of Granma’s website there were between 10 and 20 decorative images linking to the paper’s most popular subjects. These included a collection of adoring tributes to Fidel, a section titled, “Fidel: A Soldier of Ideas,” a special group of articles to celebrate Fidel’s 90th birthday, as well as collections of speeches and original essays from Raul and Fidel. The paper is by far the most circulated print news source in Cuba and, along with daily state TV news broadcasts, the primary source of information for the Cuban people. And yet, it functions more as a vehicle to commemorate the Revolution and celebrate government policy than to promote journalism.

More implicitly, public opinion is shaped by the passionate viewpoints espoused by the murals and other public artwork around the country. As Grey noted, “most agree that such
displays are vital to propping up the government; without it is more fragile than one might think. After all, it is harder to keep revolutionary fervor alive 40 years after the revolution…” Therein lies a key difficulty to sustaining authoritarian power over a long period of time, but also gives us a clue to understanding how the Castros have managed to do so. To an outsider, the Cuban revolution played out over the course of several years in the 1950s and ended when Castro assumed power. But to many Cubans, and certainly in the words of the regime, the Revolution continues. That rhetoric helps to justify keeping the Castros in power by implying there is still important work they must do before handing over the reins to a non-familial successor. In the 1950s, the Revolution was against Bautista, but since 1959 it has been aimed at global capitalism, seen as an extension of colonialism, and the United States. Having an enemy unites people, and through the embargo, the United States has, somewhat unwittingly, played into the hands of the Castro regime. Since 1959, that enemy has served to distract from real problems caused by the regime.

To justify its many human-rights abuses, the government needed only to nod in the direction of Washington. Repelling the CIA-orchestrated Bay of Pigs invasion in 1961 provided Fidel with his first major post-revolutionary triumph. Subsequent attempts to diminish or destroy el Jefe proved equally ineffective, and provided the regime with an endless reservoir of propaganda…The economic embargo that began in 1960 has been exploited equally enthusiastically (Calder).
Human rights abuses are justified when dissenters are nothing more than American agents, and in the context of the embargo, economic failure is no cause for rebellion if the regime has no chance to combat the crippling effects of sanctions.

To illustrate the continuity of the Castro strategy, we may look at Fidel’s language on the U.S., which stayed much the same from 1959 until his death last year. On July 11th, 1960, he gave a speech that, like so many other he gave, decried the attitude of the United States towards his new revolutionary government, and blamed the U.S. for increasing hostilities between the two countries:

We have continued to be victims of a series of aggressions. We shall continue to be victims of this series of aggressions but our weapon is reason. We shall show the world that this unjustified attack is being carried out against a small country by a powerful country. The Latin American nations will see that the U.S. Government does not want people to develop. It does not want hunger to end; does not want the peasants to have land; does not want illiterates to have schools; does not want nations to have culture or high living standards; does not want them to enjoy their work and their land (Castro Speech Database).

Less than a week after Barack Obama became the first sitting U.S. President since 1928 to visit Cuba in March of 2016, Fidel penned an op-ed in Granma, that criticized Obama for false words and hypocrisy, indignantly rejected Obama’s call to move beyond past hostilities. Fidel wrote: “After a ruthless blockade that has lasted almost 60 years, and what about those who have died in the mercenary attacks on Cuban ships and ports, an airliner full of passengers blown up in
midair, mercenary invasions, multiple acts of violence and coercion?” In both statements, delivered 56 years apart, Castro presents the same worldview of a morally pure nation continually fighting for its independence despite opposition at every turn from the evil empire to the north. He ends the 2016 article with a particularly enlightening sentence: “We do not need the empire to give us anything.” These ten words are a microcosm for Castroism. He and the Cuban people are a united “we,” who are strongest on their own, free from American influence. To many Cubans, this argument still rings true. And it does so not because the CIA continued its assassination attempts past those early years, or because another U.S. president after Kennedy authorized a ground invasion. No, the argument of shared Cuban victimhood remains relevant because of the embargo and its continued effects on the lives of the Cuban people.

The continued presence and effect of the embargo has produced a startling, and drastically unintended result: the embargo has in many ways helped the Castro regime rather than hurt it. In the words of Arletty Gongora Torreguitart, another History student at the University of Havana, “I believe it [the embargo] has functioned to increase the support of the people for the Revolution.” Were it not for the continued embargo, the regime and its Revolutionary philosophy may have run its course, giving way to a new political movement as economic struggles and social imperfection led to public discontent.

As a foreign policy tool, the embargo actually enhances Castros standing by giving him a handy excuse for the failures of his homegrown Caribbean socialism. He can rail for hours about the suffering the embargo inflicts on Cubans, even though the damage done by his domestic policies is far worse. If the embargo were lifted, the Cuban people would
be a bit less deprived and Castro would have no one else to blame for the shortages and stagnation that will persist without real market reforms (Griswold).

But because of the embargo, the Communist Party can still stress the necessity of a revolutionary government to counter attempted incursion by the United States on the affairs of sovereign Cuba. Castro government is, at its core, a Revolutionary government that came to power through fighting and promised radical change. Eventually that radical change becomes the status quo, unless the process of revolution never comes to a close. In the words of the Castro regime and in the hearts and minds of many Cubans, “the Revolution continues,” and belief in this concept justifies the continuation of power vested in Raul Castro and his government. The American embargo against Cuba is the one key force against which the Revolution continues to fight.

The United States government has been opposed to the Castro regime since its inception in 1959, and it has attempted any and all means to unseat Fidel, and his Raul. By far the most significant method of deposing the revolutionary leaders has been the economic embargo, the infamous “bloqueo.” When the series of laws that make up the embargo were first put into place, American leaders hoped that the Cuban people would reject the regime that was overseeing economic disaster. But it has not worked out that way. The historic paternalistic relationship between the U.S. and Cuba, in which one country has consistently exploited the other makes the Cuban people especially sensitive to U.S. intervention. “Rather than weakening Cuban resolve, sanctions have strengthened Cuban determination. U.S. policy has served to bring out some of the most intransigent tendencies of Cuban leaders in the defense of some of the most exalted notions of Cuban national sovereignty” (Perez 163). These intransigent tendencies were on full display in Fidel’s article to the Cuban people after Barack Obama’s visit, as his writing made
clear that Fidel had always remained anti-American and unwilling to compromise with Cuba’s dominant northern neighbor. But this refusal to temper his language helped to uphold the image of the United States as an imperial power with fundamentally bad intentions. Fidel Castro shared and recognized the nationalism of his people, and knew he could frame the U.S. as an aggressor hell bent on exerting hegemonic influence in Cuba. Through propaganda and rhetoric, Castro identified the one true enemy, and used the embargo to consolidate his power, rather than allowing U.S. policy to dismantle it.
Chapter 3: Unilateral Failure

The unilateral nature of U.S. sanctions against Cuba has kept them from achieving their desired aim against the Cuban government. While the U.S. has consistently restricted economic opportunity for Cuba, the country has not been completely isolated from the rest of the world. Though the isolationist tendencies of the Castro government and U.S. pressure complicated economic cooperation with European countries, they have maintained relatively friendly relations with Cuba since 1959. At the same time, Castro turned to the Soviet Union for economic assistance after American sanctions were put in place, and for roughly 30 years the USSR sustained Cuba through favorable trade pacts and billions of dollars in aid. After the fall of the Soviet Union, Venezuela soon emerged to partially fill the vacant sponsorship role, ensuring that for almost the entirety of the Castro government a foreign ally was working to directly counteract the economic costs of the U.S. embargo. Though trade with its closest northern neighbor would be optimal, Cuba is able to survive with goods imported from other parts of the world, such as industrial equipment from Europe and agricultural products from South America, while increasingly gaining important revenue through the tourism industry. Additionally, the unique, extremely favorable relationships with the Soviet Union and Chavez-era Venezuela have been crucial to facilitating Cuba and the Castro regime’s survival in the face of U.S. opposition.

For a sanctions program to be successful, it requires widespread international cooperation as opposed to merely unilateral sanctions. When a country imposes sanctions unilaterally, other nations often engage in “sanctions busting,” whereby they fill the void in the target nation’s trade agenda and undercut the intended effect of the sanctions. The target country does not feel the
effects of sanctions because by modifying their trade patterns they can still acquire most essential products. The potential for sanctions busting, as well as costs on the sending nation, unilateral sanctions are generally not the preferred method of economic coercion. “States show a strong aversion to being isolated in imposing sanctions,” therefore when introducing these policies, they hope that other countries will quickly join them (Martin 246). When applying unilateral sanctions, the sending country would hope that other allied nations would quickly join the effort and tighten the economic restrictions on the target. The behavior of other countries in choosing whether or not to join the sanctioning coalition depends on multiple factors, including the political philosophy and reasoning that justifies sanctions in the first place, and the type of sanctions being imposed. Even when other countries do not apply sanctions of their own against the targeted country, fear of reprisal from the sending nation or the simple acknowledgment of the sending nation’s sanctioning efforts can lead to a stark decrease in economic activity with the target state. Raul Caruso writes that in the event of unilateral U.S. sanctions, the imposition of extensive sanctions would be expected to result in substantial negative impact on trade between the sanctioned country and other G-7 countries. However, with limited and moderate sanctions, trade has been shown to increase between other countries and the sanctioned nation (Caruso 59). Caruso analyzes the trade patterns in countries targeted unilaterally by the U.S. and finds that when trade with the U.S. decreases, trade with other G-7 countries increases, to the point that if sanctions had not been imposed trade between other G-7 countries and the target state would have been 17% lower (Caruso 57). This finding is more specifically tied to “limited and moderate” sanctions, rather than those qualified as “comprehensive and extensive.” However, as the Cuban sanctions are substantial one would expect them to decrease trade between Cuba and other countries. But while this type of trade did decrease somewhat in the years immediately
after the Revolution, the initial decrease was temporary and never substantial enough to undermine the regime. In the wake of the imposition of the U.S. economic embargo against Cuba, other major economic powers not only did not impose their own sanctions in Cuba, they actually maintained or increased trade with the island.

**Reasons for the Absence of Bilateral Cooperation**

The failure of other countries to cooperate with U.S. sanctions could stem from the fact that although the U.S. showed a commitment to the policy, the cost of sanctions to the U.S. was so minimal that other nations did not recognize it and felt little pressure to join the effort. “The costs borne by the major sender and the involvement of international institutions have strong significant impacts on cooperation; and… potential sanctions bandwagon[ing]” (Martin 247). Without recognition from the international community that the sending country, in this case the U.S., is bearing a significant burden, the chances that other countries will join in the effort are greatly diminished. As Martin states: “Sanctions can be a useful foreign policy tool precisely because they force the sender to bear costs, costs that demonstrate resolve” (Martin 250). In the case of unilateral sanctions against various Latin American countries in the 1970s, “without high self-imposed costs and without the involvement of international institutions, Washington was unable to establish a credible commitment to human-rights sanctions and thus failed to generate international cooperation” (Martin 129). It appears that the situation has been much the same with Cuba. Though the embargo has likely hurt some sectors of the U.S. economy, the real impact of decreased trade with a small island nation is relatively insignificant. To European nations and others around the world, the U.S. was bearing minimal costs even while starving
Cuba of resources. Given these circumstances, those countries were not inclined to join the sanctions.

However, lack of commitment hardly explains opposition to the embargo from Europe and the international community overall. Since 1992, the United Nations has overwhelmingly voted to call for the removal of the embargo, with only a few countries such as the United States and Israel dissenting. This vote annual vote shows that other countries are and have been strictly opposed to the very principle of harsh sanctions against the Castro regime and Cuba. There are a number of reasons why the United States has been at such great odds with the international community over the proper steps to take in Cuba. From nearly all perspectives, human rights on the island have been a concern, yet the treatment of this reality has been starkly different in Europe than in the United States. “In general, European newspapers seem to recognize the advances of the Cuban Revolution, while they are more critical of the human rights violations and economic weaknesses of the regime” (Roy 5). On many occasions, the Castro government and E.U. officials have been sharply at odds with one another over human rights violations or negotiations, yet the animosity has never grown to warrant the imposition of sanctions. After the passage of the Cuban Democracy Act in 1992, the United Kingdom’s E.U. representative spoke on behalf of the European body and summed up the typical European position on Cuba, saying:

Although the European Community and its member states are fully supportive of the peaceful transition to democracy in Cuba, they cannot accept that the United States unilaterally determines and restricts European Community economic and commercial relations with any foreign nation which has not been collectively determined by the United Nations Security Council to be a threat to international peace and security.
(Rosenblum 11).

Partially, the reason for this friendlier treatment and insistence on official U.N. justification and procedure for sanctions dates back to the Cold War and Cuba’s significance as a Soviet outpost in the Western Hemisphere. Per Monroe Doctrine principles, U.S. foreign policy has traditionally sought a remarkable level of control in Latin America and the strength of this tradition in motivating continued aggressive action towards Cuba far outweighs any factors that would inspire European coercion against Cuba’s leadership. And perhaps most important was the extent of U.S. economic involvement in pre-Revolutionary Cuba, discussed in Chapter 2, which resulted in a large-scale nationalization of private property controlled by American individuals and corporations. The loss of property was undoubtedly a key factor in American pressure for sanctions, and has remained one of several factors pushing for continuing the embargo. No other country was anywhere near as involved with Cuba economically or in terms of foreign policy strategy and philosophy. Therefore, besides human rights abuses, there has never been justification for the international community to participate in a sanctions program. Instead, trade between Cuba and the rest of the world has increased throughout the 55-year of the embargo.

**Continued Trade Between Cuba and Europe**

Despite the trade and tourist relationships that might naturally arise given the proximity of the U.S. and Cuba, by the mid-1960s it was clear that pre-1959 levels of cooperation would not be a reality at any time in the near future. The embargo was solidly written into Executive Orders and official Department of Commerce policy, and the stark political difference between the U.S. and Cuba suggested that negotiations to return to economic normalcy would be fruitless.
As Simon Calder wrote in 2014, Cuba looked to the rest of the world in an effort to “forget the United States.”

Essential to Cuba’s survival while locked out of the U.S. economy was the continuation of trade with other countries, even as the U.S. stopped buying Cuban sugar and other goods or exporting products of any kind to the island. As the U.S. first began imposing trade restrictions against Cuba, there was an initially dramatic decrease in the levels of trade between Cuba and European countries, but trans-Atlantic trade quickly returned, helping Cuba to mitigate the effects of the embargo (Schreiber 398). Amongst NATO countries, imports from Cuba dropped from $79 million in 1959 to $32 million in 1961, while exports to Cuba fell from $138 million to $86 million. But this decrease was likely more so a result of dysfunction in the new regime and continued instability after several years of war than intentional restriction on the part of European nations (Schreiber 398). The destroyed commercial infrastructure in Cuba as well as a completely new state-run economy took time to gain strength, and trade with non-U.S. countries quickly recovered. Unlike the U.S., European countries and others did not have the same level of economic investment on the island and were not collectively outraged by the nationalization of private property, nor were they as explicitly disturbed by the particular politics of the ruling regime. For most countries of the world, there was no fundamental reason not to trade with Cuba, and as the Castro regime started to remake the Cuban economy, other nations were perfectly comfortable engaging in mutually beneficial trade with Cuba.

Trade with some countries actually increased in the first few years of the Revolution. Spain was a prime example: trade between Cuba and their former colonizer jumped from $10 mil to $24 mil between 1962 and 1963. In 1965, the two countries signed a new five-year trade pact. Trade with Canada also increased just as the U.S. was starting to restrict its commercial activity.
with Cuba. In 1960, Canadian-Cuban trade was $13 million and by 1961 it had risen to $31 million (Schreiber 398). Spain and Canada maintain friendly relationships with Cuba to this day, and the island’s various resorts are filled with many Canadian and Spanish tourists. Each country capitalized on shifting commercial ties in the Caribbean and the opportunity created by U.S. withdrawal from Cuba.

While trade increased as a whole between non-U.S. countries and Cuba, especially important was the export of specific goods that made up for shortages caused by the embargo. Vehicles from England and France helped mitigate the impact of a spare-parts shortage, not to mention the fact that no more Fords and Chevrolets were being sent from Detroit to Havana. Tractors, electrical equipment and machine tools also came from Western Europe, allowing for some infrastructure development and progress in agriculture, an early area of focus for Fidel Castro. By the beginning of the 21st century, two-thirds of Cuba’s imports from developed countries came from the E.U. and European direct investment accounted for more than 50% of total foreign investment (Roy 5). Canada, Australia and New Zealand have also helped supply the Cuban economy with goods that could not be acquired elsewhere (Schreiber 399). Though the U.S. had been Cuba’s sole provider of essential goods before 1959, this combination of foreign countries from Canada to Europe to Australia proved capable of providing many of these products.

Tourism as a Component of International Commerce

Tourism is another key area in which Europe and Canada have contributed to Cuba’s national income despite U.S policy. As per the embargo, Americans are prohibited from traveling to and from Cuba unless given special permission according to set criteria, although the
restrictions on travel have been significantly relaxed in recent years. Despite the lack of American tourism, Cuba has become a favorite vacation spot for millions of Europeans and Canadians. Though Fidel was always wary of tourists arriving in Cuba, for fears of their presence infecting his Revolutionary state with undesirable values and behavior, in the midst of the severe economic hardship in the 1990s, he was faced with little choice but to open Cuba’s borders. The 1997 Cuban Economic Resolution highlighted the importance of developing sectors of the economy that could bring foreign currency into Cuba and rejuvenate key government programs, put into official language the reason for the tourism strategy that Castro has been utilizing for several years. The government set a goal: to bring more than two million visitors to the island by the year 2000 and earn more than $2.6 billion from tourism (Castillo). And Cuba quickly developed a booming tourism industry. In 1990, sugar exports made up between 70 and 75% of incoming payments to Cuba, with tourism only 6%. By 2000 tourism was at 43% (Castillo). The Cuban government invested $3.5 billion in the tourism industry throughout the 1990s, and visitors began to pour in. In 1995, there were 740,000 tourists in Cuba, already three times the 1950s levels. By 2000, 1.7 million visitors arrived, bringing in $2 billion in revenue, and in 2006 the country reached the goal of $2.6 billion in tourism revenue (Feinberg and Newfarmer 6). Since 2006, tourism held roughly steady until 2015 marked the beginning of another boom in tourism to Cuba.

Crucially, the influx of tourists and foreign capital that has spurred the growth of the industry in Cuba has been almost exclusively due to Europe and Canada. To manage resorts, the Cuban government formed public-private partnerships between state-owned tourism groups and European hotel chains like Spanish corporations Melia and Iberostar. By 2000, half of hotel capacity on the island was administered by 17 international hotel chains, none of them American.
(Castillo). In terms of the visitors themselves, Europe has made up a substantial portion but by far the largest group of visitors has been Canadians. At roughly 1.2 million tourists a year, Canada is responsible for almost 40% of Cuba’s annual visitors (Stancu). In 2015, that total was 36.9% of Cuba’s 3.5 million visitors, while Germany, the U.K., France, Italy and Spain made up 20.2%. The U.S. meanwhile, sent nearly double as many non-Cuban-Americans tourists to Cuba in 2015 as it did in 2014, but it still only accounted for 4.6% of Cuba’s visitors (Feinberg and Newfarmer 9). Even with the relaxation of travel restrictions between the U.S. and Cuba, the island’s fastest growing industry relies on primarily on European capital and Canadian visitors. The unimportance of the U.S. to the industry helps to explain why tourism has been immune to the embargo. In fact, Canada and European countries have allowed Cuban tourism to thrive despite a lack of American visitors. In the coming years, many expect the tourism boom to continue. The 3.5 million visitors in 2015 could become 10 million by 2030, in addition to 5 million cruise ship passengers set to arrive in Cuban ports and spend their money on dry land, making this tourist Cuba’s most promising industry for massive revenue returns (Feinberg and Newfarmer 1). This type of expected growth in the industry is another reason why we should not expect the embargo to be any more successful going forward.

The United States has always been well aware of the mitigating effects that other nations have had on its embargo, and have tried, in the absence of real diplomatic cooperation and agreement, to coerce other nations to stop commercial activity with Cuba using threats. In the mid to late 1960s, the U.S. threatened Spain with punishment for doing business with the Castro regime, but never followed through with any punitive measures. The 1996 Helms-Burton Act pledged to extend sanctions to foreign companies that did business in Cuba in order to punish them and harden restrictions on the Cuban economy. In the wake of Helms-Burton, the E.U.
harshly disputed U.S. intentions to punish foreign companies, and E.U. countries continued trading. After the U.S. had conceded to not go after European companies, Spanish Prime Minister Jose Maria Aznar challenged the U.S. to keep its promise, while stating that Spanish companies “are free to invest in Cuba.” At the same time, France announced a new trade agreement with Cuba, signaling a desire to maintain and strengthen economic relations well into the 21st century (Kamm and Vitzthurn). Once again, Europe held firm and continued their relationship with Cuba. European-Cuban trade has never fully replaced pre-Revolution commerce with the United States, but it has been substantial nonetheless, and has undoubtedly buoyed the Cuban economy. Most importantly, Europe has conspicuously refused to join with the Americans in sanctioning the Castro regime. Aside from economic benefits to Cuba, this show of public support has strengthened the regime at home by giving it legitimacy, and has further isolated the United States as an interventionist aggressor, as described in Chapter 2.

Now, the European Union stands as Cuba’s primary export partner and second most important trade partner, after Venezuela. It is also the biggest foreign investor in Cuba and European visitors make up a third of the tourists in Cuba (EEAS). In 2015, exports to Cuba totaled €2.2 billion, with €0.54 billion in goods imported from Cuba to Europe. The European Union and Cuba have normal diplomatic relations, and all 28 individual EU Member States maintain diplomatic relations as well.

While the U.S. has sought to starve the country of resources and force the political regime out of power, Europe has not adhered to American demands and instead has been a valuable outlet through which the Castros and Cuba can evade the effects of the embargo. But European trade was never enough to maintain a healthy standard of living in Cuba on its own. Western capitalist democracies certainly had some misgivings about trading with the Castro
regime, Fidel himself was distrustful of those same countries and refused to engage in traditional neoliberalism, and fully replacing the U.S. through an array of trading partners was impossible.

**Assistance to Cuba from the Soviet Union**

Cuba has survived thanks in large part to direct and generous sponsorship from allies with ideological interests in supporting the revolutionary Cuban state. As stated in the literature review, scholars agree that powerful international sponsors can eliminate the effects of sanctions and support a regime (Jentleson). And while sponsors mitigate the economic costs, the continued existence of sanctions causes the target regime to rely ever more heavily on the sponsor and makes negotiations even more difficult (Kryvoi). This dynamic is remarkably accurate in the case of Cuba and the Soviet Union: the American refusal to trade with Cuba drove the island nation into the arms of the Soviets, and Castro’s embrace of the Communist power in turn caused the U.S. to pull back even further. For thirty years, the USSR propped up the Cuban economy and the Castro regime with billions of dollars in crude oil and other goods that could be resold by the Cuban government, as well as providing cash, technical training and living essentials for the Cuban people. Meanwhile, Castro’s sheltering of Soviet missiles in Cuba and the existence of a significant Communist outpost in the Caribbean at the height of the Cold War further damaged the relationship between the U.S. and the Castro regime.

The first significant Soviet-Cuban trade deal was signed in 1960, even before President Eisenhower imposed the first commercial restrictions that eventually led to the embargo. In the trade pact, Cuba agreed to sell 425,000 tons of sugar to USSR in 1960 and 1 million tons each of following four years. 80% of the payment came from Soviet oil, 6 million barrels annually and other goods, while 20% came in cash. Cuba also received a $100 mil loan at 2.5% interest for the
purchase of Soviet machinery and material, as well as technical assistance (Schreiber 390). The scale of Soviet assistance for Cuba was massive, especially in the first few years of the embargo. From 1961 to 1967, Cuba compiled a $1.1 billion debt to the USSR and other debts to Eastern European states under the influence of the Soviets (Schreiber). Without the loosening of U.S. sanctions, the Soviet-Cuba relationship had to remain in place in order to keep the Cuban state afloat.

When the Soviet Union collapsed in the early 1990s, so too did the economic support Cuba had for so long relied on. In the matter of a few short years, the biggest driver of the Cuban economy disappeared and the island was forced to fend for itself. 80% of Cuba’s foreign trade disappeared with the loss of its Soviet ally, and GDP fell by over 20% (Dolan). Fidel Castro deemed this the “Special Period:” a time for where Cubans would be forced to come together and sustain each other against nearly insurmountable odds. Despite the nationalistic spin Castro put on those years, they were the hardest years that the Cuban people ever endured. Because of the disappearance of cheap Soviet oil, the transportation system, food distribution and mechanized agriculture effectively collapsed. Those who still had jobs were often unable to get to work, and with little else to eat, Cubans were forced to slaughter household pets or animals from the Havana zoo just to survive. The average daily food intake fell from 3,000 calories to between 1,400 to 2,400, and a result the average Cuban lost 12 pounds (Schiffman). To cope with the economic hardship, Fidel decided reverse the ban he had placed on the possession of U.S. dollars. He set up dollar stores in an effort to channel foreign currency that had previously been a black market product into government coffers and loosened restrictions on self-employment and tourism, as discussed earlier (Dolan 1). These changes started to gradually relieve the pressure
Cuba faced in the wake of the Soviet collapse, as well as the recently intensified embargo, yet the country remained mired in economic stagnation and extreme poverty throughout the 1990s. Cuba and the Castro regime benefited greatly when Hugo Chavez, a friend and admirer of Fidel, was elected President of Venezuela in 1998. Chavez considered Cuba a model for what Central and South American countries should become, and soon began constructing a bilateral economic relationship between the two countries that would mirror, though to a slightly lesser extent, the privileges afforded Cuba by the Soviet Union. At a time when Soviet support was long gone, and the Cuban economy was suffering terribly, Venezuela became another extremely favorable trading partner that could help Cuba survive and find economic footing from which to grow.

Cuban-Venezuelan Trade

The close relationship between Cuba and Venezuela has lasted 18 years, and is still in effect, though as Venezuela experiences severe economic and political turmoil, the trade benefits to Cuba have waned. The relationship includes bilateral trade and investment, military and security cooperation and shared international diplomacy efforts, though the core of the relationship is the exchange of “oil-for-services,” which has been made possible by rising oil prices and the financial benefits for Venezuela (Piccione and Trinkunas 3). As part of the deal, Venezuela “provides deeply subsidized oil supplies to Cuba in return for doctors, teachers, sports trainers and military advisors” (Piccone and Trinkunas 1). When Venezuelan oil is sold to Cuba, only 60% of it is paid for in the first 90 days, while the other 40% is paid for over 25 years, at an interest rate of only 1%. For a cash-strapped country like Cuba, this favorable credit agreement is extremely important and beneficial. Shipments of Venezuelan crude oil to Cuba totaled 38,000
barrels per day (bpd) in 2003, rose sharply to 97,000 bpd in 2008, and peaked at 104,000 bpd in 2012 (Piccione 3). Venezuelan crude imports were 61% of Cuban oil supply in 2011. This oil is refined in Cuban refineries for domestic gasoline or then resold internationally for a profit.

On the other end of the deal, Venezuela receives extensive service benefits. An estimated 40,000 Cuban professionals live and work in Venezuela, and 75% of those are health care workers. In return, Venezuela pays Cuba roughly $5.4 billion per year. Since 2003, Cuba has also provided medical care for many Venezuelans in Cuba, and continues to host thousands of Venezuelan university students, mostly for study in the island’s highly acclaimed medical schools (Piccione and Trinkunas 3). Additionally, Venezuela also exports chemicals, plastics and textiles to Cuba, and has imported construction materials and medicine (Piccione and Trinkunas 4).

In total, goods traded between the two countries made up roughly 44% of the total number goods traded by Cuba in 2012, and bilateral trade between the two countries amounted to 20.8% of Cuban GDP, while only 4% of Venezuela’s GDP (Piccione and Trinkunas 2-4). It is clear to even a casual observer that Cuba is more reliant on the trade deal, and therefore benefits quite a bit more from it than Venezuela, similar to the pro-Cuban deals of the Soviet trade pacts. This sort of preferential treatment was vital to the survival of the country and the regime in the Soviet-era, and has been since 2000 as well. During the Special Period, Cuba was “reeling from the collapse of Soviet-era subsidies and in desperate need of assistance to sustain its socialist system” (Piccone and Trinkunas 6). Hugo Chavez stepped in, and for his help he has been immortalized in Cuba by the Castro regime as the little island guardian angel, or “el mejor amigo,” the best friend of Cuba.
It is unusual for a struggling, developing nation to find one patron to shepherd it through difficult times, and yet Cuba has been aided by two such countries, a nod to Castro’s revolutionary allure and appeal to political leaders opposed to the United States. Nations trade, they form alliances, and they cooperate on various economic, security, and foreign policy initiatives. Often, wealthier nations give away some amount of their annual budget in foreign aid to assist underdeveloped countries. This sort of giving is charity, but it is always a miniscule portion of the budget and considered as a moral action necessary to marginally improve life in the recipient country. In the case of Cuba, however, two separate countries, distinctly different and yet both far bigger and wealthier than Cuba, made strategic decisions to support the island nation and Castro’s government to the extreme. In both cases, Cuba benefited greatly from the deal, while their trading partners got the markedly shorter end of the stick, financially speaking. In both cases, Castro and Cuba had something unique and inherently valuable that could be traded for economic aid that facilitated survival. At the root of Cuba’s appeal to both the Soviet Union and Venezuela was an anti-American and anti-capitalist position fostered by Fidel Castro and the Communist Party.

Cuba’s leftist rejection of the United States and Fidel Castro’s gravitational pull attracted both the USSR and Venezuela, though each country was attracted to slightly different attributes of Castro’s Cuba. The Cold War is an intensely complicated topic that will not be analyzed at length here, but it is important to look at the promise that Cuba held for the Soviet Union when Castro came to power in 1959. Tensions with the United States were high, and the Soviet’s saw obvious long-term strategic promise in controlling a satellite country just 90 miles from the American coast. Moreover, Castro’s fiery anti-U.S. rhetoric, his charisma and his enthusiasm for supporting leftist revolutionary movements throughout the world made him a perfect instrument
for the Soviets. Cuba was an investment, and thus the Soviet Union was willing to lose money every year in order to wield influence in the Western Hemisphere. Castro sold the strategic potential of his leadership and his country in exchange for enormous economic support that was crucial to helping Cuba survive in the face of the embargo. By the time Hugo Chavez arrived in Venezuela’s presidential office, he had long admired Castro’s ardent stance for Latin American independence and anti-colonialism. Though Cuba’s appeal for Venezuela was different than it was for the Soviet Union, Castro’s charisma and the revolutionary reputation he had built over the previous four decades inspired Chavez to support Cuba, and foster a close alliance that would help engender a fundamental, long-lasting leftward shift in Venezuelan politics. That leftist philosophy, “Chavismo,” outlived its namesake in Venezuela and is to this day embodied in the leadership of President Nicolas Maduro. Though the Maduro government is in serious turmoil, the legacy of the relationship between Cuba and Venezuela lives on.

Experts seem to agree that even as the Cuban economy suffers due to the instability in Venezuela, a complete collapse of the relationship wouldn’t harm Cuba in the way that the end of Soviet support did. Piccione and Trinkunas suggest that, despite the levels of support coming from South American valued at up to 20% of GDP yearly, losing Venezuelan support would only result in an overall economic contraction of 4 - 7.7% of GDP (10). While damaging, this sort of recession would come nowhere close to Special Period levels of economic stagnation. The Cuban economy is far more diversified now, including more trading partners, an increasingly robust private sector, increased access to foreign capital, and a burgeoning tourist industry. Just as Fidel opened up Cuba’s borders for tourism during the Special Period, Raul has further lifted restrictions as Venezuelan aid has wavered. Pavel Vidal Alejandro traces the extent to which Cuban has been reliant on an internal sponsor, the USSR or Venezuela, since 1980. In that year,
39.3% of GDP depended on the Soviet Union, a value that fell to 28.2% in 1989 and was at zero by 1994. As the Special Period came to a close, the number climbed slightly in 2000 as Venezuelan cooperation increased, was above 10% in 2005, and at 19.4% in 2010 (Alejandro 3). In other words, the peak levels of support from Venezuela have only been about half of the economic value Cuba expected to receive from its Soviet relationship. Nonetheless, at times providing 20% of total income in Cuba, Venezuela’s direct sponsorship of Castro’s Cuba through highly favorable trade deals has been a key element in Cuba’s economic and political survival.

Because the U.S. has kept a sanctions program in place for almost 60 years that has almost completely cut off commerce between itself and Cuba, the island has relied on outside sources to survive. The countries of the European Union have served as sanctions busters by maintaining relatively normal trade patterns with Cuba, and therefore allowing the island to avoid becoming completely walled off from the rest of the world. At the same time, Cuba has survived thanks to direct sponsorship from the Soviet Union and, more recently, Venezuela, which has buffeted the country’s economy and counteracted the economic isolation imposed by the United States, consequently allowing the Castro regime to survive. As Venezuela seemingly approaches political and economic collapse, the second phase of sponsorship agreements in Cuba appears over. In recent years, the Cuban government has been conscious of the strain caused by disappearing Venezuelan aid, imposing austerity and energy-saving measures across the island. Nonetheless, with the government setting ambitious, though realistic goals for the tourism industry and small-scale private enterprising thriving, Cuba appears ready to survive, if not flourish in the first post-sponsorship era since the Special Period. A more in-depth study of trade agreements that Cuba has or is negotiating with specific European countries would provide a
better outlook for how the Cuban economy will function in the absence of preferential sponsorship treatment. Most importantly, how the tourism industry grows and evolves will likely determine the extent of economic expansion and development that occurs in Cuba in the next few years. It is possible that hardline American leaders may seek to suffocate Cuba by tightening the embargo as foreign sponsorship money dries up, just as they did in the early 1990s. But given continued economic cooperation between Cuba and the international community as a whole, the embargo will likely have even less impact on Cuban politics than it did during the Special Period two decades ago.
Chapter 4: Targeted Sanctions - Insufficient and Inapplicable

The third hypothesis that could explain the failure of sanctions in Cuba suggests that the embargo has been ineffective primarily because it targets the Cuban population as a whole, rather than putting direct pressure on the individuals in power. Sanctions that specifically target regime leaders, as opposed to a more broadly based approach, could cause more acute inconvenience to those in power while avoiding the substantial negative effects on human rights. Scholars note that in many cases ruling elites are able to protect themselves from more wide-ranging policies by forcing the burden of sanctions onto their political opponents or marginalized groups. In other words, when decision makers in the target state do not feel the burden of sanctions directly, they will not voluntarily change their ways. This phenomenon could certainly be applicable to Cuba given that the Cuban people themselves have suffered far more than the ruling elite.

This chapter will argue that although targeted sanctions are more humane, they would not have accomplished regime change in Cuba if they were adopted in place of the comprehensive embargo. Targeted sanctions would not have helped force regime change for two key reasons: First, they are only successful when their objectives are modest, whereas the U.S. has aimed to completely overthrow the Castro regime. Second, even in the absence of targeted sanctions, Cuban political leaders have not enjoyed extravagant wealth, and certainly have not invested it abroad, a key point given that targeted sanctions usually consist of individual travel bans and the seizure of foreign assets. The modest lifestyle of Cuban leaders is crucial to their carefully constructed image as Revolutionary heroes who promote egalitarian independence from the global capitalism embodied by the United States.
Despite the argument that targeted sanctions would not help to accomplish regime change, this chapter’s discussion touches on several points important to the Cuban situation, namely how the effects of sanctions are often felt most severely by the underclasses in society, and the inherent limits of broad economic sanctions without accompanying pressures, such as the threat of military intervention.

The Theory of Targeted Sanctions: More Humane and Potentially Effective

Sanctions are imposed in pursuit of political aims, but almost always have unintended consequences that can be extremely harmful to civilians. There seems to be some consensus among experts that sanctions have disproportionate consequences for the poor and vulnerable populations of the target state (Pape; Hendrickson). Because of this, the negative effects of sanctions are significantly more drastic than those of other policies. Echoing Pape’s stance, David Hendrickson states that sanctions rarely work as they are intended and, in any case, generally affect the most vulnerable members of a population. Individuals with socioeconomic privilege are generally more capable of adapting to economic change, using their education, social connections or wealth to construct a new way of life. Meanwhile, poor or middle class workers see government aid and other forms of income dry up, and are at a far greater risk of being left without options if their main source of employment is affected. John Bierman notes this disproportionate effect in the case of South Africa, showing that while sanctions were imposed in order to improve the standing of black South Africans, that demographic was instead affected the most. Bierman estimates that in the 1980s, each black worker in South Africa supported between four and eight individuals, therefore any loss of jobs could be devastating to many more in the black community. Charles Becker wrote in 1988: “it does not appear possible
to design a set of stringent sanctions directed against white South Africa that need not devastate black South Africans…” (Becker 83). In Haiti, the embargo imposed in 1991 by the Organization of American States embargo on Haitian exports was linked with a loss of 29,780 jobs in the manufacturing industries, and with an average of six dependents per worker, roughly 250,000 people lost their primary source of income. Over the three years of the embargo, 200,000 jobs were lost in total, and over a million people were seriously affected (Gibbons 1499). The sanctions aimed to punish Haiti’s military government, and yet the same Haitian civilians forced to live under that government lost their jobs as result of the policy.

In Cuba, the vast majority of citizens work for the government, which pays on average about $25 per month. Only in recent years, as the Cuban economy has changed significantly, have people been able to increase their earnings (Whitefield). As the embargo hampers foreign investment, housing and infrastructure have fallen into disrepair and average citizens have no extra money for home renovations while the government continually postpones other repairs. Though there is certainly some level of socioeconomic stratification in Cuban society, no Cubans are rich by American standards and all experience poverty caused by the embargo. Every Cuban is also far more reliant on the state than are citizens in most other countries. Therefore, economic regulations that stunt the growth of the state-run economy directly affect the civilian population. The success or failure of sanctions may be determined by their effects on specific areas of the target country relative to others. Olson refers to the varied impact of sanctions on crucial sectors as the “relative deprivation” resulting from the policy. This argument holds that adverse economic effects are not experienced equally, and therefore the political effects from economic sanctions depend on which groups in society are affected the most and how much power those groups have. If the sanctions only affect the poor and powerless, there will be only indirect
pressure on government leaders, if there is any pressure at all. Accordingly, Allen and Kryvoi call for targeting the foreign assets of leaders, arguing this method is far more successful than broader economic sanctions, and avoids harming the general populace. The theory follows that “a sanction threatening to impose substantial costs on members of pro-regime groups, and perhaps threatening to escalate those costs in the future if the objectionable policies are not altered, might cause members of pro-regime groups to become discouraged in their support for the policies in question.” (Lowenberg and Kaempfer 172). Lowenberg and Kaempfer focus on the “public choice approach” to sanctions, in which “economic sanctions and other international policies are presumed to affect political processes in the target country by changing the relative political influences of interest groups in that country (Lowenberg and Kaempfer 165). This strategy clearly fits into the category of targeted sanctions, in which the sanctioning country chooses specific forces within the targeted society, generally political leaders and those within the ruling inner circle, whose directly diminished power might bring about broader change. Because broader economic sanctions disrupt the global free trade economy and have a deleterious effect on the living conditions of civilians, more targeted sanctions might appear to be a more appealing alternative. “As support for broader sanctions wanes, alternative measures targeted on the political elite offer a way to continue pressure while reducing the impact on the general population” (Hufbauer and Oegg). In situations where the country or body looking to impose sanctions can identify certain individuals who are intimately connected to undesirable actions within the target state, or there are specific measures that can curtail those actions, then the target sanctions are often the preferred policy tool. Although a comprehensive embargo might address the same concerns it would be too heavy-handed and cause unnecessary pain for citizens and extensive diplomatic and administrative trouble for the sanctioning country. When
the United States government responds to government crackdowns in places like Venezuela or military aggression in Russia, the sanctions that are introduced often target individuals, such as diplomats, business leaders close to the regime, and security or intelligence forces.

The types of targeted sanctions employed generally fall into three categories: arms embargoes, travel bans and asset freezes (Hufbauer and Oegg). Travel and aviation bans can themselves vary, either restricting all travel to and from the target country, or merely restricting travel of individuals associated with the ruling regime (Hufbauer and Oegg). One example of a travel ban was the European Union blacklist of Serbian President Milosevic’s supporters in the late 1990s. The 600 people included on this list were prohibited from traveling in Europe and their assets in European banks were frozen. Some analysts suggest this type of action had more of an impact on the ruling elite because their foreign businesses were severely affected (Hufbauer and Oegg). In light of the blacklist, the Wall Street Journal reported that Serbian business magnates with regime ties were weighing the relative benefits of regime loyalty against avoiding the devastating limits placed on their business and financial interests (Block and King).

Other examples include targeted financial sanctions, such as asset freezes for individuals and state-owned companies. Wealthy politicians invest their money in a foreign stock exchange or property in another country, while state-run conglomerates control subsidiary companies all over the world. These resources are subject to seizure by host nations wishing to exert pressure by retaining control over them until desired political changes are made.

An example of a moderately successful sanctions regime was the arms embargo imposed by the United Nations against Liberia from 1992 to 2016. At its inception, the embargo banned sales of all weapons to Liberia, with later changes gradually allowing arms sales to the Liberian government with varying levels of reporting requirements (“U.N. arms embargo on Liberia.”).
Upon lifting the ban completely in 2016, the UN credited the embargo with playing a key role in stabilizing the country after a catastrophic 14-year civil war (Reuters). The Liberian civil war was defined by the involvement of child soldiers who were handed weapons and sent into battle. By reducing the ease with which warring factions could obtain weaponry, the sanctions directly reduced the number of soldiers that each side could recruit and outfit. Though the extent of the arms embargo’s effects is difficult to quantify, this example shows us a sensible sanctions regime, whereby the international community sought to quell violence by limiting the amount of weapons shipped into the country. And a safer, more stable Liberia today attests to the relative success of the sanctions.

Around the time of the Cuban Revolution, the U.S. also imposed sanctions on another Caribbean nation in the hopes of forcing regime change. Although technically a U.S. ally, General Rafael Trujillo’s dictatorship in the Dominican Republic became untenable in 1960 after his government was involved in the attempted assassination of Ecuador’s President Rómulo Betancourt (Brown 74). Although the motivations of the Organization of American States differed from those of the United States, both sides wanted to oust Trujillo. The O.A.S. and U.S. introduced a variety of sanctions, and although the assassination of Trujillo in 1961 signaled an end to his regime, the sanctioning coalition exerted important pressure on the government. The simple action of imposing sanctions stressed the urgency and importance of corralling Trujillo’s reckless leadership and the decision to sanction the Trujillo regime would have likely been the beginning of the end of the dictatorship were he not assassinated. Hufbauer, Schott, and Elliot therefore give U.S sanctions against the Dominican Republic their highest possible score, 16, for the correlation between the imposition of sanctions and the achievement of their policy goals (Hufbauer and Oegg). As opposed to Cuba, the sanctions imposed in the Dominican Republic
were more specifically targeted. The U.S. identified certain commodities and products such as oil, trucks and spare parts, the restricted supply of which would especially damage Trujillo’s standing (“Embargoes and Sanctions”). Instead of erecting an impenetrable trade barrier to completely isolate Trujillo’s Dominican Republic, the U.S. and O.A.S. took a more piecemeal approach that carried lower risk of widespread civilian suffering. Given the geographic and economic similarities between the Dominican Republic and Cuba, it would be logical to think a similar approach might work in Cuba, and perhaps should have been established decades ago.

Comprehensive sanctions in Cuba have undoubtedly hurt the country’s economy, and by extension they have negatively affected the standard of living for the Cuban people, as similar measures did in Haiti and South Africa. The relative success of targeted sanctions in Liberia and the Dominican Republic, which avoided the same widespread effects on civilians, provide initial support for the theory that targeted sanctions might work in place of embargo on Cuba. But a variety of factors, some inherent to targeted sanctions themselves and others fundamental to Cuban Revolutionary politics, ensure that targeted sanctions would not be an effective substitute.

**Failure of Targeted Sanctions**

Targeted sanctions are preferable from a human rights standpoint, but strategically they would not have achieved more success than a comprehensive embargo because of their limited ability to accomplish ambitious foreign policy goals and the uniquely insular governing elite in Cuba. Past examples suggest that targeted sanctions are of little use, unless combined with other significant measures or solely in the aim of modest goals. The goal of sanctions in Cuba has been complete regime change, hardly the type of modest goal achievable through targeted sanctions.
Cuba, given its self-prescribed separation from world affairs and lack of wealthy, influential industrialists is an especially unsuitable target for such sanctions.

Though targeted sanctions are favored by some academics and are appealing in theory, they have several significant drawbacks, including a poor track record and a limited ability to affect drastic change. Even in some examples where targeted sanctions have been credited with success, the imposition of those sanctions is merely a precursor to more extensive action. In the 1980s, the U.S. had sanctions in place against Panama in an effort to remove military dictator Manuel Noriega from power. In 1989, the Bush Administration expanded the list of companies and individuals close to General Noriega who were prohibited from receiving payments from Americans (NY Times). But amidst uncertainty as to the potential success of those sanctions, the U.S. invaded the country and deposed Noriega militarily later that same year. The administration concluded that the sanctions were insufficient on their own, instead requiring complementary measures, or in this case drastic action that made the sanctions themselves obsolete.

One of the more prominent examples of targeted sanctions currently in place is U.S. sanctioning of Russia. After Russia invaded Ukraine’s Crimean Peninsula in 2014, the United States immediately condemned Kremlin aggression and called on other foreign powers, such as the European Union, to join them in sanctioning Russia. The subsequent sanctions imposed by the U.S. have served as punishment for the Crimean invasion, and are intended to dissuade future Russian aggression as well as to force Russia to voluntarily withdraw from the territory. The sanctions have included freezing personal assets of individuals in Russian President Vladimir Putin’s “inner circle, including presidential aides, key figures in Russia legislature, and businessperson with close ties to the Kremlin” (Nelson). Additionally, the U.S. has frozen the assets of certain Russian companies with especially close ties to the government, and restricted
financial transactions with companies such as Rosneft, a powerful state-owned oil company. Russia’s economy has struggled in recent years, and some have argued that sanctions have contributed to the situation. However, from a political standpoint, these sanctions have had little effect. Russia maintains control of Crimea, and is increasingly threatening toward Ukraine and Eastern Europe. Indeed, rather than employing a less aggressive foreign policy in response to the latest rounds of sanctions, Putin has employed a broad strategy of directly undermining democracies in Western Europe and, infamously, surreptitiously disseminating significant amounts of information and fake news reports to damage Hillary Clinton’s candidacy for the Presidency of the United States in 2016 (Dorell, Scott). The Russian government has brushed off the effects of U.S. sanctions and continued unabated with their aggressive foreign policy initiatives, showcasing the clear shortcomings of targeted coercive policy.

Where targeted sanctions have proven successful, their objectives have been basic and within reason. As stated above, the 20% success rate of targeted sanctions is below the 34% rate for sanctions in general, and in the 20th century cases where they accomplished their aims, the goals of the sanctions were quite modest (Hufbauer and Oegg). For example, the sanctions imposed on Libya in 1992, an arms embargo, a public asset freeze and a public travel ban, were aimed at the extradition of suspects in the Pan-Am Flight 103 bombing. While the sanctions were substantial, their aim was relatively simple and highly attainable, and ultimately the sanctions played a role in Libya eventually releasing the two suspects for trial in the Netherlands. This example supports the statement by Hufbauer and Oegg that “as a general proposition, targeted measures might have the most success when modest goals are sought.” While it may be obvious that modest goals are easier to reach, this statement does reflect the important consideration that the ability of targeted sanctions is perhaps limited. In only one historical case were targeted
sanctions linked with achieving the most difficult foreign policy: regime change. In this case, the above-mentioned Dominican Republic, the sanctions were correlated with regime change but only on account of Trujillo’s assassination. There is no historical example of targeted sanctions succeeding as the primary force in deposing a political regime. Nor should we expect to find such an example. Power is politicians’ primary desire and attacks on personal finances or individual travel bans would not, on their own, be enough to prompt a dictator to abdicate. Targeted sanctions in pursuit of regime change rely on political leaders surrendering power in order to protect their individual interests. But the intrinsic, emotional and financial value of maintaining control outweighs concerns over the effect of these sanctions.

In Cuba, the United States’ goal has always been regime change, and individually targeted sanctions are incapable of bringing about such radical change on their own. As a substitute for broader sanctions that have already failed to achieve that goal, targeted policies would do no better. And even if we imagine that sanctions are only intended to cause modest, albeit significant changes in human rights policy on the island, targeted sanctions would still likely be unsuccessful due to a lack of potential leverage over Cuban leaders.

Travel bans and asset seizures on individuals are essentially pointless measures in Cuba, even if imposed multilaterally, as the island’s political power structure gives little opening to targeted coercive policies. After the Revolution, effectively all industry and commerce were nationalized in Cuba. Therefore there is no wealthy class of industrialists close to the regime who maintain investments and business affairs in foreign countries, as there is in places like Russia. Individuals close to the Castro’s tend to be either original revolutionaries or Communist Party loyalists who grew up within the Party. They are politicians and military leaders, but not established businesspeople. Now private enterprise is returning to Cuba in the form of small
restaurants and bed-and-breakfast inns, but the entrepreneurs who run these fledgling businesses are distinctly separate from state-run industry and although they often do rely on foreign money, no set of individuals have significant clout with political leaders. To this day, the Communist Party is led by many of the same individuals that joined Fidel Castro in the revolutionary fight in the 1950s, when they were students, lawyers, and farmers, but certainly not wealthy capitalists. The businesspeople of Cuba overwhelmingly supported the capitalist status quo under Bautista, and most took whatever wealth they have left and fled to Miami or elsewhere in the years after 1959. In fact, essential to Castro rise to power was the principle of egalitarianism. Fidel’s sway over the people was predicated on his existence as a common man, albeit one with extraordinary charisma. Foreign investments would have directly undermined his reputation, and that of all Communist Party officials. Unlike some developing countries, where dictators hoard natural resources and embezzle the funds from accrued through government transactions in order to build massive personal fortunes, Cuban leaders have never sought this type of lifestyle. Embezzled money tends to find a home in offshore locations or in real estate investments around the world. Dictators’ investments are subject to targeted sanctions, and such sanctions can extract a substantial toll on the wealth and state of mind of the targeted leaders. Although some level of corruption certainly exists in Cuba, the Communist Party leaders have shown little desire to enrich themselves, perhaps realizing how important maintaining a ‘common’ reputation is to their political image. Without significant foreign financial holdings, these leaders are not at all vulnerable to asset seizures and travel bans.

A third point that suggests the potential impotence of targeted sanctions against Cuba is that targeted sanctions rely on international cooperation and it is unlikely other countries would join in given their opposition to the embargo. Seizing a sizable amount of foreign assets requires
cooperation between many countries because it is unlikely that wealthy elites would invest or stash all their money in one location. Banning travel to one specific country has a negligible effect because targeted individuals would still enjoy extensive freedom of movement throughout the world. Targeted measures thus rely on a broad coalition of enforcement in order to have their desired effect. There is an argument to be made that more humane sanctions would have a better chance of garnering international support, but besides the U.S., the majority of other world powers have been opposed to the embargo since its inception. As shown in Chapter 3, despite misgivings about the Castro regime’s human rights record, no other countries have shown strong inclinations to force regime change in Cuba.

Nonetheless, it is important to note that targeted sanctions may still be preferable to current policy. Once again, it is worth restating that the embargo has not achieved its goal, nor has it shown any sign of success. It might be time for the United States government to tacitly accept that the Cuban Communist Party will continue to be in power, and replace the embargo with a package of sanctions that target the ruling elite in any way possible, while protecting human rights, and pleasing international observers and domestic business interests alike. A change in policy to targeted sanctions could not fare worse in terms of regime change and, as has been shown, would have a markedly improved effect on average citizens. Relieving the burden on common people would improve opinions of the U.S. around the world, and especially in Latin America. Meanwhile, keeping targeted sanctions in place would at least send the message to conservative Cuban-American and other anti-Castro hardliners that the U.S. has not forgiven the Castro regime nor abandoned its efforts to promote regime change in Cuba. Lowenberg and Kaempfer state that a “public choice approach to economic sanctions suggests that the type of sanctions selected by the sanctioning countries will reflect competitive interest-group pressures
in those countries and will not necessarily be designed so as to maximize economic damage in the target country” (118). The special-interest class of sanctions often means refusing to import from the target country without restricting exports to that country, so that the consumer base for domestic producers is not diminished. This sort of policy may seem hypocritical in that it betrays any commitment to a stated goal, in favor of economic gain, yet by definition it inflicts less pain on citizens of the target nation while serving business interests domestically. Keeping industry happy increases the likelihood of public support for targeted, rather than comprehensive, sanctions. Already, the embargo has been weakened in certain areas, such as agriculture, due to pressure from industry and the public choice analysis suggests that business interests will advocate for the continuity of Obama-era softening. Importantly, it is an example of a type of sanctions project that could please some of those who demand sanctions, still providing value as a political statement while lessening the brutal effect of the embargo on civilian life. But ultimately, though they may be preferable, targeted sanctions have proven insufficient in forcing dramatic political shifts, even with objectives that fall far short of regime change. And they would especially fail in Cuba, where political leaders do not hold the type of financial assets that could be directly targeted by sanctions.
Chapter 5: Why They Have Failed, Why They Have Remained, and What the Future May Hold

The previous three chapters have shown that there is strong support for two of the three hypotheses tested to help explain the failure of the United States’ embargo against Cuba. A healthy commercial relationship with Europe and Canada has offset the economic effects of the embargo, and allowed Cuba and the Castro regime to survive. Generous sponsorship agreements with the Soviet Union and Venezuela have provided essential support to the Revolutionary government. In addition, the Castro brothers and the Cuban Communist Party have perpetuated a nationalist, anti-U.S. narrative that many Cubans find appealing, and thus all U.S. efforts to support regime change in Cuba are seen through a lens of historic U.S. infringement on Cuban affairs. These factors have each played a large role in causing the failure of the embargo, which sought to depose the Castros as punishment for the seizure of American property during the Revolution and the human rights violations in the years since.

Although many still argue that it should be kept in place, the embargo has failed definitively. Fidel Castro passed off control to his brother Raul, who still rules the country, and although economic changes have been made in recent years, the country is not demonstrably closer to democracy now than at any other point since the Revolution. Outside of the United States there is little political support for the embargo, and even within the U.S. the policy has always had its critics. A 2016 poll found that 62% of Americans favored reopening diplomatic relations with Cuba, and a majority was in favor of lifting the embargo, even though only 40% believed that increased cooperation would improve democracy (Sussman). Leftist scholars and activists favor ending the embargo because they deem it to be an overblown response to
socialism, with cruel effects on the Cuban people. On the right, there are a host of critics as well. Conservative scholars also bemoan the effects of the embargo on living conditions in Cuba, and criticize the embargo as a pointless restriction to free trade. In 2005, Daniel Griswold at the Cato Institute argued that the embargo has been an utter failure.

If the goal of U.S. policy toward Cuba is to help its people achieve freedom and a better life, the economic embargo has completely failed. Its economic effect is to make the people of Cuba worse off by depriving them of lower-cost food and other goods that could be bought from the United States. It means less independence for Cuban workers and entrepreneurs, who could be earning dollars from American tourists and fueling private-sector growth. Meanwhile, Castro and his ruling elite enjoy a comfortable, insulated lifestyle by extracting any meager surplus produced by their captive subjects (Griswold).

Despite the poor living conditions and lack of opportunity, the Cuban people have not mobilized and risen up against leadership that many of them feel supports them and has their best interests in mind. Yet, the embargo has remained in place for roughly 55 years, and despite loosening of restrictions under the Obama administration, Congress does not appear to be close to reversing the provisions of the Helms-Burton Act and lifting the embargo.

In the introductory chapter, I posed the question, why do countries stick to broken policies? The theoretical literature has given us three potential explanations: economic sanctions are most valuable for signaling value, the cost of repealing sanctions outweighs the cost of keeping them in place and domestic political pressure and public opinion causes governments to
maintain failing policies. I will now analyze each of these options in the context of the U.S. and its embargo against Cuba to determine which factors have been most important in causing the U.S. government to maintain its failing strategy to force regime change.

Signaling value is a persuasive reason to use foreign policy instruments, as certain policies can show a commitment to a goal deemed important by the country and the international community. If a country attempts to hold itself and others to a high moral standard, it must act in some way when other nations and political regimes commit gross violations of human rights or act in some other undesirable fashion. Most of the international community upholds democracy to be the standard governing form, therefore it is imperative for countries such as the United States to admonish or punish governments that subvert democracy. Even if there is no expectation that sanctions will force the guilty regime to return to representative democracy, sanctions might have value insofar as reiterating the U.S. commitment to democracy and its unwillingness to overlook violations of democratic norms. When the embargo was imposed, one nearly universal objective within Europe and the United States was to stop the spread of Communism and attempt to defeat the ideology once and for all. Removing Castro was viewed during the Cold War as important to stopping the growth of Communism in the Western Hemisphere. Even without regime change, taking a stand against Communism would have been seen as valuable during the 1960s. Although anti-Communist fervor has subsided since the fall of the Soviet Union, pressuring a dictatorship to move toward democracy, as the U.S. has been doing in Cuba is the type of cause that might still warrant sanctions purely for their signaling value. There is a strong argument to be made that their signaling value could justify maintaining sanctions against Cuba. However, signaling value is only important insofar as the actions taken engender support from allies and the international community as a whole. But the principle of
sanctioning Cuba clearly holds little value in the eyes of the international onlookers, as discussed in Chapter 3. Furthermore, at the end of worldwide Communist hysteria, that anti-Soviet justification got much weaker, especially when taking into account the many undemocratic regimes the U.S. continues to do business with. If the U.S. can conduct commercial affairs with a repressive, undemocratic state such as Saudi Arabia, adhering to a strict embargo solely for the purpose of promoting and defending democracy seems worthless.

The risk of giving the targeted regime a hand-delivered victory is another reasonable concern when considering removing sanctions. If sanctions are removed, absent signs of progress that can be attributed to the policy, it shows in the clearest of terms that the targeted regime outlasted and defeated the sanctions. This type of victory, inevitably trumpeted in state press, directly strengthens the regime. It also has the potential to anger those at home and around the world that support the sanctions.

In terms of Cuba, the potential for handing the regime a victory is applicable but strategically insignificant because, as shown in Chapter 2, the embargo has likely been a net political victory for the Castro regime. The Cuban government certainly does not hesitate to congratulate itself at every opportunity, but it has already done so in the context of standing up against the embargo and likely would take a more appreciative stance if Congress did lift the policy. Of course, removing the embargo would lead to more propaganda and potentially political momentum, but it could not possibly increase the near-absolute power enjoyed by the Cuban Communist Party, power that has been accrued with the help of the embargo. Lifting the embargo would be a widely celebrated move across the world, therefore doing so cannot be supposed to cause consternation and anger amongst our allies. Besides the U.S and its “no vote,” the United Nations have voted unanimously, albeit symbolically, to remove the
embargo. In terms of international goodwill, ending the embargo would be extremely valuable, though countries that have benefited from lack of competition in Cuba may be less enthusiastic about the full-scale entrance of the U.S. into the Cuban economy. Domestically, the reaction to lifting the embargo could be considerably negative. First, it is generally unpopular amongst a population when its government appears weak or is forced to admit failure. But in the context of domestic support for the embargo, this concern is rendered inconsequential relative to the virulent anti-Castro sentiment and the support for the embargo historically prevalent within the Cuban-American community. This topic takes us to our third explanation for maintaining broken policies.

Literature has suggested that domestic political pressure and public opinion can cause governments to keep failing policies in place, even when strategically it is the wrong course of action (Beal and Hinckley, Yankelovich). Considerations such as signaling value and granting targeted regimes new strength through surrender are not necessarily at the forefront of public consciousness. But domestic groups, some large and some small can place significant importance in an issue based off of purely emotional reasoning. In the U.S.-Cuba case, Cuban-Americans, many of whom lost property, were separated from family members and were forced to leave their homeland, have historically held extremely strong views about the Castros and sanctions against the regime.

As of 2013, there were 2 million people of Cuban origin living in the United States, a substantial increase over the 822,000 in 1980. 57% of those individuals were born in Cuba (Lopez). The Cuban-American population is not overwhelmingly large, but it is concentrated in South Florida. With Florida as the most important presidential election swing state in the country, politicians on both sides of the aisle have pandered to a key constituency of voters who
care more deeply about one issue than they do all the rest. Even as public opinion has favored lifting the embargo, staunch opposition from Cuban-American political leaders remain the biggest roadblock to policy change. “Support for the embargo certainly does not come from the general American public, but from a group of Cuban-American activists concentrated in southern Florida. By a fluke of the electoral college, Republican presidents feel obligated to please this small special interest at the expense of our broader national interest” (Griswold).

A key historical anecdote helps to describe the traditional Cuban-American stance, the passion surrounding the issue and some of the reasoning behind political pandering to South Florida hardliners. In 1999, a five-year-old boy named Elian Gonzalez set off from Cuba with his mother and small group of other Cubans seeking refuge in the United States, tragically, their boat sank and Elian’s mother was killed. Elian himself was rescued and brought to relatives living in Miami. But his father, living in Cuba, demanded the boy’s return and set off a bitter legal battle in U.S. courts between the father in Cuba and the extended family in Miami. In Cuba, Fidel Castro called for the U.S. to return the boy, and ultimately President Clinton’s Attorney General did order to send the boy back. Many Cuban-Americans had sided passionately with Elian’s extended family in the U.S., and were enraged by the government’s decision. Carlos Saladriga, an influential Cuban-American noted that, in response, the Cuban-Americans “got their revenge on the Democratic Party by voting for Bush over Gore in 2000” (Anderson). Al Gore received just 25% of the Cuban-American vote that year at a time when Cuban-Americans felt betrayed by Democratic leadership. Gore lost Florida by 537 votes, and as a result lost the election (US Election Atlas). In summarizing the anti-Castro sentiment in South Florida, Alfredo Mesa, a Cuban-American and a vice-president of the Miami Marlins, said “To the rest of the world, it is a battle between Cuba and the United States. For Cuban-Americans, this is an issue between
Cubans” (Anderson). The emotional power of the Cuba debate in South Florida, at least historically, cannot be overstated. The inter-Cuban conflict that Mesa describes quite possibly swung one of the most influential elections in history. Though this may be the most extreme example, it underscores the importance that Cuban-American voters have had in American democracy and the political risks of appearing less than tough on Cuba.

Times are changing, but Castro hardliners still count themselves among the most influential individuals in the U.S. In the 2016 election cycle, Cuban-American senators Marco Rubio and Ted Cruz both ran prominent campaigns for President. After falling to defeat, both have returned to the Senate, where they have been constant critics of renewed diplomatic ties with Cuba and have pledged to block any and all efforts to lift the embargo. When President Obama announced the reopening of bilateral relations, Rubio said: “I am committed to doing everything I can to unravel as many of these changes as possible… This congress is not going to lift the embargo” (Lightman). Though the majority of American citizens support fully lifting the embargo and, with the advocacy of Republican politicians like Senator Jeff Flake, perhaps so will Congress as well, the embargo remains the law of the land for the at least the immediate future.

However, few doubt that the embargo will, eventually, come to an end. Despite still strong political opposition, resuming normal trade between the U.S, and its closest Caribbean neighbor is a priority favored by political leaders on both sides of the aisle, as well as many business leaders and advocates on Capitol Hill. The Cuban-American population that has held up policy change has experienced substantial demographic shifts, and along with them a change in political preferences. Even some of the most ardent supporters of the embargo are rethinking their strategy. Carlos Saladrigas, the South Florida millionaire who has spent most of his adult
life lobbying on U.S. policy towards Cuba, told the New Yorker in an interview that he and his allies in the anti-Castro movement in Florida started reconsidering their efforts around the time that Fidel handed power over to his brother in 2008. Saladrigas says: “so we looked at our policy” – enforcement of the embargo – “and saw that it hasn’t accomplished anything. Our previous policy was based on squeezing people on the island, forcing an uprising. This, we decided, was unethical” (Anderson). This longtime anti-Castro hardliner’s realization touches on two important points; the suffering of the Cuban people under the embargo and the simple fact that the policy has not worked. Saladrigas represents many Cuban-Americans and others who have come to see the embargo for what it is, a failed policy that has been held in place for too long. Opinions on Cuba are changing and, though there is considerable uncertainty surrounding the Trump Administration, the Obama-era policy shifts were unprecedented steps toward normal relations. In all likelihood, the increasing footprint of American business interests in Cuba and obvious potential for economic development on the island will be too much for U.S. political leaders to ignore. Lifting the embargo has always been the best course of action for the business community, and now with growing support amongst Cuban-Americans that change may be on the horizon.

However, it will be extremely important in the years ahead to understand and appreciate how and why the embargo failed, as future policy must reflect the lessons of the past. In this and other cases, the U.S. must never expect to achieve the desired change through a unilateral sanctions regime. Trade between Cuba and a host of countries from Europe to Asia and the Pacific have helped the island nation retain some level of commercial normalcy throughout the life of the embargo. As Venezuela falters, Cuba may never again have the type of preferential
trade agreements that sustained it for decades, but it will always have trading partners so long as the international community condemns sanctions, as it does the embargo.

Most importantly, American policy considerations towards Cuba must be cognizant of the long history of U.S. aggression in Latin America and especially on the island itself. This history is much better known in Cuba than here in the United States, and U.S. colonial and neo-colonial behavior continues to strike a chord with many Cubans. Fidel embodied the Cuban spirit by finally bringing, what Yasmani Lopez calls “true revolution” to the country. The people love their homeland, they are proud of their independence, and many have shown a willingness to suffer in pursuit of the values they hold dear. Arletty Torreguitart says: “It is preferable to eat a little less but when you need a doctor you will have it, and you don’t need to preoccupy yourself with how you are going to pay for your child’s college because education is free…” This principled struggle mimics the example set by Fidel, Raul and the other heroes of the Revolution. When asked directly why the embargo has not inspired armed revolt against the government, Lopez alludes to the feeling of kinship that many Cubans have for government officials, who are an extension of those Revolutionary leaders: “Because the people know that although there are economic problems, the government does everything it can to fix them…[fighting the government] is not an option for us, because who are we going to fight when the Armed Forces are Cubans just like us, with the same problems that we all have, and families that share the same communities.”

Many Cuban citizens know little of free speech or freedom of the press, and as Cuba becomes less isolated from the world there is sure to be discontent within the population regarding the limits placed by the government on their liberty. But the U.S. will fail if it attempts to impose democratic values or political orthodoxy directly. Democracy will come to Cuba
eventually, but only when the Cuban people find it. American initiatives arrive in Cuba with a label that says “Caution” in bold letters, and the Cuban government has proven itself adept at convincing its citizens that those initiatives do indeed pose a threat. With this in mind, future policy towards Cuba must never grant its political leaders any more reason than they already have to label the United States the enemy of the Cuban people.
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