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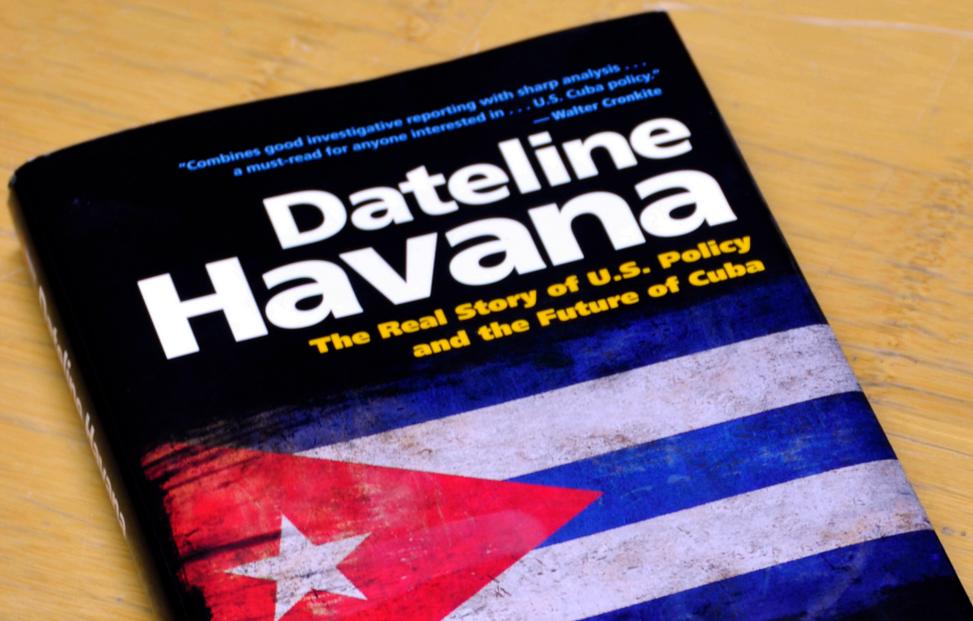
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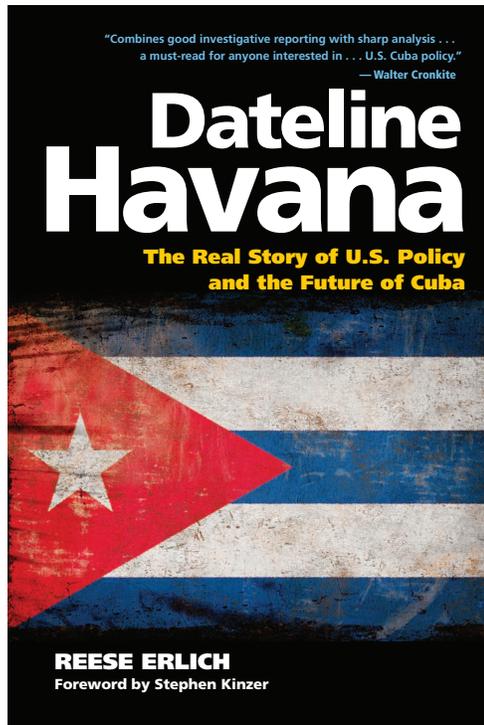
**DISSIDENTS,
DEMOCRACY AND
THE INTERNET**

An excerpt from

DATELINE HAVANA

The Real Story of US Policy and the Future of Cuba
by **REESE ERLICH**





THE AUTHOR

Best-selling author **Reese Erlich** has previously written *Target Iraq: What the News Media Didn't Tell You* (coauthored with Norman Solomon) and *The Iran Agenda: The Real Story of U.S. Policy and the Middle East Crisis*. Erlich is a freelance foreign correspondent who has won numerous journalism awards from a variety of organizations, including Project Censored and the Society of Professional Journalists. He won a Peabody Award (shared with others) in 2006

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DISSIDENTS, DEMOCRACY AND THE INTERNET

REESE ERLICH

An excerpt from his book

DATELINE HAVANA:

The Real Story of US Policy and the Future of Cuba

On a bright and Sunny afternoon, I visited one of Cuba's most well-known dissidents. Martha Beatriz Roque, 62, lived in a modest apartment building in Havana. The pastel colors and black railings reminded me of 1950s Miami. I walked down a narrow outside corridor with a concrete wall on the right and apartment entrances on the left. Hostile neighbors had hung a big poster of Fidel on the wall directly opposite her apartment. In turn, she had festooned her door and windows with posters and bumper stickers supporting dissident causes. It reminded me of Bay Area friends who proudly display their political proclivities outside their homes. Only in her case, it was like a Bush supporter putting up posters in the People's Republic of Berkeley.

Roque once taught math at the University of Havana and thought of herself

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It reminded me of Bay Area friends who proudly display their political proclivities outside their homes. Only in her case, it was like a Bush supporter putting up posters in the People's Republic of Berkeley

as a supporter of the Revolution. She later became a full-time dissident. The government had imprisoned her twice and continually harassed her. The Bush administration featured Roque in an unprecedented March 2008 videoconference between the president, leading U.S. officials, and three dissidents.

In her interview with me, Roque complained that opponents of the regime have no freedom of speech, freedom to assemble, or other means to organize for political change. Those who oppose the government, she said, face harassment and jail. “Here in Cuba you can't be against anything. You have to be like the government wants you to be.” When I asked Roque what kind of system she would like to see in Cuba, she said, “I'm a person of the right. I want to liberate the economy. I support free-market capitalism. It's the way to develop.”

She praised Miami's conservatives

who left Cuba for the United States in the 1960s. “They used to live in a democratic country.” Cubans in Miami “have ideas about how to come to Cuba and change the Cuban government. I think they want good things for Cuba. They love their country. They want freedom for Cuba. Perhaps when we are in a free country, they can come to Cuba and give us money and resources that we need for development.”

Roque denied that she received money from the U.S. Interests Section. She was on good terms with all foreign diplomats, she said, and the only money she received was from relatives living in Miami. She wanted to see peaceful change in Cuba and didn’t support ultrarightists who engage in armed struggle against the Cuban government. “I am a pacifist. I don’t want war. I do not support those who want to come to Cuba to make war.”

Dissidents such as Roque play a vital role in the propaganda war between the two countries. The U.S. Interests Section publicizes their views and encourages American journalists to interview them. Their plight becomes known, and Americans become convinced of the repressive nature of the Cuban regime. But U.S. diplomats don’t publicize their own role in the process.

In May 2008, Cuban authorities dropped a bombshell on Roque and some other dissidents. In a series of press conferences for the foreign media, they revealed recorded phone conversations, surveillance tapes, and emails showing that she accepted money from a Miami ultrarightist, delivered by the chief of the U.S. Interests Section. The press conferences showed Roque had accepted \$1,500 a month from Miami resident Santiago Álvarez. Álvarez had been arrested for stockpiling weapons to attack Cuba and,



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in another matter, was serving 10 months in a Florida jail for refusing to testify in the illegal immigration case of terrorist Luis Posada Carriles.

The authorities provided reporters with email exchanges between U.S. Interests Section Chief Michael Parmly and Roque in which she arranged for relatives to deliver Álvarez’s money to Parmly at the Miami airport. Parmly had given her his personal cell phone number. When a reporter called the number, Parmly answered, but refused to comment. When I contacted Roque, she had no comment either.

According to Cuban officials, the United States was also passing money to 22 members of the Ladies in White, a group of wives of political prisoners who demonstrate Sundays in front of a Havana church. The Ladies in White have received a great deal of favorable international publicity comparing them to human rights groups that opposed the 1970s military dictatorship in Argentina. A Ladies in White leader later confirmed that they did receive regular payments from Álvarez but denied getting money from the U.S. government.

When questioned at a Washington press conference, Thomas A. Shannon, assistant secretary of state for Western Hemisphere Affairs, never denied the accusations that Parmly had carried funds from Álvarez to Roque. In fact, in roundabout diplomatic language, Shannon confirmed them. “[A]ssistance that moves from the United States to Cuba under official auspices in this regard does so for humanitarian purposes. It really is aimed at helping dissidents and the families of political prisoners who operate under enormous stress in a society in which their loved ones have been locked away.”

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Parmly's actions are a blatant violation of Cuban law. They also apparently violate U.S. law, which limits remittances to no more than \$1,200 per person annually. Parmly's actions also violate international diplomatic norms. Can you imagine the reaction in the United States if the chief of the Cuban Interests Section in Washington had been caught passing funds to American revolutionaries?

Don't expect an FBI investigation anytime soon.

I ALSO interviewed Eloy Gutiérrez Menoyo, a dissident from the other end of the political spectrum. Gutiérrez had led an armed guerrilla group opposing the Batista dictatorship. He considered himself a social democrat, politically aligned with the socialist parties of Europe. In 1959, Gutiérrez broke with Fidel Castro and fled to the United States, where he founded Alpha 66, a group dedicated to overthrowing the Cuban government by armed force. Alpha 66 launched terrorist attacks against Cuban civilians. Gutiérrez landed in Cuba with a small Alpha 66 group intending to wage guerrilla war, was arrested in 1965 after only a month, and spent 21 years in a Cuban jail.

After getting out of jail in 1986, Gutiérrez went to live in Miami. Fed up with ultraconservative domination there, however, he returned to Cuba to carry out legal political struggle in 2003. Ultrarightists in Miami denounced Gutiérrez for working within the Cuban system, and Cuban authorities viewed him suspiciously, refusing to give him permanent residence.

I had trouble finding Gutiérrez's apartment in the San Agustín section of Havana. I knew that the government tapped his phone and watched his apartment. I would ordinarily have asked the



Dealing with the United States, he told me, is “like a drug addict who says I don’t like the drugs from Colombia. But I like them from Russia. No. Drugs from one are as bad as drugs from another”

taxi driver to wait and drive me to my next appointment, but I worried that the driver might get hassled. So I found the apartment on my own. Gutiérrez lived on a pedestrian-only street without clear street signs or addresses. Neighbors pointed the way. Gutiérrez told me my concerns about the taxi driver were unfounded. As a dissident, he freely talks to foreign journalists. I wasn't hassled going in or out. Family members who live with him are not harassed. But Gutiérrez said that when he meets with people outside his apartment, the intelligence service visits them later to ask what was discussed.

Gutiérrez told me he returned to Cuba “to establish some independent political space, including setting up an office and creating other political parties.” But the government has not allowed such activities. He wanted to separate himself politically from the ultrarightists in Miami, who support the U.S. embargo and such undemocratic measures as the coup against President Hugo Chávez of Venezuela. “How can you support a coup and then claim to be for democracy here?” he asked. He accused the United States of manipulating the dissidents by doling out cash. “I won't have anything to do with the U.S. Interests Section. I don't have anything in common with the State Department or its Cuba policy.”

Dealing with the United States, he told me, is “like a drug addict who says I don't like the drugs from Colombia. But I like them from Russia. No. Drugs from one are as bad as drugs from another.” In retaliation for his political views, the United States has accused Gutiérrez of unauthorized travel to Cuba and threatened him with a 10-year jail term and \$250,000 fine.

I asked Gutiérrez a critical question: if

somehow Cuba allowed free elections tomorrow, would the dissidents and their supporters win? He paused for a long moment. The dissidents are too closely identified with the Miami exiles, he said. “The people of Cuba don’t want the ultraright from the U.S. They think they will take their houses.” The dissidents “wouldn’t win” free elections, he said. “The government would win.”

That’s a startling admission from a man who has spent his life opposing Cuba’s communist dictatorship. Gutiérrez is not alone in his assessment that the Communist Party has a significant base of popular support. Jay Taylor headed the U.S. Interests Section in Cuba from 1987 to 1990. During the time he was in Cuba, he told me, “25 to 30 percent of Cubans probably supported Castro quite strongly. They would vote for him in an election. About the same number of Cubans really hated him. There’s a group in the middle who grabs another 30 percent or so.

A 2006 Gallup poll of Cubans offered an even more fascinating picture. Gallup conducted personal interviews with 1,000 residents of Havana and Santiago. The poll indicated 49 percent approved of Cuba’s leadership, 39 percent disapproved, and 13 percent offered no response. Other polls show that Cubans are far more concerned about economic problems on the island than about political freedoms or democracy.

The U.S.-backed dissidents have little popular support. The United States actively seeks out dissidents who ideologically agree with U.S. policy, which further isolates the dissidents because U.S. policy remains unpopular with the vast majority of Cubans. “We don’t care if it hurts the dissidents,” said former diplomat Wayne Smith. He told me the United



The Cuban government said the Varela Project was a creation of U.S. imperialism, and that the U.S. Interests Section had given money and gifts to project organizers. Cuban officials argued that the Cuban Constitution already provided for civil liberties and that the real thrust of the project was restoring capitalism

States seeks to make propaganda points. “The more the Cuban government reacts to them [the dissidents], the more we like it.” Some of the dissidents were simply seeking a fast track to emigration. “Some may have seen it as a way to get to the States,” Taylor told me. “They could get status eventually if we thought they were genuine dissidents. If they were facing difficulties, we could get them visas.”

The United States has played this game for a long time. During the Cold War, it publicized the plight of selected Soviet dissidents and welcomed some as heroic opponents of totalitarianism. When elections were held after 1992, however, no dissident promoted by the United States was ever elected to a significant office in Russia.

BEGINNING in 1998, Christian Liberation Movement leader Oswaldo Paya initiated the Varela Project. He and his supporters circulated a petition calling for changes in the Cuban Constitution: freedom of the press, speech, and assembly; amnesty for political prisoners; and the right to start private businesses. The Varela Project said it collected over 11,000 signatures and called for a national referendum. President George Bush Jr. declared support for it, and in a May 2002 speech televised in Cuba, former president Jimmy Carter praised the project as well.

The Cuban government said the Varela Project was a creation of U.S. imperialism, and that the U.S. Interests Section had given money and gifts to project organizers. Cuban officials argued that the Cuban Constitution already provided for civil liberties and that the real thrust of the project was restoring capitalism. National Assembly chair Ricardo Alarcón said the petition was also procedurally

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flawed because no Cuban law allows for a citizen petition to become a national referendum. “I challenge you to show me just one constitution of any country that can be modified at the request of some citizens,” he said. “I have found many constitutions in the Western world that can be modified, but none that recognizes a citizens’ initiative.” The Cuban National Assembly accepted the petition but tabled any action.

Interestingly enough, the ultrarightists in Miami denounced Project Varela as too moderate. Ninoska Pérez Castellón, whom we met in chapter 5, was spokeswoman for the Cuban Liberty Council. She told the Miami Herald, “If you accept these baby steps, you are legitimizing the system. They are steps, but steps in the wrong direction.” The ultraright feared that political initiatives inside Cuba could take away from their domination of the anti-Castro movement and dash their hopes of eventually coming to power.

Less strident groups, such as CANF, realized that Miami had little impact on Cuba and saw supporting the Varela Project as a means to exert their own influence. CANF recognized the Varela Project as an initiative from within the island that could ultimately push forward the Miami agenda. “Forty years ago, the debate was in the streets of Miami,” said Joe García, then executive director of CANF. “Now we have to take the debate to the streets of Cuba.”

The Cuban government saw the Varela Project as a direct challenge to the socialist system. It gathered thousands of signatures for its own petition drive, and the National Assembly voted to hold a referendum:

Cubans voted overwhelmingly to make the socialist system a permanent part of



While the United States was preparing to invade and occupy Iraq in March 2003, the Bush administration talked about spreading American democracy elsewhere in the world. Cuban leaders feared their country could be next. The government rounded up opponents, gave them quick trials and threw 75 in jail

the constitution. The government also cracked down, arresting 25 of the Varela Project organizers in March 2003 as part of a wider effort. While the United States was preparing to invade and occupy Iraq in March 2003, the Bush administration talked about spreading American democracy elsewhere in the world. Cuban leaders feared their country could be next. The government rounded up opponents, gave them quick trials and threw 75 in jail. Martha Beatriz Roque was among those arrested. Cuban officials accused the dissidents of receiving funds from the United States. They charged that chief of Interests Section James Cason financed the dissidents, including organizing a private meeting at his diplomatic residence. Cason didn’t deny the charge. In a Miami speech, he said his actions “were fully consistent with U.S. policy and with diplomatic protocol.”

The crackdown had serious negative consequences internationally for Cuba. Groups such as Amnesty International and Human Rights Watch complained that the opposition figures were given show trials and faced horrible conditions in jail. The European Union (EU) voted to limit diplomatic visits and cultural exchanges with Cuba. In retaliation, Cuba evicted Spain from its Cultural Center in Old Havana and erected a huge, antifascist billboard nearby. For two years, diplomatic relations remained cool between Cuba and Spain, Italy, and some other European countries.

Relations began to warm again when the EU suspended the sanctions in 2005 and then formally lifted them in June 2008. The Cuban government had released 23 of the 75 dissidents by then. The releases were interpreted as a response to international calls for greater respect for human rights. Cuba also signed two

international human rights treaties and promised to allow international human rights monitors into the country starting in 2009.

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IN a now infamous 1979 article, “Dictatorships and Double Standards,” Jeane Kirkpatrick drew a distinction between authoritarianism and totalitarianism. Kirkpatrick later became U.S. ambassador to the UN under President Ronald Reagan. She defined totalitarian regimes as one-party dictatorships that controlled every aspect of people’s lives through propaganda and terror. Authoritarian regimes were less repressive dictatorships, which were more unstable and therefore subject to democratic change. Not coincidentally, all her totalitarian regimes were Cold War opponents of the United States (USSR, China, Cuba) and the authoritarians were allies (Indonesia, Saudi Arabia, Iran under the Shah).

The theory didn’t make any sense even when written. Why was the relatively free-wheeling Yugoslavia somehow more repressive than Saudi Arabia with its all-controlling religious police? And since the end of the Cold War, the theory has been even further discredited given that—by U.S. standards—many parts of former Yugoslavia and Eastern Europe made the transition to democracy but Saudi Arabia remains a dictatorship.

But there is one crevice of U.S. foreign policy where Kirkpatrick’s theory still holds sway: Cuba. U.S. officials argue that America can neither lift the embargo nor have full diplomatic relations because Cuba remains a totalitarian state. Former chief of Interests Section Taylor described himself to me as a “moderate liberal, a tough-love liberal.” He disagreed with Bush administration policy on Cuba, but he still called Cuba totalitarian. “It is a



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more pervasive dictatorship. If you have thoughts and express them you can get into difficulty.” Taylor said Cuba’s totalitarianism is disguised by the island’s relaxed atmosphere. “The climate and the sun and the beaches, it’s not like you live in dreary old Romania. When I arrived [in 1987], it was a totalitarian regime that had pretty much repressed spontaneity.”

It’s true that Cubans don’t have free speech, freedom of assembly, or a free press. One party rules the country. But I’ve traveled in totalitarian states such as Myanmar (Burma) where the military junta controls every aspect of life and people won’t talk politics with strangers. In Cuba, by contrast, you’ll meet people who vigorously criticize the government. Filmmakers, musicians, and writers criticize ruling policies. I’ve had numerous conversations throughout the country in which people complain about the economy, poor transport, lack of food, and a host of other problems. None of them ended up in jail.

The United States always points to the political prisoners held in Cuban jails as a sign of totalitarianism. According to a leading, pro-U.S. human rights activist in Cuba, Elizardo Sánchez, at the end of 2007, there were 234 political prisoners, down from thousands in earlier decades. The number has steadily declined over the past few years.

I think U.S. diplomats label Cuba totalitarian in order to justify present policies, a holdover from the Jeane Kirkpatrick era. I think the designation will disappear as soon as the United States decides to trade with Cuba, much as happened with China and Vietnam. Former chief of Interests Section Wayne Smith agreed. I asked him to rate Cuba’s level of repression on a scale of 1–10, with one being the least repressive. “It’s down on the lower

end. It can be repressive. There's no real freedom of expression or assembly. On the other hand, Cubans are very patriotic. I think the Cubans are loyal to the Revolution."

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IN 2007, acting President Raúl Castro called for a wide-ranging debate about solving problems on the island. In February 2008, a video delivered to the foreign media displayed a fascinating example of that debate. Several students at the University of Computer Sciences challenged Communist Party Political Bureau member and National Assembly chair Ricardo Alarcón at a campus forum. They asked sharp questions about why ordinary consumer goods cost so much, why they can't freely travel outside Cuba, and why they don't have full access to the Internet. Foreign media accounts characterized the interchange as an unusual discussion of uncomfortable issues. Some reports later falsely maintained that one of the students had been arrested.

But reading the entire question-and-answer session from the video reveals that the students were clearly trying to improve Cuban socialism, not challenge the system. And several of the criticized policies—such as the inability to stay at tourist hotels—were, in fact, changed soon thereafter.

There's actually a long history of such interchange with government officials. I remember in 1968 students at the University of Havana telling me that Fidel Castro would periodically show up for nighttime bull sessions, engaging any students who happened to be around at the time. Cuban leaders have always maintained an unusual frankness and direct interchange with the people. On his frequent visits around the country, Fidel would be peppered with requests to im-



Cuba was cut off from high-speed communication because the United States won't allow a fiber optic upgrade to the existing underwater phone lines between the two countries. So Cuba used a very expensive satellite system for all its international Internet traffic

prove something or right some injustice. Unfortunately, Cuban leaders have never institutionalized a means of democratic control. Nor do they allow full access to information in this Internet age.

In 2008, the international media gave a great deal of publicity to Yoani Sánchez, an Internet blogger who posed as a tourist to enter hotels and write her daily blog. She mostly wrote about her personal life and reactions to developments in Cuba, and she was hailed as an intrepid example of Cuba's younger, dissenting generation. When the Cuban government eventually made her blog inaccessible, critics called it government repression. It illuminated a wider issue: as Martha Beatriz Roque told me, "Cubans don't have access to the Internet."

As with almost everything in Cuba, it's a lot more complicated than that. Broadband Internet connections don't exist except in a few government offices and hotels. Few Cubans have access to dial-up Internet service at home. Cubans can go to the post and telecommunications offices or to tourist hotels, although the cost is very high. Connection fees ranged from 3 CUCs per hour for slow access to 10 CUCs per hour for DSL-like connections at some tourist hotels. Yet virtually every young person I met had an email address. So what's going on?

Cuba was cut off from high-speed communication because the United States won't allow a fiber optic upgrade to the existing underwater phone lines between the two countries. So Cuba used a very expensive satellite system for all its international Internet traffic. This drove up the cost of Internet connections for Cubans and required the government to ration access. Cuba and Venezuela have plans to lay a fiber optic cable between the two countries, but it was not sched-

uled to begin operating until 2010.

Late one Friday afternoon, I entered an air-conditioned office at the International Press Center in Havana to meet Juan Fernández, a professor at the University of Information Science and advisor to the Communications Ministry on Internet issues. He said that the U.S. embargo hurt Internet use in many ways. U.S. companies control a lot of the computer hardware needed for modern Internet connections. He told me, “The U.S. is very close and could sell everything very cheap. Yes, we can buy it in Asia, but it’s more expensive.”

I asked him if Cuba limited access to certain websites such as Google or the website of the Miami Herald’s Spanish-language newspaper, *Nuevo Herald*. He said that each college, office, or other institution determined which Internet access would be available. For example, people can’t play computer games during work hours or access porn sites. He pointed out that certain travel sites advertising trips to Cuba are blocked in the United States. But I hadn’t asked about travel sites, porn, or games. He never directly answered the question about limiting access to media. He used the same argument Cuban authorities have long used to limit access to information. “Cuba isn’t a normal country. We face great pressure, practically an economic war, from the most powerful country in the world. Every day the United States tries to make our system disappear. For 50 years the United States has been trying regime change in Cuba.” He never explained how accessing Google would endanger Cuban socialism.

After interviewing many college students, professors, intellectuals, and ordinary Cubans, it became clear that Cubans have access to the Internet, but it’s



If socialism disappeared tomorrow, and the Miami ultrarightists returned to power, they would not be able to provide cheap Internet connections for Cubans until the United States allowed the laying of new cables

limited. Some artists who regularly travel abroad are given free dial-up access in order to communicate with bookers. Some medical personnel get home dial-up with access to a specialized medical intranet that allows limited international access to medical web-sites. Many Cuban young people obtain email addresses and check their accounts when they can afford to use the telecommunications office. The satellite link is a serious cost issue for Cuba. If socialism disappeared tomorrow, and the Miami ultrarightists returned to power, they would not be able to provide cheap Internet connections for Cubans until the United States allowed the laying of new cables.

But Cuba clearly does block some websites and worries that unlimited access to foreign websites will have a negative ideological influence. As a practical matter, Cuban authorities can’t completely block unpopular or controversial news. For example, every student and professor I spoke with was aware of the computer students sharp questioning of Alarcón. Many had received the entire transcript of the session via email. When sports stars defect to the United States, word circulates quickly via cell phone, text messaging, or the Internet.

IN his famous 1961 speech to writers and artists, Fidel Castro formulated how the Revolution would deal with criticism, “. . . within the Revolution everything; against the Revolution nothing.” In theory that meant supporters of Cuban socialism were free to criticize its shortcomings so long as it was done constructively. That’s not always been the reality.

In the late 1960s, the University of Havana Philosophy Department taught the classics of Marxism but also a wide range of contemporary

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Marxist authors. Marta Núñez, a member of the department, told me, “We were against the Soviet manuals that were very popular at the time,” finding their interpretation of Marxism too narrow. “We were in the midst of revolutionary fervor, we were very much interested in understanding what was happening in our country and the world. The students really did study the essence of Marxism.”

But as Fidel Castro and top officials decided to bring Cuba closer to the Soviet orbit, the free-wheeling ideological discussions shut down. The Soviet teaching manuals came back. And in 1971, the university closed the Philosophy Department altogether. It wasn’t a purge because professors kept the jobs by moving to other departments. But it was a top-down decision conforming to the Soviet ideological view, which tolerated no deviation from its version of Marxism. As good members of the Communist Party, Núñez and other faculty didn’t protest. “We accepted the decision. There was a discussion, but we accepted it. Perhaps one or two of us left the country. Everyone else stayed.”

Ironically, some of the contemporary Marxist philosophers discarded in the 1970s are being taught once again. Cuban intellectuals are taking another look to see if they offer some help in figuring out Cuba’s current difficulties. American poet and author Margaret Randall had similar experiences. She lived in Cuba from 1969 to 1980. She wrote a fascinating memoir, *To Change the World: My Years in Cuba*, in which she reexamines some of her experiences on the island. In her book, she described herself as a supporter of Cuban socialism and a critic of its deficiencies.

Randall wrote about “Magin,” a group of women revolutionaries and Commu-



An old joke made the rounds in Havana.

“In America, you are free to shout ‘Down with Bush.’ In Cuba we have freedom of speech as well. We, too, can shout ‘Down with Bush.’”

nist Party members who came together in the 1990s. They saw the growth of feminist movements around the world and wanted to bring the positive aspects of that movement to Cuba. Magin held workshops and “published studies revealing the ongoing gender bias” in Cuba. They met with delegations of foreign women and maintained contacts with feminist groups abroad. Then in 1996 the Communist Party Central Committee ordered Magin to disband and cease all publication activities. Randall wrote, “The reason given was patronizing in the extreme: in light of the ongoing efforts of the U.S. government to destroy the Cuban Revolution, party officials said, they were afraid these women might be duped into making contacts or doing work which inadvertently played into the enemy’s hands.”

No one was jailed. But some women lost their jobs; others were refused permission to travel abroad. The cause of Cuban women was certainly set back. Randall wrote, “As it has done rather consistently through close to half a century of revolution, the Cuban Communist Party used the ever-present threat from the north to legitimize a lack of support for diverse efforts and justify repressive measures . . . [T]here have been many situations in which trusting the insights and intelligence of its own best citizens rather than relying on such insulting excuses might have pushed true revolution forward. This was one of them.”

AN old joke made the rounds in Havana. “In America, you are free to shout ‘Down with Bush.’ In Cuba we have freedom of speech as well. We, too, can shout ‘Down with Bush.’” The joke reveals a lot about how Cubans view their government. Let’s look at some of the Cuban government’s

defenses of its political system.

Cuba is a democracy because people vote by secret ballot for local councils and the National Assembly. Cuba has elected legislatures at the local and national levels. The Communist Party formulates policy and offers guidance, but formally, these elected bodies make all decisions affecting government.

In reality, decisions are made by a relatively small number of leaders at the top of the Communist Party.

I've covered the legislative elections, and voters don't have much of a real choice. There are no campaigns. Candidates post their photos and qualifications at the polling place. Government supporters argue that Cuba doesn't have the phony, money-driven elections typical in the United States. But Cuban candidates don't even pass out leaflets or hold rallies as would be fitting for a grassroots democracy. The candidates don't take positions on issues, so the lively debate that goes on in every Cuban household doesn't get reflected in the electoral process. The National Assembly, especially in recent years, does have genuine debates. But top leaders still make the critical government decisions. Those policies may be more or less popular, but they are not made through an institutionalized democratic process.

Human rights include not just political rights, but the right to work, education, health care, and a secure life. In that sense Cuba has a very good human rights record.

U.S. leaders narrow the definition of human rights to issues of civil liberties. Many countries include the right to a job, for example, as part of their constitutionally guaranteed human rights. And the U.S. government conveniently ignores its own violations of political rights. In



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that broader, international definition, Cuba does respect many human rights. But that doesn't excuse Cuba's very real shortcomings in the realm of institutionalized democracy, press freedom, and other civil liberties.

Cuba has press freedom because the country has two national daily print newspapers, many online publications, and broadcast news programs that put forward a revolutionary perspective.

The Cuban press is among the worst in the world, and it's really boring. The daily Communist Party paper, *Granma*, is almost unreadable, and believe me, I've read a lot of turgid rhetoric in my day. The evening news broadcasts are often days behind breaking events, rarely take on controversial stories inside Cuba, and tend toward the "heroic workers harvest new rice crop" style of journalism. Film directors and musicians offer better critiques of Cuban society than do the news media.

Since Raúl Castro effectively became president, the *Juventud Rebelde* (Rebel Youth) newspaper has published some impressive investigative stories about corruption and economic mismanagement. In 2008, the government was discussing how to improve TV broadcasts as well. However, as long as the Cuban media don't provide better journalism, Cubans will get their information through rumors and foreign sources.

Cuba has been in a virtual state of war with the United States for the past 50 years, and this war has restricted its ability to widen democracy.

True, the United States has remained hostile and still seeks to overthrow the Cuban government. But it is not about to invade Cuba. Nor would it allow an invasion by Cuban exiles under current circumstances. Cuba is a stable coun-

try, with a solid base of support from a sizeable sector of the population. Exactly when will Cubans be able to have a larger influence on their country's affairs? When will they be allowed the civil liberties appropriate for a self-described socialist democracy?

Cuban authorities offer a devastating critique of democracy in the United States, from the money-dominated campaigns to the Florida fraud of 2000. Who wants a so-called democracy like the one imposed on Iraq? If ultrarightists in Miami represent democracy, then Cubans will have none of it. But lack of democracy elsewhere doesn't get Cuban authorities off the hook. Democracy has a much more profound meaning: rule by the people. And it's not an abstract issue. If Cubans had full democratic rights, they might have chosen greater self-reliance back in the 1970s and less dependence on the USSR. That, in turn, might have lessened the impact or even avoided the economic disaster of the early '90s. I think that economic reforms are far more important than political liberalization at the moment. Mikhail Gorbachev made the serious error of putting political change



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first, and chaos ensued.

But if Cuba is to come through the difficult period when both Castro brothers eventually die, Cubans will need to participate more in the political process. Cuba should make a distinction between advocacy and subversive acts. If people accept money from foreign agents or facilitate armed attacks, they should be tried and punished. But no one should be jailed for advocating unpopular views. The media needs a serious revamping, with reporters free to uncover wrongdoings and help facilitate change. As technical conditions improve, the government should open up low-cost Internet cafes with no blocking of political and media websites. The government should allow candidates for office to campaign and disagree. Let grassroots activists organize to improve the society.

Of course the U.S. government and Miami ultraconservatives will seek to take advantage of such changes. But Cuba is sufficiently stable, and if the political and economic changes are positive, the government has nothing to fear. And, as we'll see in the next chapter, those economic changes will be key to Cuba's future.

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