

Ending Decades of Animosity: Framing 2014 Thaw in US-Cuba Diplomatic Relations in the Washington Post and Miami Herald

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Abstract

On December 17, 2014, US President Barak Obama and Cuban President Raúl Castro simultaneously announced from Washington and Havana that their countries would resume diplomatic relations ended half a century ago. But how did the US press frame the détente? Exploratory and comparative in nature, the study mainly and inclusively examines via qualitative and quantitative analysis the US press's coverage of the restoration of US-Cuba diplomatic relations. It seeks out the themes in newspaper opinion items in the Miami Herald and The Washington Post to explain the American public's position and interpretation of Obama's new Cuba policy.

Keywords: Cuban revolution; Cold war; Cuba policy; Soviet union

Introduction

On December 17, 2014, U.S. President Barack Obama and Cuban President Raúl Castro simultaneously announced from Washington and Havana that their countries would resume normal diplomatic relations ended half a century ago. Super-secret talks were under way between the United States and Cuba for more than a year, and the decision took many by surprise. The US broke off diplomatic relations with Cuba on January 3, 1961, following the 1959 Cuban Revolution which brought Fidel Castro to power. Under Castro's communist leadership, U.S. Cuba relations were filled with animosities, including the failed 1961 Bay of Pigs invasion and an American trade embargo imposed on the island a year later. This tug-of-war with Cuba—a nation, of eleven million continued, spanning eleven U.S. presidencies. “These 50 years have shown that isolation has not worked,” said Obama in his announcement.

In his televised address, eighty-three-year-old President Castro, who assumed leadership from his brother Fidel in 2008, observed that there remain profound differences between his country and America with the embargo continuing to be the stumbling block. Castro added that they freed U.S. Agency for International Development subcontractor Alan Gross from detention for humanitarian causes. The historic three-for-one prisoner swap included Washington's release of three Cuban spies serving long terms in American prisons in exchange for the release of an unnamed US intelligence agent. The three Cuban prisoners are part of the spy network known as the Cuban Five who were convicted of informing Havana of the movements of anti-Castro Cubans in Miami and of operations that led to Cuba's 1996 shoot down of two airplanes in Florida carrying anti-Castro activists¹.

Obama declared that efforts will be exerted toward re-instating US and Cuban embassies in Havana and Washington respectively. In the month that followed, and until this study was completed in late January 2015, the Cuban government released all the fifty three Cuban political prisoners² whose cases had been advocated for by Washington—and it promised to increase Internet connections for its citizens³.

¹The shooting of the Brothers to the Rescue airplanes resulted in the death of three Americans and a legal resident. The Cuban Five spies are admired in Cuba as anti-terrorism heroes, and three of them were held in US jails for sixteen years; the other two were freed before the Obama-Castro agreement because they served their term already.

²The Castro government did consent to Washington's demands that the Cuban dissidents be allowed to remain in Cuba and take part in peaceful political activities.

³Following the statement made by US officials on January 12 that all 53 Cuban political prisoners were released, human rights monitors in Miami argued that only 43 were released.

The thaw has had a wider implication in Latin America, particularly for Cuba's strong regional partner Venezuela—another American bogeyman in Latin America and the ideological crony of Cuba—which is encountering economic instability because of declining oil prices⁴. The American public's opinion was divided on the issue. A Pew Research Center poll (2015) revealed that 63% of Americans support restoring diplomatic relations with Cuba, while only 32% believe it would result in greater democracy on the island. This change in opinion was also displayed among Cuban Americans⁵. A survey conducted by the Florida-based Bendixen and Amandi International (2014) found that Cuban Americans are closely divided on Obama's policy shift with Cuba, with 44% supporting normalizing relations with Cuba and 48% opposing it. Finding revealed a significant generational gap, with 53% of those born in Cuba opposing the policy change and 64% of Cuban Americans born in the US supporting it.

But was the American press optimistic or pessimistic in its coverage of the rapprochement? Exploratory and comparative in nature, this study mainly and inclusively examines the US press's coverage of the 2014 restoration of US-Cuba diplomatic relations. It seeks out the themes in newspaper opinion items of the détente in the Miami Herald, which is published from south Florida and caters to America's largest Cuban community, and The Washington Post, a “newspaper of record” which operates from the nation's capital where US foreign policy decisions are manufactured⁶. We did not include Spanish-language newspapers such as El Nuevo Herald, which is also owned by the Miami Herald Media Company, because we desired newspapers that reach a wider audience in Florida and not just the Cuban American

⁴From a peak of \$100 in late June 2014, the price of Venezuelan oil hit \$42.44 a barrel six months later.

⁵There are roughly two million Cubans and Americans of Cuban descent living in the US.

⁶The Post has won forty seven Pulitzer Prizes and was published in 1877; the Herald has won twenty Pulitzer Prizes and was published in 1903.

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community. A discourse analysis of the frames found in opinion items in the two papers is utilized to explain the American public's position and interpretation of Obama's new Cuba policy.

News Framing and Discourse Analysis

Framing research deals with how the media choose to depict issues and impart a certain spin to the events they cover. Tuchman [1] was the first to apply framing to news gathering and views that the most essential mission of media framing is their capacity to organize everyday reality. Hence, noted Tuchman, "news is a window on the world". Gitlin [2] notes that media frames organize the world for journalists who cover it and for consumers who depend on their coverage. He perceives framing as "persistent patterns of cognition, interpretation and presentation, of selection, emphasis, and exclusion, by which symbol handlers routinely organize discourse". To frame, said Entman [3], is "to select some aspects of a perceived reality and make them more salient in communicating text in such a way as to promote a particular problem definition, casual interpretation, moral evaluation, and/or treatment recommendation". Furthermore, when framing involves a political enemy, it inexorably leads to stories that ignore certain facts and emphasize others [4]. In this study, it involves the US media's definition of Cuba as a communist state and Castros as dictators, without any reference made to the island's achievements in the areas of health care and education. Severin and Tinkard [5] articulate that frames are often defined by those who hold power and picked by the media. They cite how during the Ronald Reagan administration much of the news from Latin America was framed in terms of a Communist menace and that much of the international events after World War II suggest that the Cold War often provided an overriding frame.

Discourse analysis, on the other hand, refers to all kinds of communicative actions and focuses on the use of language when talking and trying to comprehend the world surrounding us [6,7]. Discourses are ways of representing the world that can be identified and distinguished at different levels of abstraction [8]. Discourse analysis, argues Howarth and Stavrakakis [9], deals with "the practice of analyzing empirical row materials and information as discursive forms". It usually involves the study of particular texts: interviews, speeches, conversations, etc., and can "range from the description and interpretation of meaning-making and meaning-understanding in specific situations through to the critical analysis of ideology and access to meaning-systems and discourse networks" [10].

Method

The study combines a qualitative analysis with a partial quantitative assessment of the overall themes, or frames, in opinion articles in the *Miami Herald* and *The Washington Post's* coverage of the 2014 restoration of US-Cuba diplomatic relations. The time period under study is roughly the one-month period following the Obama-Castro announcements made on December 17, 2014. Data selections will be of opinionated articles-op-eds, editorials, columns, and letters to the editors. The study builds on the concept of news framing and discourse analysis. It outlines the particular frames that emerged from opinions in the two major US newspapers on the rapprochement and the discursive framework used in constructing meaning. It endeavors to answer these five research questions:

- How did the two newspapers frame the US-Cuba détente and what difference was there?
- Was coverage favorable or unfavorable of it?

- What are the most prominent frames and issues made salient in articles?
- How did they frame the position of the Cuban American community on the issue?
- How often was reference made to the "Cold War" and "communist/communism" in each newspaper?

The main hypothesis is that the thaw in US-Cuba relations will receive mixed reactions in the US media. Coverage in the *Herald* will, however, be less favorable of the détente than in *The Post*, this is because of the influence of the large Cuban-American community in Miami-the capital of Cuban exile. The *Herald* will make more reference to communist/communism than the *Post*, while the latter will carry more mentioning of the Cold War than the earlier. This is possibly because of reference that is likely to be made in *Herald* articles by Cuban Americans in south Florida-where more than one million Cubans reside-to the Castros as communists or symbols of Communism and to Cuba as a communist state. It is natural, on the other side, for the discourse on Cuba in a newspaper of record like *The Post*, published from the nation's capital, to be colored more with Cold War fever. Both papers will, however, praise Obama for ending what they perceive as Cold War hysteria.

The qualitative assessment of framing is established on careful identification of the specific properties of the news narrative embodied in the key words, concepts, metaphors, symbols, and visual images emphasized in opinion items [11]. A total of 77 opinion articles-staff-written editorials and op-eds, columns and letters to the editors contributed by non-staff-appearing during the month that followed the statements of Obama and Castro were studied and coded according to a scheme. We included letters to the editors because they indicate public opinion [12] and continue to be an "important site of contemporary public discourse". The *Herald* published 44 pieces-17 of them are letters to the editor-and *The Post* ran 33 pieces, 16 of them are letters to the editor. Articles were collected from the websites of the *Herald* (www.miamiherald.com) and *The Post* (www.washingtonpost.com). Frames and discursive themes were recognized after reading the opinion articles. A coding sheet was then developed to measure the frequency of each frame in the two national US newspapers. Every occurrence of a given frame was tallied. Using a nominal scale, we measured whether opinion articles were "favorable," "unfavorable," or "neutral" of the détente. Items that did not explicitly express any such stance were not coded. When the frames were measured, the article was used as the coding unit. Coding was conducted by the researcher who has published dozens of op-eds in almost every major US newspaper, including the *Miami Herald*.

Three master frames, or recurring themes, were formulated in the *Herald* and *The Post*. These frames are:

- The *burial of Cold War confrontation* frame articulates that US sanctions on Cuba have not worked and that it is imperative that Washington and Havana, Americans and Cubans, wipe out this symptom of the Cold War era from their mentality and resume ties.
- The *democracy and human rights* frame contends that for relations between Cuba and America to be truly re-established, Havana and the Castro brothers must first exhibit respect for human rights and democratic change.
- The *Cuban-American community* frame posits that there will be mixed emotions among Cuban exiles and anti-Castro

hardliners in the Cuban-American community. Cuban Americans will raise questions on whether the normalization of relations will benefit their community and if Cuban dissidents will be integrated in future discussions with Havana⁷.

After the three frames were identified in all opinion items, and frequencies and percentages measured, a textual discourse analysis of them was employed to assess how the debate on the rapprochement was constructed.

Finding

Rancorous discussions were thrown in the *Herald* and *The Post* on the warming of US-Cuba relations, with some describing it as “historic” and others cautioning that the White House should tread carefully. But there were also those who opposed reconciliation with the “communist island” altogether and denounced Obama as the “appeaser in chief.” The instinctive view that engagement with Cuba will bring it into the international community rather than isolation was higher in *The Post* (56.25%) than in the *Herald* (34.21%), asserting the hypothesis that Cuban exile in south Florida will diminish *Herald’s* support for the détente. The stand of the *Herald* toward Obama’s normalization initiative was 13 (34.21%) favorable, 17 (44.74%) unfavorable, and 9 (21.05%) neutral; while in *The Post* it was 18 (56.25%) favorable, 7 (21.88%) unfavorable, and 7 (21.88%) neutral. Of the total 71 articles coded, 31 (43.66%) were favorable of the rapprochement with Cuba, 24 (33.80%) unfavorable, and 16 (22.54%) neutral (Table 1).

When we examined coverage in terms of the portion of favorable versus unfavorable categories, we found that 56.36% of the statements that expressed either positive or negative stance were favorable of the rapprochement while only 43.64% unfavorable (Figure 1). The *Chi-Square* value at the 0.05 alpha level for 1 degree of freedom is 3.841; since our *Chi-Square* value of 4.556 exceeds this level, we can conclude that this represents a significant difference that is unlikely to have arisen due to chance.

The word “communist/communism” was mentioned more 23 (57.5%) in the *Herald* and less 17 (42.5%) in *The Post*, while “Cold War” was mentioned less 8 (36.36%) in the *Herald* and more 14 (63.64%) in *The Post* (Table 2). This confirms the hypothesis made above. There was contradiction, nonetheless, in the position of the editorial board of each newspaper on the détente, with the *Herald* offering its full support of it in a couple of pieces and *The Post’s* doing the same in four pieces.

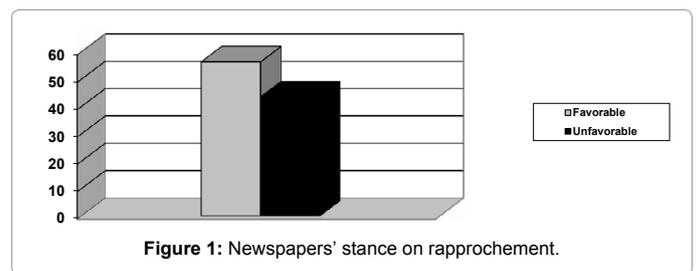
⁷ In his statement, Obama mentioned the myriad Cubans who have come to Miami often with nothing more than “hope in their hearts” and the great achievements that they have contributed to the advancement of the US.

Favorable Stance

Many commentators have offered introspective views and exhibited an unbridled euphoria since Obama’s opening to Cuba, arguing that engagement is better than confrontation. They contend that fifty four years of sanctions have not promoted freedom in Cuba. In two pieces, the editorial board of the *Herald* supported the détente-but with caution. The policy change, noted the paper, is “a new beginning, a milestone in US-Cuba relations” that should end this five-decade-old diplomatic rupture; it is of “historic significance, a train that has been a long time coming”.

Katrina Heuvel of *The Post* described the restoration of US-Cuba diplomatic relations as “a decision to recognize reality” because the US has, for five decades, pursued a failed Cuba policy. “The embargo hurt the Cuban people it claimed to help and bolstered the regime that it intended to undermine,” added Heuvel. *Herald* journalist Carl Hiaasen depicted the agreement as “a breeze of sanity”. It is astonishing, added Hiaasen, to hear people still attempting to defend Washington’s policy of isolating Cuba, which stands out as “one of the worst foreign-policy backfires in diplomatic history” that has achieved nothing but weaken US influence in the Caribbean and the Americas.

Eugene Robinson, an opinion writer at *The Post*, described the Cuba shift as a long overdue move that could speed the downfall of the Castro regime and called on its opponents to clarify why they think a policy that has failed for half a century can ever work. Citing how the US sustained diplomatic ties with the Soviet Union during the Cold War and Richard Nixon’s opening of dialogue with China, Robinson contended: “History argues powerfully for engagement as the best way to deal with repressive, adversarial regimes.” Robinson visited Cuba ten times between 2000 and 2004 while researching his book *Last Dance in Havana*, and he said that those visits have made him respect the Cuban people more and the Castro regime less. Obama made the right decision, proclaimed the *Herald*. Just as Nixon initiated dialogue with China, Obama desires to be remembered as the president who opened talks with Cuba.



| | Favorable | | Unfavorable | | Neutral/Balanced | | Total | |
|-----------------------|-----------|---------|-------------|---------|------------------|---------|-------|-----|
| | N | (%) | N | (%) | N | (%) | N | (%) |
| Miami Herald (100) | 13 | (34.21) | 17 | (44.74) | 9 | (21.05) | 39 | |
| Washington Post (100) | 18 | (56.25) | 7 | (21.88) | 7 | (21.88) | 32 | |
| Total (100) | 31 | (43.66) | 24 | (33.80) | 16 | (22.54) | 71 | |

$\chi^2=4.556$; $p=0.05$; $df=1$

Table 1: Distribution of newspapers' stance toward the thaw in USA Cuba relations.

| | Cold War | | Communist/Communism | | Total | |
|-----------------|----------|---------|---------------------|---------|-------|-------|
| | N | (%) | N | (%) | N | (%) |
| Miami Herald | 8 | (36.36) | 23 | (57.5) | 31 | (100) |
| Washington Post | 14 | (63.64) | 17 | (42.5) | 31 | (100) |
| Total | 22 | (35.48) | 40 | (64.52) | 62 | (100) |

Table 2: Distribution of newspapers' mentioning of “Cold War” and “communist/communism”.

In a *Herald* op-ed, Secretary of State John Kerry, Secretary of Commerce Penny Pritzker, and Treasury Secretary Jacob Lew stressed that the thaw will benefit both Americans and Cubans. “Our new US policy on Cuba reflects the reality that past policies-although well-intentioned-no longer suit today’s situation”. Luis David Losada, a sixty-seven-year-old Cuban American living in Miami called on the Cuban community in a *Herald* letter to admit that the embargo has not worked and to support Obama’s new Cuba policy. He posed the following question to his fellow Cuban Americans?

President Jimmy Carter spoke in a *Post* op-ed of how sanctions only hurt innocent civilians and not the political elite and called for lifting the embargo from on Cuba. We help dictators achieve their objectives by “punishing their already suffering subjects and letting them claim to be saviors”. The US, argued a *Post* letter, holds strong ties with non-democratic countries, such as China and Vietnam, and these relations are not only vital to our world leadership but also “yield benefit”. If the US desires influence and better human rights in Cuba, it needs to be there, pointed out Elizabeth Newhouse, director of the Washington, DC-based Center for International Policy’s Cuba Project. She added in her *Post* letter that President Obama’s astute new Cuba policy is “much more likely to be effective in preparing for the post-Castro era than any policy we’ve tried until now”. The embargo on the Cuban people is unjust and violates the sovereignty of nations, commented José Maunel Pallí, President of the Miami-based World Wide Title, in the *Herald*. “We need to free Cuba from American politics, and this is a task for all Cubans to undertake, even those who answer with Pavlovian⁸ applause whenever an American politician hollers a *Viva Cuba Libre!*⁹ somewhere in Miami”.

Unfavorable Stance

Unlike that of the *Herald*, the editorial board of *The Post* was critical of the rapprochement with four pieces grieving that Obama unexpectedly granted the Castro regime a “comprehensive bailout.” There can be no doubt that “Cuba’s hardline intelligence apparatus obtained exactly what it sought when it made Mr. Gross a de facto hostage,” noted *The Post*, even though the Obama administration has tried to picture Gross’s discharge as a separate issue from the spy swap. We cannot end an embargo just because it failed in abolishing communism, continued *The Post*. While Havana celebrates what it sees as victory over Washington, Cubans who strive for basic freedoms are harassed and arrested, added *The Post*’s editorial board in another piece. “If support for the Cuban people and American values is supposed to be the point of this process, then it is off to a very poor start”.

In “Castroism Has Won-Again,” prominent Cuban blogger Yoani Sánchez argued in the *Herald* that the rapidly deteriorating health of Gross-who was held in Cuban prison for five years for assisting Cuban Jews with Internet technology-and threat to commit suicide was what compelled Castro to release him. “In the game of politics, totalitarian regimes manage to overpower the democracies because they control public opinion inside their countries,” qualified Sánchez. Cuba is a “terrorist state,” observed journalist Helen Ferré in the *Herald*, and it is eager to be removed from the list so that it can access certain credits. She regretted that Obama’s “concessions” constitute “an assault on American values as communist dictators are rewarded”. Jackson Diehl, deputy editorial page editor of *The Post*, criticized what he called Obama’s “chaos theory” which has been pushing him not to support regime change in Cuba because of fear of eruption of violence,

civil war, or counterrevolution as witnessed in Iraq, Syria, Egypt, and Libya. This explains Obama’s offer of what amounts to “a bailout to the Castros just as they were facing the twin threats of losing Venezuelan oil subsidies and mounting popular pressure for basic freedoms.” Diehl cautioned that the economic benefits of engagement with Cuba are minimal while the chances that sanctions could bring about regime change are far greater.

In the opinion of renowned *Post* columnist George Will, Obama’s new policy is justifiable if it will enhance the political conditions of the Cuban people by laying into their island economic and cultural forces that can defeat tyranny. Obama is “so phobic about George W Bush’s miscarried ‘regime change’ in Iraq that he cannot embrace, or at least enunciate, a regime change policy toward Cuba,” added Will. Obama, remarked Diehl, can naturally make the case for “appeasing the Castros,” but his argument that Cubans should not wish for their downfall as a path toward freedom is not only denigrating; it is incorrect. Citing how change of dictatorial and communist regimes in Romania, Indonesia, and East Germany has brought successful transition to democracies, Diehl continued,

Authoritarian leaders themselves, from the Castros to Egypt’s generals to China’s first secretaries, routinely offer a version of Obama’s argument-that the alternative to them is chaos-as reason for dodging the liberalizing steps Washington urges. Governments such those in China and Vietnam have proved far more adept than US policymakers anticipated in pocketing the profits of US investment and trade while preventing political liberalization.

It is both “naive and fallacious” to believe that normalizing diplomatic ties with the authoritarian state will speed Castros’ demise and bring about a democratic government, wrote Jerry Haar, a professor of business at Florida International University, in the *Herald*. “The expectation that economic liberalization leads to political liberalization is unfounded historically,” so curb your enthusiasm. Charles Lane, a *Post*’s editorial writer, described Obama’s policy shift as “nuanced morally” because Washington is reconciling with a regime “whose misdeeds have included inviting Soviet nuclear weapons onto its soil, sponsoring violent guerrilla groups throughout the Western Hemisphere, harboring fugitives,” and violating the basic rights of its citizens.

When trading with authoritarian governments, “the theory that improvements in material conditions usher in democratic governance is demonstrably false,” wrote José Azel, a scholar of Cuban-American studies at the University of Miami, in the *Herald*. America’s tourism and investment on the island will not help ordinary Cubans, observed *Post* columnist Marc Thiessen. It will help the regime “repress them” because it has monopoly on employment, with almost everyone in the country working for the state, added Thiessen. Like Thiessen, *Post* columnist Charles Krauthammer criticized the viewpoint that material conditions will eventually bring about democratic reform in Cuba. Krauthammer said Obama should give item by item, and not in abundance, and get something in return; for example, relax part of the embargo in return for Internet access and tie further normalization to ending police repression.

There was fear echoed that by normalizing relations with Cuba, Washington is legitimizing a “terrorist” state. Republican Representative Carlos Curbelo of Florida spoke of Obama’s poor decision, dishonesty of the Castro regime, and how a well-funded Castro government could cause a rise in anti-Americanism around the globe. “The President has given every anti-American dictator and terrorist group a blueprint for successfully extorting the United States: Take an American hostage.

8 Pavlovian refers to Russian physiologist Ivan P. Pavlov (1849-1936) who developed the concept of the conditioned reflex.

9 Spanish for “Long live Cuba Free!”

Be patient, and eventually you'll extract every concession you seek," added Curbelo, a Cuban American. A new business model of spies for hostage has been created, and there is "a great supply of Cuban spies in the United States and a great supply of potential American tourists and businesspeople now available for the taking," cried Emilio Palomo, president-elect of the Miami-based Facts about Cuban Exiles. Likewise, two Washington, DC-based lawyers wondered about how Washington can renew diplomatic relations with a country which is on the list of state sponsors of terrorism. By re-establishing relations with Cuba, Obama is legitimizing Castro's "oppressive regime," remarked Azel, author of the *Mañana in Cuba* which examines the prospects of contemporary Cuba.

Both Washington and Havana believe that the accord will benefit their political goals, but there will be no win-win in this negotiation; "one government or the other is likely to lose," qualified a *Post* op-ed by Tom Gjelten, a correspondent for National Public Radio and author of *Bacardi and the Long Fight for Cuba*. If Obama's policy, which aims to avoid the regime's downfall, is truly to focus on helping Cubans "it would be well to promote the changes that their citizen leaders are seeking-not just the ones sought by their totalitarian rulers," said another *Post* commentary published on the same day. But what comes next then now that Gross is home? wondered Frank Calzon, a veteran anti-Castro activist who chairs the Washington DC-based Center for a Free Cuba. "One thing is certain: blackmail and extortion don't establish a tenable platform on which to rebuild United States-Cuba relations," added Calzon in his *Herald* op-ed.

Burial of Cold War Confrontation

After the announcements there was cheer for the normalization of US-Cuba relations and the tearing down of what some characterized as the last lingering pillar of the Cold War. "The Cold War died Wednesday" at a White House podium, cried *Post* journalist Manuel Roig-Franzia. "Its death was foretold, yet somehow it still came as a shock." As the *Herald* put it: The swap of the three Cuban spies for a US intelligent agent, together with the release of Gross and Cuban political prisoners, has several "Cold War precedents". That estrangement between Cuba and Washington survived undamaged, added Roig-Franzia, as "a relic of the Cold War," which may have ultimately ended with the collapse of the Soviet Union in 1991 but endured in the anomalous liaison between the two states. Likewise, Tim Padgett, an editor at the Miami-based WLRN Public Radio, spoke of an "outdated, Cold-War-relic Cuba strategy" which Obama has replaced with a policy that lets the US "masticate instead of isolate." Padgett's *Herald* op-ed was titled "Now Ditch the Embargo, as Well".

Commentators emphasized that in the post-Cold War era Cuba does not pose a security threat to America, and that the country's Cold War overtime is concluding. "The Cold War is over; the Soviet Union no more," exclaimed Heuvel. Obama's shift to renew diplomatic relations with the "Cold War foe" is the right move, Robinson accentuated. In Will's opinion, the criticisms by conservative US politicians of the détente are spontaneous and seem indicative of "Cold War Nostalgia." The agreement is "a historic turning of the page on enmities born of a different era and toward a brighter and more promising future," wrote Kerry, Pritzker, and Lew. "Since US-Cuban relations were frozen, the world has been transformed; the Cold War ended a quarter century ago." A Cold War which, according to Krauthammer, the US won by containing, constraining, squeezing and ultimately exhausting the Soviets and forcing them to concede. Obama, concluded the *Herald*, should be commended for ending a Cold War-era attitude that kept the US in conflict with a close neighbor.

Democracy and Human Rights

Questions were raised regarding Cuba's human rights record and whether Havana will release all the political detainees. Without regard to their position toward the thaw, articles stressed that Havana must show clear indications of its intent to respect human rights, free speech, and democratic change. Ferré, for instance, asked: "If the embargo is a failed policy, as the president says, what can be said of a band of brothers that has led the island to ruin for more than five decades and are directly responsible for countless human-rights abuses-and outright murder?" *The Post* stressed that before signing an agreement with the Castros, Obama should have secured a commitment for freedom of expression, establishment of political parties, and freeing of political prisoners without expelling them from Cuba. It doubts that Havana will release the political prisoners because Castro made a similar promise four years ago, so the White House "has purchased the same horse already sold to the Vatican and Spain".

Obama, said *The Post*, claims that reconciliation will make the US more effective in boosting political reform in Cuba, but this contradicts with our "experience with Communist regimes such as Vietnam, where normalization has led to no improvements on human rights in two decades." The paper argued that what the Castro regime is banking on is an outcome similar to that of Vietnam's, in which we see an abundance of American tourists and business investment that will empower the Castros to maintain their "totalitarian system" forever. Obama may allege that he has demolished "a 50-year-old failed policy; what he has really done is give a 50-year-old failed regime a new lease on life". Palomo pointed out that all we see in Cuba today are restrictions on freedom of expression, religion, and the press. "There will not be a party in Miami until the Cuban people are free and there are political parties in Cuba."

There were strong doubts among Cuban Americans that the policy shift will help change the country's "dark" human rights record. Calzon, for example, criticized Havana's treatment of prisoners and how it does not allow international human rights organizations to inspect its prisons. He lamented that Obama gave the Castros everything they want without getting anything in return. Obama, wrote Ferré, just "blew oxygen" into the declining Cuban economy which will benefit the Castro dynasty and elitists and not ordinary Cubans. The Cuban regime tramples the most basic rights to its citizens, stipulated Lane who doubts that the Obama administration, or its successor, will have the "diplomatic smarts and the attention span" to motivate the Castros to allow their people more freedom. So let us demand that the Castro regime be held responsible for human-rights abuses, wrote movie director Joe Cardona in the *Herald*.

There was also the debate that policy change, greater openness, and more Internet access could prod Havana toward democratic reform, and that the US is already trading robustly with countries that have horrible human rights records-such as China, Vietnam, and Saudi Arabia-and hence it should not place an embargo on Cuba. In a letter in the *Herald*, a Cuban who immigrated to the US fifty four years ago commended Obama for his success in changing a failed isolationist policy and doing what no other US president has dared to. He added, Just like the fall of Communism in Europe, once democracy slips into the public it can't be stopped. Once the people of Cuba taste what life is all about, once they awaken to what is happening around the world, once they taste freedom and democracy, no Castro or Communist government will take that from them ever again.

Cuban-American Community

Cuban dissidents complained that Obama betrayed his promise to them because he did not consult with Cuba's opposition movements and that Havana has received vast concessions from the US without being expected to make vital changes to its politics. They moan that Castro remains in power and call on Havana to free political prisoners, allow for freedom of expression, and the establishment of political parties. But there was also hope among some. Listen to what Cardona has to say: The policy shift "was but a blip on the American national political spectrum. Yet for many Cuban Americans in Miami it was life altering-the paradigm of US-Cuba relations was reset to a place it hadn't been in most of our lifetimes."

Anti-Castro sentiment among Cuban dissidents and Miami Cubans was evident in the *Herald*. The outspoken Cuban community of South Florida, particularly older ones, battled to accept the fact that a Cuban flag could soon fly over a Cuban embassy in Washington. Thiessen believes that the majority of Cuban dissidents oppose easing the embargo. Obama, he wrote, has granted the Castros the legitimacy and political recognition they badly needed. Unless true democratic changes materialize on the island, Congress should heed the demands of dissidents in Cuba and reject endorsing any more easing of economic sanctions. "The dissident movement," wrote Sánchez in another *Herald* article, "finds itself facing one of the greatest challenges of its long-suffering trajectory. It must take advantage of every crack that opens, slip its demands into negotiations that heretofore have included only two governments, and prepare to pass from the heroic phase to the political stage".

Cuban exiles shouted that Obama deceived them. Cuban exiles, wrote Ferré, cheerfully celebrated the release of Gross because they know well what it means to be a political prisoner; however, those who lost their loved ones at the hands of the Castro regime feel deceived by Obama. A *Herald* editorial emphasized that Cuban exiles should receive the respect they deserve, particularly in Miami where they have flourished. It added, Older Cuban exiles-the ones who have never stopped chanting "Viva Cuba Libre!" at large patriotic gatherings-fled Fidel Castro's communist takeover in the '50s, '60s and '70s because they wanted to live in the democracy America markets so well across the world. They have never forgiven Castro for hijacking their homeland into a dictatorship, executing thousands, derailing their lives and tearing Cuban families apart.

The *Herald* editorial was titled "The Pain of Cuban Exiles".

This criticism of the rapprochement continued unabated in commentaries by Cuban Americans and dissidents. Rosa María Payá Acevedo is a member of the Cuban Christian Liberation Movement and daughter of Oswaldo Payá, one of Cuba's best-known dissident whom she claims died in a 2002 car crash provoked by Cuban intelligence. In a *Post*'s op-ed published as a letter addressed to Obama, Acevedo wrote: "Mr. President, your laws are not what is preventing the free market and access to information in Cuba; it is the Cuban government's legislation and its constant censorship." It is a government which was not elected by its people and practices "state murder." Acevedo called on Obama to involve Cubans in upcoming US-Cuba negotiations, including the impending Summit of the Americas, so that their pleas are heard. Like Acevedo, Cardona called on members of the Cuban-American community to engage in the political process. The Cuban community in the US has a golden chance at hand today to ensure that the battle for freedom in their motherland is not founded on US partisan politics. Cardona added that it is time to eradicate this "patronizing 'Cuba si,

Castro no"¹⁰ hollow promises made by stiff, gringo politicians having café at Versailles¹¹ and begin to actively and constructively engage in the new paradigm so that decisions are no longer made for us."

Citing the large number of Cuban immigrants in Florida and their influence on U.S. policymakers, a letter in *The Post* called on Washington to normalize relations with Cuba, arguing that the problem "is not policy but politics, especially in those states now home to the Batista-era immigrants and others who would profit from the return to the "good old days" of Batista-style government"¹². In Hiaasen's opinion, the embargo, and as "Miami's exile community knows," has made life tougher for Cubans, who sometimes are unable to get the basic needs of life, such as medicines and bread. Ric Herrero, executive director of the U.S.-based advocacy group #CubaNow, believes the rapprochement is a "historic victory" for Cuban Americans whom he claims played a key role in the negotiations. He said that over the past two years the Obama administration consulted with distinguished Cuban civic and religious leaders and with renowned Cuban organizations such as his. We all knew one fact: Our policy was not working, concluded Herrero.

Conclusion

America's record with Cuba has been rather dismal, with an intransigent mind-set, particularly from older Cuban exiles and Republican politicians. But things are different now after 17 December 2014. Washington and Havana fully realize today that reaching solutions requires negotiations and not confrontation, and the prisoner swap did pave the way for the historic détente. Obama has truly undertaken a step that no other U.S. president dared to take, and this will be part of his legacy.

The debate on whether the thaw could form a positive future for the Cuban people was fierce in the *Herald* and *The Post*, with some arguing that we should no longer be morose about the future of U.S.-Cuba relations while others offering a pessimistic view. The paradox in coverage somewhat echoes the split that polls have shown toward the thaw. In general, the argument went as follows: (1) Cuba is no longer a Cold War menace; (2) Obama should promote democracy in the island and include Cuban dissidents in talks; (3) younger Cuban Americans are more in favor of normalizing relations with Cuba than older ones; and (4) Venezuela's troubled economy is a factor in pushing Havana to initiate dialogue with Washington. Much remains to be seen about how the reconciliation between the two states will unfold and the US media's coverage of it, particularly those in cities where there is a large Cuban community.

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¹⁰Spanish for "Yes to Cuba, no to Castro."

¹¹Versailles is a popular café in Miami's Little Havana neighborhood where heated political debates on Cuba often take place.

¹²Fulgencio Batista was Cuba's president from 1940 to 1944 and dictator from 1952 to 1959, the year he was overthrown by the Cuban Revolution.

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