

Bill Hudnut visited Cuba in October, 2015, with a group of other former congressmen. Here are his personal reflections on the visit. He writes in the "editorial we" -- i.e. his views are not necessarily those of the others on the visit.

The New Cuba

As the poet once wrote—

“New occasions teach new duties
Time makes ancient good uncouth
They must ever up and onward
Who would keep abreast of truth”

(James Russell Lowell)

We have just concluded an informal study tour of Cuba. We return to the United States enthusiastic about the process of normalizing relations with Cuba, and convinced that many Americans hold an outdated view of Cuba . . . including ourselves before our week-long visit. For years, Americans have clung to their perceptions of Cuba based on old realities. Now we need to demythologize our thinking, disenthral ourselves from old fears and misconceptions, recognize that change is occurring, and embrace the opportunities for a new era in Cuban-American relations.

To us, it is clear that a NEW Cuba is slowly replacing the OLD Cuba.

After Castro led a successful revolution against the Batista dictatorship 1959-61, we Americans immediately recognized this fact: Cuba was a Communist country run by a dictatorship that was a puppet of the old Russia. Cuba was an enemy, a terrorist state. The people were oppressed, poverty was rampant, police guarded every corner, private property was expropriated, and private businesses were nationalized. Religion was banned as were radio and TV, the state owned everything, human rights dissidents were thrown in jail or executed by the hundreds, the mass murderer Che Guevara, and Fidel were in charge, food was scarce, an elite autocracy enjoyed all the benefits, and the presence of this island just 90 miles south of Florida represented a serious threat to American safety and well-being. Many Cuban families whose possessions, land and businesses were appropriated by the revolutionary government, fled the island, came to Florida, and will not relent in their hostility toward Cuba until Fidel is gone.

Eventually, diplomatic relations were broken, an embargo was placed on the sale of American products (except food and medicine) to Cuba, tourism to

Cuba was banned, the Bay of Pigs and Cuban missile crisis occurred in 1961-2, a quarter million Cubans fled in "Freedom Flights" to the United States, and boat lifts freed up more Cubans to come to America, including many mentally ill and criminal types who were dumped on our country. Normalization became impossible.

But that is the past. Those old realities are disappearing. A new Cuba is slowly emerging and Americans need to disenthral themselves from old ways of thinking.

Cuba is neither a terrorist nor a statist nation any more. . Fidel is seldom heard from, his brother Raul seems more reform minded and open to change. We saw no remnants of the old Russian presence. Average Cubans seem genuinely warm and friendly to Americans. They are pleased that diplomatic relations with America have been renewed after 54 years, and that our embassy has returned. A market economy is in the making, as the %25 of privately owned enterprises attest. The arts, often a source of expressions of discontent, are flourishing. Dissidents are harassed and jailed, but their number is diminishing. The government seems to be moving away from the previous outrageous oppression. Billboards filled with propaganda occasionally appear but they are few and far between. Guns are not permitted, crime is low, and there are no signs of an omnipresent police or military force. Two million visitors from around the world come to the island each year. There is still plenty of poverty (the 400 workers in the cigar factory we visited make about 350 pesos (\$14) a month), but a middle class is growing. Students are required to learn English. Pre-Revolutionary homes are being restored, and behind crumbling facades, many buildings need significant rehabilitation. The streets are clean, colors abound on physical structures in keeping with the Spanish heritage, and trees line the boulevards.

Freedom of worship and speech have been restored, and people are allowed to say what they please short of inciting a riot. The TVs are full of American news (CNN, ESPN, the Weather Channel), movies and serials such as House of Cards and The Good Wife. While voting by consensus characterizes Parliamentary debate, a great diversity of candidates for election characterizes politics at the local level (One does not even have to be a Communist to run for public office.) Some of the entrenched bureaucracy still hold resentful views toward the United States, but there are many more who have changed their thinking and appear more open to new relationships and negotiations with our country.

Most importantly, a Bilateral Commission formed in August, is working to negotiate improved relations between the two countries. Its work needs to be better known in America. These auspicious discussions are based on mutual respect between two sovereign nations, according to Cuba's lead negotiator, Josefina Vidal Ferreiro, Director General of the American desk for the Ministry of Foreign Affairs. She emphasized to us the importance of achieving some short term goals in such areas as environmental protection, aviation, telecommunications, technology (particularly in the field of oil drilling) , and alternative energy sources like solar and wind power. The aim is to create a solid foundation for negotiations that will in the long run provide a stable structure for normalization of relations and the discussion of such vexing issues as human rights, Guantanamo, and the American embargo.

The foreign minister spoke of a "new chapter." Change is occurring in a new Cuba. It will come slowly, not overnight. Negotiations need to continue, regardless of who is elected the next U.S. President in 2016. American attitudes about Cuba, so often based on the assumption the old Cuba still exists, must be modernized to recognize the new realities. Cynicism must be replaced by hope. We return to our country hopeful that positive leadership will lead to positive improvements in relations between these two neighbors. As we say at midnight on Dec. 31, "Ring out the old, ring in the new."