

## **Lift the ban -- let Americans visit Cuba**

By Richard G. Lugar and Howard L. Berman  
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U.S. law lets American citizens travel to any country on earth, friend or foe -- with one exception: Cuba. It's time for us to scrap this anachronistic ban, imposed during one of the chilliest periods of the Cold War.

Legislation to abolish restrictions on travel to Cuba has been introduced in both chambers of Congress. And on Thursday the House Foreign Affairs Committee will hold a hearing examining the rationale for the travel ban.

This ban has prevented contact between Cubans and ordinary Americans, who serve as ambassadors for the democratic values we hold dear. Such contact would help break Havana's chokehold on information about the outside world. And it would contribute to improving the image of the United States, particularly in Latin America, where the U.S. embargo on Cuba remains a centerpiece of anti-Washington grievances.

While opponents argue that repealing the travel ban would indicate approval of the Cuban human rights record, many human rights organizations -- among them Freedom House and Human Rights Watch -- have called for abolishing travel restrictions.

There is no doubt that Raúl Castro's government continues to ban most political activity not controlled by the Cuban Communist Party. Opposition parties are illegal, virtually all media remain state controlled, and Cuba has the highest number of political prisoners of any country in the Americas. But isolation from outside visitors only strengthens the Castro regime.

U.S. travelers' dollars, furthermore, could aid the underground economy and the small self-employed sector permitted by the state, strengthening an important foundation of independence from Cuba's authoritarian system.

Travel ban defenders view sanctions as leverage over the Cuban government and their abolition as a concession. But over the last five decades, it has become clear that isolation will not induce the Castro regime to take steps toward political liberalization. Conditionality is not leverage in this case.

Our current approach has made any policy changes contingent on Havana, not U.S. interests, and it has left Washington an isolated bystander, watching events on the island unfold at a distance.

Finally, while travel restrictions are contrary to our foreign policy interests, they also impede the right of Americans to freedom of speech, association and to travel. Sometimes a travel ban may be necessary, but nothing about the Cuba situation today justifies such an infringement on our basic liberties.

The Obama administration has already made a move in the right direction by lifting restrictions on travel and remittances for Cuban-Americans and opening the way for greater telecommunications links with the island.

It is now time for the Congress to take the next step for all Americans.

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