

San Francisco Chronicle

OPINION // OPEN FORUM

Cuba is a case study in the failure of two governments: theirs and ours

By Shanin Specter Dec. 30, 2019 Updated: Dec. 30, 2019 3:37 p.m.



Old American cars are driven in a street of Havana, on December 12, 2019. - Cuba and the United States, former enemies of the Cold War, had a historic approach five years ago, but their relations deteriorated after the election of Donald Trump, who reinforced sanctions against the island. (Photo by YAMIL LAGE / AFP) (Photo by YAMIL LAGE/AFP via Getty Images)

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A recent week with my family on Cuba's backroads and in its backward capital of Havana remind us that this island nation is a study in the failure of two governments — theirs and ours.

The simplest things are, as they say in Cuba, “complicated.” Stuff that 21st-century Americans take for granted, such as toiletries, functioning electrical outlets, running water, serving utensils, decaf, telephone service and reading light are spotty.

The government says that the weakest are protected, but basic safety measures such as seat belts, speed limits, a real drinking age, child-proof lighters and bike helmets are absent.

But Cuba has lots of plastic bags and straws, roadside garbage fires and diesel engines, though they rhetorically nod at environmentalism.

Winston Churchill’s quip that the virtue of socialism is the equal sharing of misery comes to mind on a Cuban farm.

Tenant farmers we visited are talented and imaginative, but the government collects a hefty percentage of their agricultural bounty. So, should they work hard, buy new equipment, invest and expand? Of course not.

While our government bars use of an American credit card, making travel in Cuba difficult, the Cuban government has retaliated by pirating American television, including the NFL. So you can watch the Philadelphia Eagles in your hotel room, but you must pay your hotel bill in cash with absurdly inflated Cuban tourist pesos.

By law, dollars must be exchanged at an obscenely taxed rate; it’s cheaper to furtively pay with dollars on the street and get a 1-to-1 or even more favorable exchange.

Poverty is incessant and grinding. Nearly everyone lives very modestly. Roofs are corrugated metal, and wiring is dangerous. Rooms are tiny, though spotless, at least where we visited.

Parents confide that their children are poorly educated.

Cubans don’t enjoy Western freedoms. A guide rolls his eyes when asked tough questions about civil rights. In the presence of other Cubans, he hints at what he thinks, saying, “Americans and Cubans are equally free to criticize the president, so long as it’s your president.” Privately, he says he’d take 1950s Batista “with a few changes” for what they’ve got now.

There’s a pervasive sense of hopelessness about the future. People don’t seem to smile as easily as we do.

Havana today is marginally improved since my visits in the early part of this century. People now have cell phones and internet access, and there are a few new hotels.

But the better food is still in private homes and small restaurants, called *paladares*. And nearly no one goes to Cuba to eat or shop, unless they're in the market for rum or cigars.

The crumbling limestone architecture of Havana's magnificent golden age would be gentrified in a New York minute if it were anywhere else. But instead it decays like the rusting pre-revolution American cars that still rumble along Havana's streets.

Except for some hotel building, the construction crane is an extinct species.

But astride the failures and limitations is a colossal asset: the people of Cuba. Their fine art, dance and music are exceptional. Maybe the government's thumb on most everything else has inspired cultural expression.

A skilled children's dance troupe performing on a Saturday afternoon in a terrific fine arts collective in Matanzas delights the people of this rural province, reminding us that there are lots of paths to joy.

When a local is asked what's the most beautiful thing about Cuba, he says "family loyalty." Up to four generations live under one roof. While that's a matter of economic necessity, it's also good in lots of obvious ways.

So what's next for Cuba? If the past 60 years are prologue, it's tempting to say "nothing great."

But there was a glimmer of hope four years ago, when the United States temporarily loosened its mindless embargo and the Cuban government signaled an interest in reform. If that could happen again, the potential for gigantic American investment and Cuban advancement is limitless.

If we elect a new president this year, that spigot will probably be turned back on, this time with full force, I hope.

And if our current president is re-elected, perhaps he'll reverse and see Cuba as a pathway to establish relations with an authoritarian regime, something he seems to want to do elsewhere. Or maybe he'll use commerce to send a message to the Cuban people that its government exists only to perpetuate itself.

Freed of the electoral pressures of the expat Cuban community in perennially 50-50 Florida, the president could look at Cuba as an enormous real estate play, which it is.

The Cuban people are waiting with open hearts and open arms.

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