Is the U.S. Economic Embargo on Cuba Morally Defensible?

Editor’s Note: Pope John Paul II on more than one occasion has called for an end to the U.S. embargo of Cuba. While the embargo has recently been softened with respect to medicines and food, some still argue that the essentials of the embargo be kept in place. In an op-ed column in the New York Times (June 24, 2000) “On Trade, Cuba is not China,” Senator Jesse Helms wrote: “Those who advocate lifting the embargo speak in broad terms about using investment to promote democracy in Cuba. But I challenge them to explain exactly how, under this system, investment can do anything to help the Cuban people.” As it happens, Logos had already commissioned the following essay by two Cuban economists, Drs. Vilma Hidalgo and Milagros Martinez, both of the University of Havana. Responding to the challenge in detail, the essay closes with direct citation of the Pope’s solemn appeal.
I. The Economic Costs: Embargo or Blockade?

The year 1959, with the triumph of the Cuban Revolution, marked a dramatic turning point in relations between Cuba and the United States. From that year to the present, relations have been conducted within a framework of stark confrontation. Economic sanctions have been one of the mainstays of an openly hostile U.S. foreign policy toward the Cuban political regime. For a small nation like Cuba, dependent in large measure on a meager array of principal exports with increasingly depressed prices in the international market, having to face an economic blockade throughout the course of four decades has unquestionably been one of the greatest challenges in its history.

The set of economic sanctions imposed against Cuba cannot be aptly characterized using the term “embargo”; rather, as we shall argue in this essay, given their scope, nature and strategic implementation, we are justified in using the term “blockade.” There are two additional reasons that validate the distinction between these terms in the case of Cuba. First, the economic sanctions are not applicable exclusively to bilateral economic relations between Cuba and the United States but rather have been extended to apply to third countries, and second, they constitute economic aggression involving agencies of the highest level in the U.S. government, with the strategic objective of bringing down the political system in Cuba and without flinching at the prospect of subjecting the Cuban people to penury, hunger, and shortages of staple goods as a means to this end.

In 1961, the United States broke diplomatic relations with Cuba, and in 1962 the economic blockade was officially proclaimed, although many of its measures dated back even further. Among other restrictive steps, all kinds of commercial exchange with Cuba were prohibited, regardless of the nature of the activity or ultimate destination of the goods, including reshipment of Cuban goods from third countries; the use of the dollar in business transactions with Cuba was forbidden; commercial flights from the United States were
suspended, and drastic restrictions were placed on the travel of U.S. citizens to the island. Thus, Cuba was forced suddenly to redefine its international trade practices, cut off from the trading partner on whom it had traditionally relied, and accordingly its access to one of the world’s most competitive markets and to a significant source of state-of-the-art technologies worldwide was curtailed.

Although the damage these measures brought about was always felt, the extent of their influence was relatively minor during the seventies and eighties, as Cuba was a part of the Council for Mutual Economic Aid (COMECON), which afforded it preferential status, especially vis-à-vis the Soviet Union. Commerce with the socialist countries of Eastern Europe and the U.S.S.R. represented approximately 80 percent of the country’s trade. But in the early nineties, with the disappearance of the socialist bloc, the Cuban economy once again suffered a radical change in its international economic relations. On this occasion, Cuba not only lost its principal trading partners but also saw the interruption of a set of long-term development programs provided for by COMECON. The country fell victim almost immediately to an economic crisis of major magnitude: its gross domestic product and imports fell 35 percent and 75 percent respectively, directly impacting the islanders’ standard of living. Amid these difficult conditions a pragmatic economic program was undertaken, one designed to reintegrate the country into the international context.

Within the framework of this new strategy, business relationships with subsidiaries of U.S. companies in third countries were expanded. Cuban trade with subsidiaries had existed since 1975, as a result of amending the Regulations Controlling Cuban Assets of 1963, but it was not until the late eighties that trade became more firmly entrenched. The U.S. Treasury Department estimated that in 1991 the exchange between Cuba and the subsidiaries had reached $718 million, with 90 percent of Cuban imports comprising medicines and foodstuffs. This trade had been rather well balanced and there-
fore beneficial to both parties, representing what might have been the germ of future resumption of business relations between the two nations.

Moreover, given the magnitude of the crisis and Cuba’s marginal status in international capital markets, one key tenet of the economic program during the nineties was an openness to direct foreign investment, particularly in the tourism sector, which was emerging as an alternative to the export of primary commodities. Cuba’s process of opening up to foreign capital was strengthened in 1995 with the passage in the Cuban Parliament of the Foreign Investment Act (Act No. 77), which allowed existing legislation to be adapted to conform to the new situation.

In this climate of vulnerability and crisis in the Cuban economy, the U.S. government resolved to redouble its economic sanctions, taking direct aim at Cuba’s efforts to regain a foothold in the international economic scene and intending to put a quick end to the country’s political regime. The clear extraterritorial nature of the sanctions was at the heart of the new proposals. In October 1992, following passage of the Torricelli Act, regulations governing the control of foreign assets were changed, and most licenses allowing entities located in third countries and owned or controlled by Americans to do business with Cuba could no longer be issued. The Torricelli Act also prohibited boats from entering U.S. ports within six months of having loaded or unloaded products in Cuban ports, a measure to which Cuba was particularly vulnerable, since in 1992 the Cuban fleet carried only 20 percent of trade merchandise. The elimination of trade with subsidiaries meant that Cuba must seek out new trading partners and negotiate credit terms and transportation agreements from a weaker bargaining position. There was even the risk that its supply of necessary foods and medicines would be definitively disrupted.

In 1995, although the situation remained tense, the Cuban economy showed signs of recovery, creating new speculation on the part
of the Americans about the efficacy of the sanctions in place and eventually leading to new initiatives. The passage of the Helms-Burton Act, in March 1996, was an explicit attempt to discourage foreign investment in the island and stifle the Cuban economy. Among other measures, this law threatened lawsuits in the United States against foreign corporations—as well as sanctions against company officers—if they benefited from transactions involving properties formerly owned by Americans (those nationalized during the early years of the Cuban Revolution). While the law did not actually interrupt the flow of foreign capital into the country, some foreign companies withdrew and others canceled plans for investment in the island.

According to estimates, from the time these measures were instituted until 1998, their economic impact on Cuba has been to the tune of more than $67 billion, equivalent to about four times Cuba’s gross domestic product and approximately sixteen years’ worth of exports in goods and services.

Economic effects on Cuba during the period 1960–1998

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>RESPONSIBLE FACTORS</th>
<th>MM USD</th>
</tr>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Export income lost</td>
<td>$30,195.8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Losses due to relocation of trade and commerce</td>
<td>$6,120.1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Effects on production of goods and services</td>
<td>$9,584.3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Effects on direct services of the population</td>
<td>$1,484.9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Direct effects on cultural activity and sports</td>
<td>$61.4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Monetary and financial effects</td>
<td>$7,440.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Brain drain (emigration of qualified personnel)</td>
<td>$2,206.7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>$57,093.2</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Source: National Institute for Economic Research (INIE)

In spite of the rigor with which studies have been carried out, it is difficult to fully address the broad spectrum of factors triggered by the economic blockade that have directly or indirectly harmed the
Cuban economy. The following are among those most often taken into account when calculating these effects:

- Increases in transportation costs, given the greater geographic distances, and the rising cost of access to international markets, as well as the risk of entering Cuban ports.
- Costs of stockpiling goods at levels greater than economically justifiable under normal conditions, given the increased uncertainty with respect to delivery of products and access to markets.
- Limited access to sources of financing under normal market conditions, costs associated with fluctuating exchange rates, as well as limits on multilateral renegotiation of Cuba’s foreign debt and obtaining new lines of official financing, all of which comes as a result of being unable to use the dollar in transactions with third countries.
- Losses occasioned by lack of access to export and import markets for goods and services. Particularly staggering have been the losses generated when the U.S. government decided to end the sugar export quota in the sixties and, more recently, potential income forfeited from tourism, not to be taken lightly, since before U.S.-Cuban relations were broken off a significant percentage of foreign visitors to the island were Americans.
- Increased investment and expense required to replace equipment produced in the United States, given the lack of spare equivalents in Cuba.
- Costs attributable to lack of access to cutting-edge technology and advantages of scientific-technical exchange.
- The appeal to emigrate felt by highly qualified Cuban personnel, creating a brain drain especially during the sixties.
- Costs attributable to increased risk discouraging foreign investment.
II. Costs to the Society:
Whom Has the Economic Blockade Harmed?

The prime victim of the economic blockade has unquestionably been the Cuban people. The blockade affects the Cuban population without regard to sex, age, race, religion, political creed, or social position, not only because it attacks basic means of living but also because it undermines the possibility of intellectual development and the spiritual well-being of the Cuban family.

In this essay we shall focus on three important and sensitive aspects of the harm caused to Cuban families by the blockade: the food supply, health, and the negative consequences felt by women in Cuba. We shall stress the impact that economic sanctions have had in heightening the crisis during the nineties. For the moment we do not delve into other dimensions of the problem, which may be less visible but are no less relevant, such as the effect on education, culture, scientific activity, and quality of life, as well as a more personal impact felt by sectors of the population such as children and the elderly.

In our effort to present an objective analysis we have often relied on quantifying the most tangible effects from an economic perspective, yet even so it has not been possible to evoke the full effect of the havoc wrought by each of the factors described in the preceding section as a function of ensuring adequate food supplies and levels of health among the population. Moreover, the toll in terms of human suffering cannot be quantified nor estimated, and consequently we shall allow the historic events themselves to bear witness to what has transpired, running the risk perhaps that the anecdotal nature of the events reported may seem to render our analysis simplistic.

Assuring Adequate Food Supplies and Good Health

In spite of the severity of the crisis, one of the goals of the economic program begun in Cuba during the nineties was to preserve social
gains and prevent the costs of this adjustment from impacting spending to benefit the society. Cutbacks required by the inevitable macroeconomic readjustment largely involved administrative costs and subsidies to public enterprise, while the national budgets for health and education remained virtually unchanged. An effort was made to ensure consumption of essential goods by all families through distribution of a quota of these items at subsidized prices. But in spite of good political intentions, the gravity of the monetary pressures that the nation faced led inevitably to lost ground with respect to assuring an adequate diet and maintaining the quality of basic services.

Cuban agriculture was not exempt from the crisis. In the face of shortages of fuel and farming supplies, the level of activity in this sector fell significantly, heightening the dependence on imported foods acquired at unfavorable market conditions. As a result, in a few years the effects on consumption by the general population were in evidence: daily caloric consumption, for example, dropped 34 percent, and protein intake plummeted 40 percent between 1989 and the worst year of the crisis, 1993. Despite a slight recent improvement, there is a long row to hoe before previous levels are reached: in 1989 the availability of food per capita was 3,108 caloric units and 73 grams of protein, while in 1997 these figures were 2,480 and 51.7, respectively. This drastic change in consumption levels affected the health of the population, as both men and women experienced weight loss, epidemics of some diseases previously unknown in the country broke out, and the birth weight of babies declined. In these difficult times, every additional dollar paid to import foodstuffs affected Cuban families, taking its toll in human terms.

When the Torricelli Act took effect, contracts valued at over $100 million with Argentine subsidiaries of Continental Grain, in New York, and Cargill, in Minnesota, for products such as wheat, soy, beans, peas and lentils had to be canceled. The U.S. market is obviously one of the most competitive in terms of production of
various types of foods. According to several studies, the average cost of importing grains coming from U.S. suppliers, including transportation charges, is $130 (US) per metric ton, substantially cheaper than importing the grain from Europe, which would cost around $270. This means, for example, that in 1997 the added cost for Cuba of importing beans was $24 million (US) dollars, and for importing wheat flour it is $7.8 million each year.

Likewise, restrictions imposed on shipping by sea raised transportation costs of food by 30 percent with respect to international rates and lengthened delivery cycles of goods to the people. Thus, for example, a New Zealand company that manufactures powdered milk declined to supply 1,500 metric tons in the face of refusal on the part of their shipping company to deliver the cargo to Cuban ports. Overall, it is estimated that in 1998, the added cost of importing essential foods, given the lack of access to U.S. markets, reached $30 million, which represented approximately 2 percent of exports that year and substantially reduced the global import budget. This figure is equivalent to 15,000 tons of powdered milk that Cuban children never received.

The impact on availability of food was not limited exclusively to direct importation of foodstuffs but also exerted considerable effect on the already weakened agro-industrial sector. The productivity of the agricultural and farming sector was severely hampered by the prohibition on selling items such as pesticides, fertilizers, animal feed, and fuel.

Two well-known cases were those of Bayer AG of Germany and Sanachem of South Africa. Bayer canceled sales of the pesticide Senicor because the company transferred production of the active ingredient to a plant in Kansas City. Bayer requested permission from the United States to continue exporting to Cuba, but permission was denied. In 1997, Dow Chemical bought the shares of the Sentrachem group of South Africa, owner of Sanachem, with which Cuba had enjoyed stable trading relations since 1992. In 1997 a Cuban import
firm had purchased pesticides valued at $82 million from Sanachem, yet after that acquisition the U.S. Treasury Department put an end to business dealings between the two companies, refusing even to grant a license to cover the shipment of products that were in transit.8

The human costs due to impact on the health sector are even more obvious and dramatic if we consider that U.S. companies produce more than 50 percent of important new drugs on the international market and that 90 percent of patents on new biotechnology products are granted to U.S. firms. Many of these products are vital to saving human lives and have no equivalents made in Cuba. After Torricelli, fourteen subsidiaries based in Germany, Sweden, Japan, France, Argentina, Italy, Australia, the Netherlands, Canada, Belgium and Switzerland that produce medicines and medical equipment stopped selling to Cuba.

Cuba is forbidden to buy, from U.S. companies or subsidiaries, products such as third-generation antibiotics, medicines and drugs used in postoperative pediatric cardiology and to treat infantile leukemia, modern cancer therapies, and medications for the relief of side effects, for the treatment of AIDS, and others. Cuba is also denied the ability to purchase equipment and replacement parts for donated equipment, as is the case of Kobe dialysis equipment, used with persons requiring transplants.

In addition, the situation was complicated after mergers and acquisitions among American and foreign companies in 1994 and 1995. In 1995, for example, the U.S. company Upjohn merged with the Swedish firm Pharmacia, which since 1970 had been selling medical equipment, reagents, chemotherapy drugs, and other products to a Cuban company. Cuba also lost an important supplier of diagnostic materials when Wisconsin’s Sybron International acquired Germany’s Nuc. Sales of pacemakers for heart patients were suddenly halted when Siemens of Sweden and Teletronics Pacing System of Australia transferred production and ownership to the United
States. As a result, the number of surgeries at Havana’s Cardiology Center, where more than half of Cuba’s pacemakers are implanted, dropped 50 percent between 1990 and 1995. The effect of this decline was considerable, since heart disease is the leading cause of death in Cuba.9

Despite the severity of these effects, thanks to the investment of physical and human capital in the Cuban health system for more than three decades and to the profound ethical commitment on the part of Cuban medical personnel, basic health indicators have not declined and continue to be comparable to those recorded in many industrialized nations.

**Impact on Cuban Women**

The economic blockade, like almost all events in a country’s economy, is reflected in people’s daily lives and especially in the context of family. Throughout the time of crisis, intensified by the blockade and coupled with the existence of cultural norms that continue to prevail in Cuba, Cuban women have been called upon to make a great sacrifice, becoming protagonists and strategists in the drama of family survival.

The analysis of the impact of the U.S. blockade on the lives of Cuban women and their family situation has been carefully studied by several of the country’s female academics.10 Taking these rigorous studies as a point of reference, we shall try to characterize and quantify the most salient effects in the nineties.

Cuba’s social plan called for the full participation of women in all society’s tasks, and this ideal has materialized in educational and cultural work carried out during four decades and in the strengthening of an institutional and legal framework that protects full equality of rights between men and women. Yet there still remain deeply rooted ideas, beliefs, and cultural traditions that assign to women the greater responsibilities associated with raising children, homemaking, domestic chores, and countless tasks to assure the well-being of
the family group. This is a characteristic still prevalent in Cuban families, although its manifestations vary in intensity according to age, educational level, social standing, and other factors. In contrast, women have made greater and greater inroads over the course of four decades, gaining enhanced professional status and successfully occupying positions in social, scientific, academic, technical, and other fields. In this sense, the economic crisis has brought greater complexity to the entire scenario, creating true conflicts for Cuban women.

The crisis heightened by the blockade affects Cuban women in various and diverse forms. In the family setting, where meeting basic needs of nutrition, personal and domestic hygiene, and adequate rest are paramount, accomplishing household chores can become a true dilemma for women in dire economic straits. Thus, Cuban women have experienced for themselves the harsh effects of the blockade on their regular routine, reflected in the daily difficulties created by shortages of food, delays in receiving supplies of essential products, difficulties in obtaining articles for personal and family hygiene, limitations in acquiring clothing and footwear, short supplies of medicines, the absence of transportation, and costs in terms of time, among many others. The scarcity of fuel during the first years of the crisis directly affected the life of Cuban households: for example, the average number of hours without electricity or water supplied to the domestic sector rose considerably during the period 1990–1995. In addition, the availability of electrical appliances and of replacement parts for existing machines was sharply reduced.\textsuperscript{11}

It is evident that during those years each Cuban woman became a true strategist of family survival, needing to meet not only the most basic needs for her family, but also assuring that each of its members, children and men, might continue to carry out their social roles and activities. Working just to get by, which now occupied most of her energies, also impinging on the satisfaction of her spiritual needs,
such as modest opportunities for enjoying recreation, time with family, and professional growth.

However, there has not been a return of Cuban women to the home in proportion to the intensity of the crisis, which is explained by a combination of two factors. First, in spite of cultural standards, the integration of women into the workplace is a gender victory that has been incorporated into her identity. For that reason, even in the worst of circumstances a majority of women were not willing to quit their jobs, even though continuing to work involved a great sacrifice of a personal nature. Second, with women’s entrance into the job market, many families were now benefited by the earnings brought home by women, income that became more and more essential in the context of crisis. Moreover, the contribution made by women to the family budget in many cases can hardly be overestimated, given their abilities and professional/technical skills.

Nevertheless, during these years there was a decline of roughly 16 percent in the female labor force, one particular effect of which was a restructuring of employment. One portion of the female labor force moved to the informal sector or worked in small-scale private businesses such as food preparation, family restaurant services, and providing lodging for tourists in their own homes. Now 27 percent of the labor force in this sector is female. These activities, while improving the living conditions of many families, reflect one of the contradictions imposed by the crisis: the migration of qualified workers. There was also a migration of the female labor force to the emerging formal sector. For example, 42.8 percent of employees in firms and mixed capital concerns are women.

In summary, even though women remained at the forefront of the labor arena, the search for alternative solutions to the multiple problems of everyday life exacted a heavy social toll. Additionally, it increased the conflicts between social and family commitments, between meeting family needs and spiritual needs, between indi-
Individual professional ambitions and those of the family. Many of these conflicts, which were also characteristic of earlier times, were aggravated and often led to unfortunate consequences for families, with divorce rates reaching unprecedented levels during the nineties.

Annual increase in number of divorces

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>YEAR</th>
<th>RATE (%)</th>
</tr>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1989</td>
<td>3.6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1990</td>
<td>3.5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1991</td>
<td>4.1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1992</td>
<td>5.9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1993</td>
<td>6.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1994</td>
<td>5.2</td>
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<tr>
<td>1995</td>
<td>3.7</td>
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<td>1996</td>
<td>3.7</td>
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<tr>
<td>1997</td>
<td>3.7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1998</td>
<td>3.6</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>


As in the case of all economic turmoil, the Cuban crisis also had a moral dimension. Obviously, although it is well known that a people’s values and economic situation are not always related in direct proportion, economic crises tend to bring on a crisis of values. The place of women in society was also affected by the decline in certain values that had previously been encouraged, which gave rise to the reemergence of prostitution—a phenomenon that had all but disappeared—and to trampling upon legal and moral standards for personal gain or even simple subsistence, among other negative social phenomena.

In contrast to the foregoing, the crisis strengthened other values within a significant sector of female society in Cuba. As demonstrated in an important study conducted by the Women’s Studies...
Section of the Department of Psychology at the University of Havana, even though none of the women surveyed identified any positive effects of the crisis, a high percentage of them now felt they were more creative and better organized and had strengthened their self-esteem. They hold an optimistic vision of the future and continue to include activities related to professional growth, job promotions, and rearing and spending appropriate amounts of time with their children among their priority life plans.

III. The Economic Blockade and the International Community

The economic blockade imposed on the Cuban people by the United States violates the principles of international law set forth in the United Nations Charter and in international agreements such as those governing navigation and free trade between countries. But it essentially constitutes a violation of the human rights of millions of innocent civilians, especially of children, the elderly, and women. For many years the U.S. government has refused to comply with international conventions regarding human rights that defend the principle of free trading of food and medicine, even during wartime, so as not to affect the basic needs of the civilian population.

U.S. foreign policy toward Cuba comes into direct conflict with various facts. First, the U.S. government traded with all of the former socialist countries of Europe, including the U.S.S.R, although this trade was regulated to avoid technologically sensitive transfers. The United States presently maintains normal economic relations with the People’s Republic of China and in 1994 lifted the economic blockade on Vietnam.

Second, this policy is at odds with the current trend toward increased globalization within international economic relations, where the principal players have been the developed countries themselves, and toward meeting objectives within the new process of institutionalization at the international level, favoring economic and
financial agreements among nations, including those arrived at by the World Trade Organization.

Third, the economic blockade has not only failed to bring about the collapse of the political regime in Cuba but has also had counterproductive effects, given its own strategic goals. With its principal victim being the Cuban people, the economic blockade has rallied Cuban society to unity around a national plan seeking to find alternative solutions and assert its total rejection of American foreign policy. In contrast to the U.S. policy of beefing up the blockade in spite of the severe economic crisis, the Cuban government responded by placing highest priority on social policy in order to avert a dramatic decline in basic social indicators, an achievement difficult to ignore, even by those most critical of the Cuban model. Thus, the decade of the nineties, bucking expectations to the contrary, again became a scenario of important social mobilizations against the aggressive policy of the U.S. government, and new generations of Cubans began, as part of their immediate experience, to live out scenarios that had previously seemed mere historical references.

Indeed, from the economic point of view, the sanctions have managed to delay and complicate Cuba’s reentrance into the international scene, but not prevent it. In recent years, hints of Cuban economic recovery are afoot, especially in tourism and related fields. Institutional reform has forged a stronger link between Cuban businesses and new trading partners from different parts of the world, creating a new pattern of participation in international affairs. In addition, the obstacles imposed by the Helms-Burton Act did not succeed in completely stemming the flow of foreign investment to the island. Tourism in particular has benefited from outside capital and has expanded at an annual average growth rate of 18 percent over the decade, helping ease the impact of slumping activity in other areas of the economy. Products such as nickel and tobacco also benefited, showing significant recovery.
The resistance shown by Cubans for more than four decades of economic blockade under difficult circumstances heightened the prestige of the nation’s plan of action in international circles and allowed for the diversification of its political and economic relations with other countries. In contrast, the extraterritorial aspects of sanctions against Cuba, which go beyond punishing just one target, have brought condemnation of the U.S. policy in international quarters.

These apparent inconsistencies demonstrate that the formulation of U.S. policy toward Cuba is not essentially a response to foreign policy or national security considerations, but rather is explained by the interaction of two factors: on the one hand, by internal policy pressures arising from alliances struck with anti-Castro Cuban-American groups and, on the other, by the ideological fanaticism with which the subject of Cuba has traditionally been discussed, within a Cold War posture that is anachronistic in today’s international environment.

The clamor to bring to an end the blockade against the Cuban people is finding more and more support from the international community, based on considerations of a religious, humanitarian, family, economic, and political nature. Governments, world figures, and various groups in favor of sustaining friendly relations with Cuba, even though they may disagree with its political model, are making gains and outpacing those few who continue to support isolationism.

The U.N. General Assembly has passed resolutions for seven consecutive years condemning the blockade against Cuba. The Report of the Secretary General of the United Nations to the fifty-second Session of the General Assembly indicates that “the continuation of the blockade, including its extraterritorial effects, is in many ways affecting the difficult process of economic recovery begun in 1994.”

After the Helms-Burton Act was signed, some of the United States’ most important trading partners passed the so-called antidote laws to invalidate the extraterritorial provisions of the law on their
soil (this was the case in Canada and Mexico). The European Union filed a petition with the World Trade Organization on October 3, 1996, asking that a panel be formed to discuss the matter.

In the United States, the Pastors for Peace movement and other nongovernmental organizations assumed a leadership role in obtaining humanitarian aid for the Cuban people during the most difficult years of the crisis, pointing up the fact that American public opinion was divided on the issue. Likewise, within the American business sector more pragmatic positions began to predominate, motivated by the potential benefits of trade and investment in the island, particularly to American states that produced agricultural foodstuffs. Several studies show that the economic sanctions against Cuba have taken a considerable toll on American business. In 1988, for example, the blockade cost American businesses more than $30 billion. According to a study conducted by the Institute for International Economics, unilaterally imposed sanctions against Cuba in 1995 alone set the U.S. economy back between $15 and $19 billion and resulted in the loss of more than 260,000 jobs.

An event unprecedented for its repercussions in and out of Cuba was the visit of His Holiness Pope John Paul II in January 1998. For the first time in the history of the Revolution, a religious activity on the island was given exhaustive coverage by Cuban as well as foreign media. The Pope’s position on the blockade was summed up clearly in this celebrated phrase: “Cuba should open up to the world, and the world should open up to Cuba.”

The Pope was even more explicit when he stated:

Economic embargoes are always deplorable because they always harm those in greatest need. . . .

No nation can live alone. Therefore, the Cuban people can not be deprived of the links that are necessary for economic, social and cultural development, especially when imposed isolation has affected the population indiscriminately, exacerbating the problems experienced by the weak in such
basic aspects as nutrition, health and education. Everyone can and should take concrete steps in order to bring about change in this regard . . . contributing toward overcoming the anguish caused by material poverty and moral bankruptcy, whose causes can be, among others, unjust inequality, the limiting of fundamental freedoms, the depersonalization and disparagement of individuals, and restrictive economic measures imposed from outside the country, which are unfair and ethically unacceptable.19

Clearly, the fact that this venerable figure, opposed to the model of the Communist regime, should declare his support for lifting the blockade legitimized and strengthened the position of openness of various sectors at the international level, tipping the balance in favor of Cuba in this struggle.

After the Pope’s visit, a change in political trends with regard to U.S. economic sanctions began to take shape. The balance of power in the formulation of the U.S. policy toward Cuba apparently began to shrink from the hard-line positions of the most reactionary segments of the Cuban-American community in Miami, as the conservative bloc that traditionally supported such a policy began to lose sway. A new generation of individuals and interest groups of varying political persuasion has begun to exert an influence on U.S. policy toward the island, promoting the improvement of economic and diplomatic relations. Among these are politicians, nongovernmental organizations, humanitarian groups, think tanks, business groups, environmentalists, public health professionals and others, including Cuban-American organizations with moderate leanings.20

Even Jesse Helms himself, with support from the National Cuban-American Foundation, proposed approving humanitarian aid for Cuba as part of a political maneuver to undermine initiatives backed by Sen. Christopher Dodd, Rep. Charles Rangel, and Rep. Esteban Torres concerning the lifting of the embargo on medicines and food products.
IS THE EMBARGO ON CUBA MORALLY DEFENSIBLE?

The U.S. government has had to react to the new national and international circumstances and has taken steps to make sanctions more flexible, such as resuming direct charter flights to Havana, accepting shipments for families and, more recently, facilitating the issuance of licenses to sell medicines and medical supplies and equipment to Cuba.

Although these measures represent advances in the tense relations between the two governments, in practice they have a very limited scope because, on the one hand, they face various bureaucratic obstacles that make them difficult to implement, and on the other, they have usually been tied to political requirements that are impractical or unacceptable from the Cuban point of view. Even if these measures were in fact feasible, to ignore that they only mitigate the human costs brought about by the blockade of Cuban society is to ignore also that the injustice of the blockade lies in the fact of its very essence, its very existence.

It is not surprising, then, that, in the current context of international relations as the new millennium begins, the U.S. government should continue to hold fast to a failed and obsolete policy. The central theme, however, is that the economic blockade against Cuba in any of its manifestations is morally intolerable because of the price it exacts from innocent people. For forty years, three generations of Cubans have suffered the effects of an absolutely unjust and unjustifiable blockade that has caused death, disease, hunger, pain, and suffering to millions of victims. This ethical and human dimension of the issue must prevail if we are to abolish the irrationality of the laws that underlie and perpetuate the problem, if we are to one day return to normalcy and to mutual respect in relations between our two countries for the benefit of the people of both nations.

Notes

1. All the countries of the former socialist Europe, as well as Cuba, Vietnam and Mongolia belonged to the COMECON.
2. Including properties of Cubans who subsequently acquired U.S. citizenship.
10. Among others, studies by the following authors are noteworthy: Dr. Norma Vasallo, Women’s Studies Chair of the University of Havana; Dr. Elena Díaz, Cuba-FLACSO Program; and Carolina Aguilar, Women’s Studies Area of the Federation of Cuban Women.
12. There was still conflict, as migration into the emerging sector affected other priority sectors, such as education.
15. Study by the Women’s Studies Section, University of Havana (1997).
16. This prohibition is outlawed by the Geneva Convention, signed by the United States but so far disregarded in the case of Cuba.