

Wyoming for Cuba Nuestra América Convoy to Cuba Report Back/Reflections

I cannot concisely describe how it feels to look at a hospital couched in blackness. Not a photograph, but to stand there and see it for yourself. I can, however, concisely describe the feeling of knowing that your own government is responsible for it, to know that the apocalyptic darkness that surrounds you and the nauseating shadows before you are the result of your tax dollars at work. The proper term is rage-inducing.

Last week, I was honored to join the Nuestra América Convoy as part of the Codepink delegation and as a representative of Wyoming for Cuba, an organization I helped start after the January 29th executive order threatening extreme tariffs on any country that supplies oil to Cuba. This threat was primarily directed at Mexico, which became Cuba's only significant external energy supplier after the January 3rd abduction of Venezuelan President Nicolas Maduro. I had traveled to Cuba before, in 2023, which was the culmination of years of curiosity dating back to Little League, a curiosity sparked by an admiration for the swing of Cuban MLB star Yoenis Céspedes. It was a deeply impactful visit during which I finally got to see the mysterious place I had heard and read about for so long. What I found was not some sort of brainwashed communist island that hates Americans and wishes the Cuban missile crisis had ended differently (as Cold War propaganda would have you to believe. Nor did I find an island full of people desperate for some sort of help overthrowing their own government (as those in Miami and Washington want you to believe). Instead, I found a hub of culture, music, art, philosophy and history. I found a society full of doctors, teachers, singers, dancers, artists, entrepreneurs, workers, bureaucrats, activists, students, and everything in between. And all of those I met had led lives marred by imposed poverty, scarcity, and limitations; that poverty, that scarcity, and those limitations are exactly what the US economic embargo on the island nation 90 miles from the Florida coast

causes. This policy, save the brief Obama-era “thaw” which saw the normalization of diplomatic relations and the removal of some sanctions, has only intensified over the nearly 65 years since the first measures were implemented.

In the nearly three years that elapsed between my first visit and the Nuestra América Convoy, the situation in Cuba has become palpably worse. About 90% of Cubans own their own homes; in 2023, I saw not a single person living on the street. On this trip, I counted five—all in Old Havana (essentially Havana’s equivalent to New Orleans’s French Quarter). I inquired about this with Luis Felipe, a resident of Old Havana, whom we met alongside his wife, Naomi, and their newborn while admiring the Capitolio. Wanting to practice his English and talk with Americans (he’d heard about the Convoy), he introduced himself to us (as many Cubans will happily do). He told us he held a degree in History and Philosophy from the University of Havana. When I asked him about the increase in homelessness in Havana, he told me it had mostly happened in the wake of the new oil restrictions. Cuban society is grinding to a halt without fuel so there is less work, which means already extremely low wages (~\$20/month for the average Cuban) are depressed even further with fewer hours. Havana is a very safe city and Old Havana in particular is a hub for the island's foreign visitors. Cubans from the outskirts of Havana and the countryside have begun coming to Old Havana hoping they’ll make more than \$20/month begging outsiders and living on the streets than they would sitting at home as work hours continue to be cut.

Luis Felipe and Naomi also told me about how difficult it was to find and pay for what they needed to care for their newborn. Joe, our initial greeter on the buses from the airport to the hotel (one of the few times we traveled in vehicles due to the fuel crisis), told us that “if you ask two Cubans what they think you’ll hear seven different opinions.” When we asked Luis Felipe

and Naomi about Cuban sovereignty, the recent measures and threats by the US toward Cuba, and the legacy of the Cuban Revolution, what we got was more like eight opinions between the two. If there had been any doubt before that Luis Felipe studied history and philosophy there was no longer, and what we got was a brief (30ish minute) history of Cuba, an overview of the ideas of José Martí, Fidel Castro and Che Guevara, the Special Period (what Cubans call the period immediately after the collapse of the USSR and the socialist bloc when the island lost about 75% of its foreign trade in 2 years), a nuanced critique of the current presidents and governments of Cuba and the United States, and a brief overview of the parts of the Chinese economic model that he wished the Cuban government would/could pursue. While Luis Felipe talked, Naomi listened, chiming in with disagreements and more context and embracing a more staunchly Cuban position regarding the nation's economic issues, in contrast to Luis Felipe's desire for a more market-oriented model like China.

I met one woman who told me “death to Diaz-Canel,” (Cuba's President). I met a man whose biggest gripe with the Cuban government was that they wouldn't let him re-enlist in the military when Cuba sent 30k+ soldiers to fight against Apartheid South Africa's military invasion of Angola. At John Lennon Park, an eight-year-old named Rafael told me he wanted to be a zookeeper, and that Lionel Messi was the greatest soccer player of all time. His friend disagreed, and proceeded to deliver a defense of Cristiano Ronaldo as the GOAT in vernacular Cuban Spanish far too fast and complex for me to understand; another kid liked Diego Maradona, but didn't elaborate. An afro-Cuban man showed us his gold grills, which he swore were 24-carat, as his friend borrowed a lighter for his cigar, then said goodbye to us as we walked our separate ways with “¡Viva Fidel!” I asked Mariella, a retired professor of dance who now volunteers at a children's day care (currently closed due to the US's fuel blockade) “¿Eres

una Fidelista?” (Are you a Fidelista [a follower of Fidel Castro]?) She paused and thought for a moment before saying “No, soy Cubana,” (No, I am Cuban) and explaining that the heroes of the Revolution were national heroes, though she believed newer ideas were needed and that fierce loyalty to ideas of the past holds Cuba back. They all loved Obama (“We had things,” one man said of the Thaw; “He came to Cuba!” said another), and all agreed wholeheartedly with the statement that “Cuba’s politics are for Cubans; I’m American, and we need to end our Blockade.” All of this, mind you, in a place that supposedly doesn’t allow political dissent...

Starved for medical professionals in the immediate years after the Revolution when most of the more well-off people on the island (including doctors) emptied their bank accounts and moved to Miami, Cuba began educating not just doctors, but everyone, en masse. For decades now, Cuba’s foreign policy has been defined by its “Doctors Not Bombs” philosophy, which has resulted in the deployment of Cuban doctors to the most dangerous and hard-to-reach places on Earth. In these places, Cuban doctors provide medical care to people free of charge and confront the scariest diseases in the world, like Ebola. Doctors who serve on medical brigades are not only revered in Cuban society, but are paid directly by the foreign governments that have signed contracts with Cuba for the deployment of these brigades. These doctors make about \$1000/month, which is significantly more than the average Cuban. They also often have the opportunity to bring members of their families to the countries they are deployed in, allowing more Cubans to be employed in unsanctioned (or less sanctioned) economies. Thus, in Cuban society, being a doctor who provides medical care to some of the poorest and most neglected people on Earth, (often for the first time in those people’s lives and all free of charge) is one of the best opportunities for class mobility in Cuba and something you will be hailed as a hero by your neighbors, patients, family, and nation for. However, in a mind-bending feat of diplomatic

mental gymnastics, the US accuses these Cuban medical brigades of being fronts for “human trafficking.” The US has provided no evidence for such outlandish claims.

Not only is all education free to Cubans, but Cuba has also educated over 80k doctors from around the world, absolutely free of charge. For years, up until the COVID-19 pandemic, Cuba had a lower infant mortality rate than the US (~4/100k to ~5/100k in 2019). Today, the infant mortality rate is almost 10/100k. This horrifying statistic corresponds with the emptying of shelves at pharmacies and grocery stores, more scarcity, people being crushed beneath an economy under siege, and the implementation, continuation, and intensification of the Blockade on Cuba from the first Trump administration, through the Biden administration, right up to today.

The White House refers to these additional measures (on top of the embargo) as “maximum pressure sanctions.” Cubans repeatedly told me the period right now, especially the last 3 months, is harder than the Special Period in the 1990s. During the Special Period, the average Cuban lost 11 pounds, but miraculously managed to avoid famine and mass death. Compare this to the DPRK, where millions are estimated to have been starved to death under the weight of US sanctions and the evaporation of external trade. Hunger and poverty in Cuba is not the result of “incompetent communists” as Marco Rubio has recently stated, it is because of Marco Rubio himself, it is because of Donald Trump and Joe Biden, and it is because the US political establishment has never forgiven this little island of 11 million people for vanquishing their oppressors and refusing to be subjugated again, no matter how righteous their project may indeed be.

In 1960, as Washington dreamed up what would eventually become US-Cuba policy, an internal State Department document known as the Mallory-Rubottom Memo stated that, in order to “weaken the economic life of Cuba,” which it saw as the only viable path to undemocratic

regime change, US policy should make “the greatest inroads in denying money and supplies to Cuba, to decrease monetary and real wages, to bring about hunger, desperation and overthrow of government.” This was written before the Bay of Pigs, before the Cuban Missile Crisis, before the Cuban Revolution had embraced anything but Cuban Nationalism and a baseline anti-Imperialism. For much of “independent” Cuba’s history, the American ambassador was considered more powerful than the Cuban president, and within the Cuban Constitution, there was something called the Platt Amendment, which gave US Congress veto power over all laws passed in Cuba; Cuba was a veritable vassal state before 1959. Thirty-three consecutive times now, the United Nations General Assembly has voted overwhelmingly in favor of a resolution titled “the necessity of ending the economic, commercial and financial embargo imposed by the United States of America against Cuba.” The last 3 vote tallies have been as follows: 165-7 (2025), 187-2 (2024), 187-2 (2023). The entire world knows exactly what the US is doing —has done— to Cuba and Cubans, and it is perhaps one of the few issues that almost the entire world can agree on. Unsurprisingly, the only country to consistently vote with the United States in these resolutions is Israel. I guess they think Cuban babies are Hamas, too.

It is not the least bit hyperbolic to call the US Blockade of Cuba “murderous and criminal.” During the Cuban Missile Crisis (what Cubans call the October Crisis), JFK himself acknowledged that a “blockade” of Cuba was an act of war; to attempt to prevent more Soviet weapons from reaching Cuba without committing an act of war, he did a little propaganda and called it a “quarantine.” Today, US officials boast about the Blockade; the semantic charade has been dropped completely. The USSR has been gone for more than 35 years now; the Cold War is over, and there are no more Soviet weapons in Cuba. Sanctions are not economic tools that discriminate between different individuals; they are acts of economic warfare. They are

bludgeons that indiscriminately crush the lives of as many people as possible. They leave millions dead in their wake. According to a recent study published in *The Lancet*, “economic sanctions imposed by the USA or the EU were associated with 564,258 deaths annually from 1971 to 2021, higher than the annual number of battle-related casualties (106,000 deaths).” Consider this in conjunction with Article 33 of the Fourth Geneva Convention, which provides a legal definition for the war crime of collective punishment. According to the International Committee of the Red Cross, “the term refers not only to criminal punishment, but also to other types of sanctions, harassment or administrative action taken against a group in retaliation for an act committed by an individual/s who are considered to form part of the group. Such punishment, therefore, targets persons who bear no responsibility for having committed the conduct in question.” The embargo on Cuba is not even a regime of joint sanctions that the EU and other Western countries agree with the US on; they are completely unilateral sanctions that have only been intensified for 60-plus years. The only Cuban leader from the early days of the Revolution left is Raúl Castro, who holds a largely symbolic and consultatory role at 93 years old.

90 miles from the US coast, there is a project built on the idea of human dignity. It is a project backed in many different ways by millions of people, and it is full of people who will defend their land, their flag, their sky, their home to the last breath. “¡Patria o Muerte!” (Homeland or death!) is a Cuban national slogan first written by José Martí and made ubiquitous by Fidel Castro, who always followed it up with “¡Venceremos!” (We will win/We will overcome!). I would posit that these are not just revolutionary slogans but an encapsulation of the ethos of the Cuban people. They will die before they kneel again, and they will overcome no matter the circumstances. There is no more visible manifestation of this ethos than the vehicles of Havana, many of them American classics from the 1950s, which are still somehow plugging

along. They overcome. The blackouts that have become all the more frequent across the island are presenting inhuman challenges. In the pediatric hospitals in Havana, there is a five-to-seven-minute delay between when the lights go out and when the backup generators fully kick on. In these life-or-death moments, doctors and nurses turn on their phone flashlights, race to the NICUs, and hand-pump the ventilators that the most fragile lives on the island depend on for survival. They say they've yet to have a single child die. They overcome. A blackout hit the entire island on the evening of the 21st of March. At the time, I was walking back from the Vedado neighborhood with 3 friends as the sun set, mingling with kids in the street, smiling and waving at random Habaneros, and striking up conversations where I could. We found a plaque commemorating the introduction of Baseball to Cuba from the US. A Cuban man stepped onto his porch doing a little salsa-like dance as we walked by, a bottle of rum in his left hand, and upon seeing or hearing us (identifying us at the very least as not Cuban), shouted, "No hay luz, no hay comida, no hay nada, ¡pero seguimos bailar!" (There is no light, there is no food, there's nothing, but we still dance!). They overcome.

My question is "why?" Why must the Cuban people have to overcome this? It is not a matter of if they will or will not, it is a question of how much they will have to overcome at our hands. How much suffering will the US impose on Cuba before we realize we've been the bad guys all along? Is 65 years of hybrid war —an economic embargo that starves the island of investment and restricts all trade, an oil blockade, millions toward anti-government terrorism on the island, hundreds of documented CIA plots and schemes to kill Fidel Castro, an unceasing and mostly unsuccessful offensive to diplomatically isolate Cuba, what was essentially the kidnapping of tens-of-thousands Cuban children during Operation Pedro Pan, and even an attempted invasion at the Bay of Pigs— not enough? Who in their right mind can argue that

turning the lights off at the hospitals in Havana, that repeatedly causing an entire nation to be plunged into darkness, that complicating the distribution of vegetables and food, that leaving pharmacies and polyclinics unstocked, that depressing wages and provoking homelessness, that causing the waitlist for surgeries to reach more than 100k people for lack of resources, that any of this is in any way good? It is collective punishment. It is a war crime. It is explicit, bipartisan US foreign policy. And to witness it is rage-inducing.

All told, the Nuestra América Convoy delivered about 50 tons of humanitarian aid to Cuba in the form of solar panels, medical equipment, pharmaceuticals, toys for children, water filters, battery-powered lights, baby formula, and more. The Mexican government has now sent more than 3000 tons of humanitarian aid to Cuba. Vietnam and China have donated many hundreds of tons of rice and solar panels. Perhaps most encouraging in the immediate, is the arrival of the Russian crude oil tanker Anatoly Kolodkin in Matanzas, which is the first non-private fuel delivery to the island since early January. The tanker carried about 730k barrels of crude oil, which will take the Cubans almost a month to refine, but is enough to power the island for about 15 days. The day of my departure, some medical students who work at a polyclinic in Havana texted a friend from the convoy that, for the first time in months, they finally had enough medication and equipment to operate at full capacity because of what the Convoy brought. This is why I went to Cuba.

On multiple occasions now, Trump has declared that “Cuba is next.” Stopping this from happening and trying to reverse and combat the Blockade killing Cubans right now are two of the other major reasons why I participated in the Nuestra América Convoy. There is no time to waste. I encourage you to get involved with your local Cuba solidarity organization (they’re everywhere; I’m in Wyoming for god’s sake), fill up a suitcase with Advil and make plans to go

to Havana to support the Cuban people, or join one of the many groups that regularly travel to Cuba with aid in solidarity. Study, read, learn, and talk about Cuba. Refuse to look away from the crimes of our own government.

On page 96 of his autobiography “My Life,” Fidel Castro writes, “I was taught that Dignity, Morality, and Truth are unconquerable weapons.” As Fidel delivered a speech in his own defense during the trial for the raid on the Moncada Barracks in 1953 —the failed attack sparked the revolution— he ended his remarks (which would eventually become the first program of the revolutionary government) by declaring, “Condemn me! It does not matter. History will absolve me!” These are the weapons of Cuba, her people, and those who work to end the beastly Blockade. History has, and will continue to, absolve them. Venceremos.