

Paul Simon Public Policy Institute

Proposed Recommendations from the Cuba Conference

By David Yepsen, Director

On Feb. 22, 2010, the Paul Simon Public Policy Institute convened a conference of experts, university officials, students and citizens to discuss U.S.-Cuba relations and the implications for Southern Illinois University. The arrival of a new administration in Washington and the possibility of change in Cuba have sparked renewed interest in improving relations between the two countries.

Our interest in the subject also comes from Senator Paul Simon's long-time interest in improving relations with Cuba and from trips made in 1999, 2001 and 2006 to that country by Illinois officials and the SIUC community. The sparks generated by those visits still glow strongly. Many who made those trips, and others at the campuses of SIU who have studied in Cuba or Latin America, are anxious to improve relationships with the region.

We recommend:

I. The federal government must continue to take steps to build a more positive relationship with Cuba.

The two countries have a long and often difficult history with each other. It will take time and confidence-building measures from both sides to overcome that. The U.S. should take the lead in putting old slights and antiquated domestic political considerations aside. We need to drop talk of "regime change" in favor of more enlightened policies and approaches.

One goal should be clear: U.S. citizens should be free to travel to and from Cuba. Cuban citizens should be encouraged and helped to come to the U.S.

To reach that goal, the United States must also change or eliminate small irritants, such as listing the country as a "terrorist nation" when there is no public evidence to support it. Radio Marti should either be scrapped or dramatically revamped. As it is now, its programming is considered weak. U.S. taxpayers are entitled to more. The network could play a role similar to the one Radio Free Europe once played during the Cold War but only if the current programming and technology is revamped to inform and engage the Cuban people with credible information.

Other things, such as easing remittances to people in Cuba, expanded credit, and greater ease in shipping goods to Cuba are needed. We do not list all the changes the federal government should make here but U.S. policy should be clear.

We commend to federal policy-makers the recommendations made by the Cuban American National Foundation in April, 2009, when it made a "break with the past" by endorsing policies the Miami Herald called "an effort to direct attention away from Fidel and Raul Castro and toward the Cuban people." (www.canf.org/issues/a-new-course-for-u.s.-cuba-policy/) Also, Dr. Robert Pastor, professor of international relations at The American University, a long-time expert on U.S.-Cuba policies, has written and lectured extensively on the sorts of things that need to be changed. (www.american.edu/sis/faculty/rpastor.cfm)

Suffice it to say, we support any recommendations that will ease tensions and make for more hospitable, mutually-beneficial relationships in the future. We believe the citizens of both countries will benefit from improved economic, academic and cultural exchanges and that the two countries need to work toward the day when U.S. restrictions on travel to, and trade with, Cuba are relaxed or eliminated.

Yes, there are many pressing international and domestic political questions that confront officials in Washington. The problems of improving relationships with Cuba often must take a back seat to those concerns and emergencies. That said, we do not want the questions of improved relations with Cuba to be completely ignored. Improving those relations will be incremental and will take time. We should take small steps when we can.

II. Illinois state government needs to act as well. Both former Gov. George Ryan and the late Sen. Paul Simon understood the importance of fostering better relations with Cuba, if for no other reason than they would generate opportunities for Illinois businesses.

While Illinois faces a budget crisis at the moment and feels the press of other business, the governor and federal lawmakers should use their bully pulpits to highlight this issue. The governor must also make clear who in the executive branch is responsible for fostering international trade and business with Cuba.

Also, the state legislature needs to ensure its committees on business and international trade do not lose sight of the importance to Illinois of improved relationships with Cuba. They should hold periodic

meetings and briefings together to make certain they are on top of the latest developments on the federal level and are positioning the state to take advantage of any opportunities that open. Other states will be positioning themselves and Illinois should not lose out in that competition. People in Illinois need to know where the "go to" policy-makers are in state government regarding Cuban questions.

III. The university community and local citizens should not wait for someone else or the federal government to act. There is much we can do on our own to improve this relationship.

Individual Americans can be good diplomats themselves. People-to-people diplomacy can help pave the way for governments to act. Over two-dozen universities around the country have some sort of effort underway to improve relations with Cuba and SIU should not fall short.

SIU has a license for exchanges with Cuba and we need to use it. There are indications some of the restrictions on that license, such as lengthy minimum stays that make use difficult, are changing. We encourage anyone in the university community with an interest in academic work in Cuba to explore the latest developments and changes with university officials.

The campuses of Southern Illinois University have much to offer the Cuban people in the fields of agriculture, education, medicine, social work and culture. As a university that serves both rural America and underserved urban areas, the needs of our region often mirror the needs of the Cuban people. We can learn from them. They can learn from us.

Such exchanges would be non-political. They could help improve the daily lives of Cubans and Americans.

The university's current efforts, such as SIU Edwardsville's work to develop a Cuba-Caribbean initiative, need support and encouragement. The university should encourage local civic groups, such as Rotary International, in their efforts to open better relations with Cuba.

Work with other countries also demands and deserves attention. Efforts are underway at SIUC to improve relationships with China and many other nations and regions of the world. SIU is enriched and energized by students and faculty from these places and the need for that will only increase in the 21st Century. For SIU graduates to compete in the world, they must have an understanding of it.

None of these efforts should be in competition with each other. University officials need to constantly make clear in their public comments that improved relations with other countries, including Cuba, are part of SIU's future and remain a top priority even during these difficult financial times.

To aid in this effort, we recommend SIU designate an officer at the vice chancellor level on each campus to be the informal "Secretary of State." This person should direct and coordinate all staff involved with foreign travel. This person should be the "go to" person who helps coordinate and encourage institutional relationships with other countries. Duties of this official should include improving efforts at serving the logistical needs of students and faculty from other countries.

Those who have studied here need to return home telling others of the wonderful experiences they had on one of SIU's campuses and the ease with which their travels were executed and conducted. Such "word of mouth" comments abroad will pay dividends long into the future.

Finally, the university should set a goal of providing every SIU student a study abroad opportunity during their four-year undergraduate experience. Not all will desire to do so, but such experiences should be offered as part of a broad education that will better equip graduates to deal with the increasingly interdependent world of the 21st century.

To finance those efforts, the university should embark on a sustained fund-raising program to raise money to pay for study abroad trips. Also, an increased emphasis should be placed on seeking relevant grants and contracts to increase our international involvement. Removing financial impediments to travel abroad would encourage more students and faculty members to facilitate study abroad.

These findings are issued by the Paul Simon Public Policy Institute and reflect recommendations made by experts from throughout the nation, the state and the region. This document was not endorsed by the conference participants and does not necessarily reflect the views of any of the conference participants, either individually or as a whole.

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U.S.- CUBAN RELATIONS:

Warming Up or Cooling Down?

Recommendations of the Paul Simon Public Policy Institute at Southern Illinois University Carbondale

based on a conference hosted on February 22, 2010.



Paul Simon
Public Policy Institute
Southern Illinois University Carbondale

Cover photos: Paul Simon led an SIU delegation to Cuba in 2001 where he met with Fidel Castro to discuss U.S.-Cuba relations. Photo credit: Matt Baughman

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