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Geographer Joseph L. Scarpaci argues that as Fidel Castro faces his 80th birthday and appears to be surviving his eighth American presidency, it is time to rethink America's foreign policy to Cuba. In particular, we need to encourage people-to-people exchanges, especially with our "best and brightest" -- American students (767 words).

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The author is a member of the American Geographical Society's Writers Circle. The American Geographical Society is America's oldest geographical organization. Its mission is to link the business, professional, and scholarly worlds in the creation and application of geographical knowledge and techniques to address economic, social, and environmental programs. By distributing op-ed essays, it hopes to encourage public discussion of geographical issues.

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Reading (about Cuba) is Fundamental

by

Joseph L. Scarpaci

Reading is fundamental. So is academic travel to foreign lands, even ones with whom we are at odds. It is an essential part of academic inquiry. People-to-people cultural exchanges humanize an 'enemy' who is otherwise too easily demonized.

There is rich precedence for this belief. The late Senator Fulbright's pioneering program, President Richard Nixon's ping-pong diplomacy with China, and President Ronald Reagan's cultural visits to the former 'Evil Empire' embraced these ideas.

As Fidel Castro approaches his 80th birthday this August and continues to rule during this, now, his 8th American presidency, it is time to rethink our relationship with the 'Evil Empire' in the Caribbean.

Between 1990 and the summer of 2004, I led 22 legally-sanctioned classes to Cuba, which amounted to more than 500 students earning undergraduate and graduate credit issued by Virginia Tech. A half dozen Master's theses and four Ph.D. dissertations stemmed from this travel. Students were not there to, *gasp!*, dance salsa or sip *mojitos* on the beach. I collaborated with Cuban academics to produce a book on urban development in Cuba.

In 2002, however, the already onerous process of license review by the U.S. Treasury Department became even more complicated. For the first time in more than 20 years as a college professor, someone other than a tenure and promotion committee questioned the academic and cultural value of my programs in Cuba. My application materials to the US Treasury were returned several times. Treasury told me that I had to document the number of "regular Cubans" that would have contact with my students. I needed to include more information about the nature of conversations at visits to planning offices, public housing complexes, farms, and other venues where the exchanges are--to some extent—semi-structured and spontaneous. I complied unhappily with these mandates, because I knew the students' experience would outweigh the violations of academic freedom.

Ironically, our research has been validated externally. When the first edition of our book (*Havana: Two Faces of the Antillean Metropolis*, with Roberto Segre and Mario Coyula) was published in London by John Wiley in 1997, I was uninvited to a conference in South Florida. Unbeknownst to us, the book-jacket designer selected red, white and black as colors and did not know they were also the colors of the July 26th Movement. Alas, some groups judged our book by its cover. Later, a south Florida book representative told me that book vendors would reject a book of this nature. Fortunately, the book in its first edition sold out. The market administers its own kind of justice.

Across the Straits of Florida, one of my co-authors was told in the late 1990s that our book could not circulate on the island because it contained four paragraphs of criticism (out of 122,000 words). We were surprised not so much by the censorship as by the fact such a small amount of criticism could trigger the embargo; the book spans nearly half a millennium of urban planning and history.

The following year, however, the publishing arm of the Ministry of Culture, Casa de las Américas, offered us a book contract. We were both delighted and confused. On the one hand, we were pleased that a Spanish-language version of the book would reach non-English readers at an affordable price. Then we were told that the book would be published in English because of the tourist demand for a comprehensive review of Havana. "And the criticisms?" we inquired meekly.

“Offset by the quality of the work,” was the subtle reply. So, these are the ways the tropical cold war will melt away.

I encourage the Bush administration to remove its obstacles to academic and cultural travel to Cuba. Face-to-face encounters between peoples of ‘enemy’ nations can melt the freeze between our governments. I also urge the Cuban government to eliminate its higher surcharge to American academics, fees that exceed what other so-called First World nations incur. While a rich-nation/poor-nation fee structure seems fair, it is unjust to have American travelers pay as much as 25% more than our colleagues in Canada, Japan, or the European Union.

There are enough policies and people in Washington and Havana to blame for this longstanding impasse. But the right thing to do is to allow academic and cultural travel to Cuba, and to stop denying visas to Cuban scholars who wish to visit us. As Herbert Mathews, the *New York Times* journalist who interviewed Fidel Castro in the Sierra Maestra mountains, remarked: “Americans will do anything for Latin America but read about it,” American academics have a role to play in changing that, because reading is, after all, fundamental.

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