

# Cuba and the U.S.



**CURRENT  
CONTEXT**

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The United States and Cuba are moving toward repairing a strained relationship that has persisted for more than half a century. Barack Obama and Raúl Castro have announced their intention to restore diplomatic relations, indicated by their decisions in December 2014 to release political prisoners. In a lead-up to this historic decision representatives from both countries met under the encouragement and facilitation of Pope Francis, who, as the first Latin American pope, has an inherent interest in the region. The two countries hope to come to an agreement regarding the reestablishment of embassies before Obama and Castro attend the Summit of the Americas in Panama in mid April. Obama is optimistic that this restored relationship will improve the United States' reputation with other countries in the Western Hemisphere.

But a few sticking points remain before a full diplomatic relationship can be reached. For one, the United States still lists Cuba as a sponsor of terrorism, based on Fidel Castro's training of rebels in Central America in 1982. Obama does not believe Cuba remains a threat, but some American officials disagree. A second issue is the trade restrictions that have remained in place for over fifty years (which, according to Cuba, has cost the island nation over \$1 trillion). During the 1990s the U.S. Congress voted to keep economic sanctions in place until Cuba holds democratic elections and replaces the Castro family's hold on Cuban leadership. (Raúl, who took over for his ailing brother Fidel in 2006 and became president in 2008, has indicated that he will retire in 2018). Current diplomatic negotiations will continue in order to find common ground on issues of human rights, the U.S. possession of Guantánamo Bay, civil aviation, and Internet connections.

Like his brother Fidel, Raúl ascribes to socialist ideals, though he has instituted several reforms such as encouraging private industry, decentralizing the agricultural sector, and expanding access to consumer goods, among other measures. President Obama took office one year after Raúl Castro, and immediately made known his interest in improving relations between the two nations. Opinion polls indicate that a majority of Americans are also in favor of diplomacy, including ending

travel and trade restrictions. But critics of Obama's policy argue that it will only bolster Castro's hold on the country without forcing real, democratic change. Many Cubans, meanwhile, displayed their support with celebratory demonstrations after December's developments, explaining that with so many of their family and friends in the United States (around two million Hispanics of Cuban origin reside in the U.S.), strained relations just don't make sense.

So what precipitated the diplomatic crisis between Cuba and the United States? The two nations share a long history. Even prior to Cuban independence from Spain, Americans owned a good deal of the island's sugar estates and the U.S. imported (and refined) close to 90% of the island's raw sugar. Moreover, Cuba imported even more from the U.S. than it did from Spain. After years of seeking independence, Cuba became free after the Spanish-American War of 1898. For the next six decades the U.S. held significant economic and political influence in Cuba until Fidel Castro challenged this framework by overthrowing pro-U.S. dictator Fulgencio Batista in 1959. Initially the U.S. recognized Castro's new government, but within a few short years the two countries came to the brink of nuclear war because they stood at opposite ends of the Cold War political spectrum. The U.S. feared Castro's ties to the Soviet Union and his communist government, and opposed his decisions to nationalize American-owned properties and increase taxes on American imports. Castro, in turn, regarded the United States as imperialist and exploitative, and disagreed fundamentally with its political and economic system. In 1961 the U.S. severed diplomatic ties to Cuba, instated economic sanctions and travel restrictions, and eventually attempted to overthrow Castro and his government, even plotting Fidel's assassination. All of these attempts failed, and the end of the Cold War did not improve relations between the two countries. The Castro brothers' tight grip on Cuba has long led the U.S. to criticize Cuba's human rights record, especially the right to political dissent (an ongoing critique).

But today there appears to be hope for diplomacy. Why? As the White House reports: "It is clear that decades of U.S. isolation of Cuba have failed to accomplish our enduring objective of promoting the emergence of a democratic, prosperous, and stable Cuba." And this has come at a cost to the United States, says the White House, as the U.S. has at times found itself isolated from regional and international partners and constrained in its "ability to influence outcomes throughout the Western Hemisphere." And so the White House calls for a change in U.S. policy because "We cannot keep doing the same thing and expect a different result." Any fundamental change in U.S.-Cuban relations is unlikely to happen immediately, or without controversy, but a functional relationship appears to be a mutual goal for the first time in generations.

*-Shelley Brooks, Ph.D., CHSSP Statewide Office*

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**1898** – Spanish-American War ends and Spain gives up claim to its former colony of Cuba.

**1901** – Cuban Constitution adopted, modeled on that of the United States.

**1902** – Official Cuban Independence.

**1903** – American-authored treaty known as the Platt Amendment (approved by U.S. Congress in 1901) gives the United States significant influence in the island's affairs, including rights to lease or buy lands for U.S. naval bases and coaling stations in Cuba. Entitles U.S. to intervene in Cuba's affairs for "the preservation of Cuban independence, the maintenance of a government adequate for the protection of life, property, and individual liberty."

**1925** – Cuban Socialist Party founded.

**1933** – Sergeant Fulgencio Batista overthrows dictator Gerardo Machado.

**1934** – Repeal of Platt Amendment under President Roosevelt's "Good Neighbor" policy. U.S. keeps its lease of Guantánamo Bay naval station.

**1952** – Eight years after retiring from leadership, Batista seizes power again, institutes corrupt, pro-U.S. regime.

**1953** – Fidel Castro tries unsuccessfully to overthrow Batista, is imprisoned for two years, receives amnesty and leaves for Mexico. Returns to Cuba in 1956 and wages guerrilla warfare against Batista.

**1959** – Fidel Castro, with his brother Raúl, lead successful overthrow of Batista.

**1960** – Fidel Castro nationalizes all American-owned businesses in Cuba, without compensation, and establishes diplomatic relations with the Soviet Union.

**1961** – U.S. ends diplomatic relations with Cuba, and unsuccessfully attempts to overthrow Castro's government in the Bay of Pigs Invasion.

**1962** – U.S. institutes an embargo banning all trade with Cuba.

**1962** – Castro agrees to the Soviet placement of nuclear missiles in Cuba, just 90 miles from U.S. The Cuban Missile Crisis lasts for two very tense weeks until the U.S. agrees to remove nuclear missiles from Greece and Turkey and the Soviets agree to remove missiles from Cuba.

**1963** – U.S. bans travel to Cuba and commercial transactions with Cuba for U.S. citizens (repealed by President Carter in 1977, reinstated by President Reagan in 1982).

**1985** – U.S. prohibits travel to U.S. by Cuban government or Communist Party officials, as well as most Cuban students, scholars, and artists.

**1992** – U.S. Congress passes and President Bush signs the Cuban Democracy Act. Keeps any subsidiary of U.S. companies from trading with Cuba, prohibits travel to Cuba by U.S. citizens, does not allow family remittances to Cuba.

**1992** – United Nations General Assembly votes 59-3 in favor of Cuban measure requesting end to U.S. embargo; for 22 consecutive years the majority of UN Representatives vote in favor of ending the embargo.

**1996** – Helms-Burton Act sustains economic sanctions against Cuba until transition to a democratic government not headed by Fidel or Raúl Castro.

**2002** – UN Human Rights Commission criticizes Cuba's human rights' record.

**2002** – Cuban National Assembly amends constitution to guarantee permanent social system of government.

**2003** – Cuba's "Black Spring" sentences 75 political dissidents for long jail-terms and three are executed who hijacked a boat in an effort to reach the U.S.

**2008** – Raúl Castro becomes president after his brother's failing health forces him to retire. Raúl lifts ban on private cell phones and computers and relaxes restrictions on amount of land a private farmer can own.

**2011** – Cuban reforms, such as support for private enterprise and legal sale and purchase of private property (for first time in 50 years).

**2014** – December 17, Raúl Castro and Barack Obama announce intentions to restore diplomatic ties between Cuba and the U.S.

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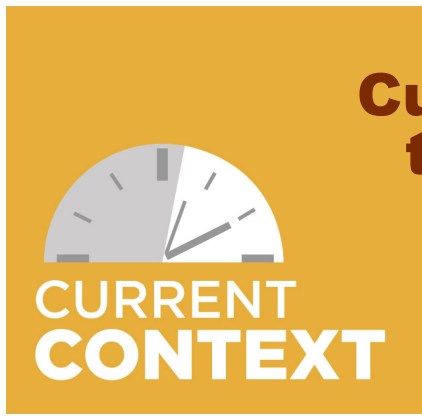
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	GDP per Capita	Population Growth (annual %)	Unemployment (% of total labor force)	Mortality Rate under age 5 (per 1000 births)	Internet Users (per 100 people)
United States 1970	\$4,997	1.165	N/A	23.1	N/A
Cuba 1970	\$654	1.7	N/A	40.5	N/A
United States 1981	\$13,526	0.98	7.59	14.4	N/A
Cuba 1981	\$2,043	0.5	N/A	20.3	N/A
United States 2011	\$49,803	0.7	9	7	69.7
Cuba 2011	\$6,051	-0.1	3.2	7	16



Map from CIA World Fact Book: Cuba



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The CHSSP's *Cold War History Blueprint* provides lessons and teacher resources on Cuba for World and U.S. History teachers. Download the unit or specific lessons on our website: <http://chssp.ucdavis.edu/programs/historyblueprint/coldwar>. Visit our blog for additional teaching suggestions: [http://chssp.ucdavis.edu/copy\\_of\\_blog/u-s-cuban-relations](http://chssp.ucdavis.edu/copy_of_blog/u-s-cuban-relations)

## Additional Resources\*

Current events and archival stories - *New York Times*: <http://topics.nytimes.com/top/news/international/countriesandterritories/cuba/index.html>

White House Fact Sheet: <https://www.whitehouse.gov/the-press-office/2014/12/17/fact-sheet-charting-new-course-cuba>

Cuba timeline: *BBC News*: <http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/americas/1203355.stm>

Viewpoints on the Cuba Embargo - Pro-Con.org: <http://cuba-embargo.procon.org/#background>

Current events - *The Guardian*: <http://www.theguardian.com/world/2014/dec/18/us-cuba-deal-a-marriage-18-months-in-the-making-blessed-by-pope-francis>

Historical background summary - Council on Foreign Relations: <http://www.cfr.org/cuba/us-cuba-relations/p11113>

Opinion piece by U.S. Senator Marco Rubio - *Wall Street Journal*: <http://www.wsj.com/articles/marco-rubio-the-turning-point-in-relations-with-cuba-1418862936>

\*The resources listed above are provided for further research and do not imply an endorsement by the California History-Social Science Project or the University of California.