



# U.S. Public Diplomacy for Cuba: Why It's Needed and How to Do It

*By Paul Hare*

U.S. PUBLIC DIPLOMACY WITH CUBA—or the United States engaging with Cuban public opinion—is an intriguing subject. The principal reason for this is because it has never been tried. There was no attempt before the 1959 Revolution because the United States had no need to convince the Cuban government and people of why the United States mattered to them. In almost every aspect of life it was impossible to conceive of Cuba without the United States. Fidel Castro's Revolution changed that. And since the Revolution, the Castro regime has carefully molded the United States as the arch enemy of the Cuban people. Successive U.S. administrations have made little effort to banish that impression while U.S. public diplomacy has been largely aimed at the Cuban-American exile community.

The public diplomacy challenge for the United States with Cuba is exciting but also formidable. The Cuban Government has had many years experience of controlling access to information and shackling freedom of expression. The public diplomacy messages that the United States will send will be distorted and blocked. Nevertheless there are growing signs that Cubans on the island are accessing new technologies so information does get through, particularly to residents of the major cities. Expansion of people-to-people exchanges and a lifting of the travel ban on ordinary Americans would greatly assist any public diplomacy campaign. But public diplomacy can start without this and the Cuban government's capacity to block messages is no argument for not transmitting them.

## MODERN PUBLIC DIPLOMACY

The concept of modern public diplomacy goes well beyond branding the achievements of your own country and transmitting them to another. It needs a tailored strategy taking into account image deficits, the target sectors and should draw on consistent and complementary themes. There is no 'one size fits all' approach for every country. Public diplomacy involves listening to what the foreign audience is saying about you and crafting simple messages backed up by actions. An effective public diplomacy campaign succeeds in engaging with an overseas public. It implies neither an endorsement of actions of the overseas government nor any wish to micromanage developments in that country.

The United States should recognize that the most effective and credible voice is not always that of its government. U.S. civil society is active, diverse and contains many well-funded non-governmental organizations that would relish engaging with a society closed to the United States for many decades. Once the constraint of U.S. travel restrictions is removed the potential of an imaginative, unconditional public diplomacy campaign is enormous. While the United States has strong upside potential to re-shape its image in Cuba, equally the Obama Administration should acknowledge that current and past U.S. policy cannot simply be ignored in the framing of any new policy. The Cuban government is likely to be highly suspicious of new U.S. initiatives. Therefore,

few announcements should be made. A harder line against dissidents taken by Raúl Castro in recent months and a return to aggressive anti-American rhetoric may mean that 2010 will not offer an easy context to implement a new public diplomacy strategy. The Obama Administration's policy in softening the U.S. tone may already be proving uncomfortable for the Cuban government.

## TWO TRACKS

This paper favors a two track approach to U.S. public diplomacy toward Cuba. The first track would seek to engage the Cuban public with a proactive, unconditional and visible outreach strategy. It would bring a public diplomacy dimension to the objective recommended in the Brookings Institution's report on a new U.S. foreign policy toward Cuba, *Cuba: A New Policy for Critical and Constructive Engagement*. The Brookings group of U.S. and international experts suggested a policy centered on promoting the well-being of the Cuban people, people-to-people contact, grassroots economic activity and indigenous civil society. As part of this, a U.S. public diplomacy strategy needs an eye-catching program of engagement guided by non-political content and working closely with private individuals and groups. The Cuban government will be cautious about how to react to this but that is no argument for not pursuing the program.

The second track should construct an approach to several U.S./Cuba 'legacy' issues to help influence how Cuban public opinion will respond to initiatives in the first track. No public diplomacy strategy operated by any country can ignore past or present elements of foreign policy. In the case of U.S. policy towards Cuba, the six most important legacies are: the imprisonment of the 'Miami Five', the presence in the United States of several participants in terrorist acts against the Castro government, the U.S. military base at Guantanamo Bay, the continued funding of Radio and TV Marti, the inclusion of Cuba on the U.S. list of state sponsors of terrorism, and U.S. property claims against the Cuban government. These issues are separate from the wider trade and investment embargo and U.S.

programs to give material support to opposition groups in Cuba. But any U.S. campaign which ignores the existence of the legacy issues will have limited effect, even if coupled with a lifting of the travel ban for all Americans.

## PRINCIPLES OF A NEW U.S. PUBLIC DIPLOMACY STRATEGY FOR CUBA

### What principles should guide U.S. public diplomacy on these two tracks?

1. As the term public diplomacy suggests, the best policies should not be dependent on negotiations between governments. They need to be unconditional and separate from 'foreign policy'.
2. Actions speak loudest. There should be no announcements of what, why and how. Things should happen and messages will follow.
3. The campaign should attract attention from ordinary Cubans. Obscure visitors from academia and confidential exchanges won't do that.
4. Public diplomacy should show the United States working with Cuban people, respecting what they have achieved. It needs to show Americans engaging with Cubans, not Americans acting alone.
5. The United States should steer clear of ideology and promote common interests. This does not mean it should abandon its commitment to promoting improved human rights and openness in Cuba. U.S. values of tolerance, freedom of expression, accountability of government and a vibrant civil society will be evident in public diplomacy actions.
6. The voices heard and the messages projected should not only be those of the U.S. government.
7. The rationale for such policy should be explained to U.S. public opinion; public diplomacy is neither domestic nor foreign policy. It is a reaching out to Cubans after years of neglect.

8. Part of the public diplomacy strategy should draw on the expertise and cultural affinity of the Cuban-American community.
9. Attempts to predict the results of such efforts should be avoided.
10. The strategy should be incremental and should develop some significant long-term partnerships.
11. Though the outreach efforts should be unconditional, it is inevitable that the Cuban government's response will influence the campaign's development. The Cuban government, for example by refusing travel permits to Cubans, could significantly limit the public diplomacy impact. The United States needs to recognize this at the outset.
12. Addressing some of the U.S. 'legacy' issues would produce important public diplomacy impact and demonstrate new thinking.
13. The program will need to be sustained, coordinated and explained. But there should be no calibrated response matrix or attempt at creating a road map for Cuba's future.

## SPECIFIC INITIATIVES

**In practical terms what should the U.S. do? Here is a range of possibilities.**

### TRACK ONE

1. Create a mixed group of experts to direct U.S.-Cuba public diplomacy drawn from government, the private sector, NGOs, and the Cuban-American community to manage a new outreach program. Announce the composition of the group but no more. It will show the Administration is at last devoting long-term foreign policy attention to Cuba.
2. Reallocate some existing funds from Radio and TV Marti—which is widely regarded as ineffective in a modern context—toward a new public diplomacy campaign and announce this. The act of reallocation would be good public diplomacy in itself.
3. Create a scholarship fund for Cubans to study in the United States. U.S. students attend the Latin American Medical School on the outskirts of Havana. The U.S. government should offer scholarships (at graduate level) for Cubans to study at U.S. colleges. The scheme would be open to all Cubans and be administered by USINT, Havana. In addition, the United States might offer to fund Cuban students in the Fulbright program as well as American Fulbright students studying in Cuba. It is of minor importance whether the Cuban government responds. The Cuban people will hear of it.
4. Offer a cadre of Peace Corps volunteers to work on collaborative projects with young Cubans in Cuba alongside NGOs.
5. Propose collaboration on a pilot basis between U.S. and Cuban humanitarian teams overseas, for example in Haiti and Africa.
6. Establish a travel fund to facilitate exchanges between U.S. universities, music academies, research institutes and their Cuban equivalents to enable sports and cultural contacts and interaction at college level. Allow targeted people-to-people travel.
7. Invite Cuban musicians to play at the White House as part of a Latin American event. Carlos Varela—who is already due to tour the United States and Canada in April/May 2010—would be a good candidate. Why? Because of what he signifies to Cubans who want greater political and economic openness and his participation in the Juanes peace concert in Havana, a major public diplomacy event in itself.
8. Invite a small number of high-profile U.S. artists and athletes to become U.S. special ambassadors

to Cuba. Under a special travel license (if necessary), they would agree to spend a certain number of days a year in Cuba, interacting in the arts and sport.

9. Fund visits from U.S. experts in areas where the European Union and Canada have made a start: AIDS prevention and treatment, child abuse, green energy, biotechnology, wildlife and maritime preservation, soil and forestry
10. Invite Cuban medical experts from the Cuban Ministry of Health to a seminar in the United States funded by the U.S. Department of Health.
11. Announce that the United States would modify positions it has taken on Cuba in international institutions to promote practical outcomes. For example the United States could say it would not object if Cuban troops were included in UN peacekeeping forces, or if the IMF or World Bank were to be invited by the Cuban government to offer technical consultation to improve the management of Cuban national accounts.
12. Create a website for blogposts, or Twitter postings which invite suggestions from Cubans on the island for ideas on people-to-people engagement.
13. To help break Washington out of its isolationist mode, create an international dimension and combine public diplomacy efforts with other countries. Announce that the United States will discuss some common approaches on Cuba policy with, inter alia, Brazil, Mexico, Chile, the European Union and Canada.

## TRACK TWO

It might be more convenient to ignore the six 'legacy' issues. But any new U.S. public diplomacy strategy cannot afford to do this.

1. The Miami Five. It seems inconceivable that this issue could limit the capacity to realign U.S.-

Cuba relations for another 20 years. Yet this is the time that remains of the longest sentence of some relatively low-level Cuban spies who have already served over 11 years in jail. The Obama Administration should consider this case as part of its wider strategy of public diplomacy. It may be an opportunity to link the issue with that of fugitives from U.S. justice residing in Cuba. The Obama Administration could even make a unilateral gesture and send those in prison back to Cuba. At the same time it would highlight the continuing detention of many political prisoners in Cuba.

2. Radio and TV Marti. The funding for these programs is now pointless and counterproductive. A reallocation to smart public diplomacy would in itself have a major impact. The Administration should also address the USAID money devoted to funding opposition groups in Cuba. A clearer public explanation of what this is intended to do needs to be given.
3. The Posada Carriles example. The Obama Administration should state that the United States will not be a haven for those who plot or have plotted terrorist acts. Posada Carriles has been called by the U.S. Justice Department "a dangerous criminal and an admitted mastermind of terrorist plots." His trial on immigration charges is due to start in U.S. courts in March 2010, offering this Administration a perfect opportunity to show it will apply the law vigorously against alleged terrorists residing on U.S. soil.
4. The Guantanamo Bay base in Cuba. The base may have made sense in 1902 and 1934 but it seems an anachronism to the whole of Latin America in 2010. Symbolically, it remains extremely important to the Cubans and the region. If it is serious about turning a page with Cuba, Washington must address GITMO's future, starting with a realistic assessment by the Pentagon of the continued utility of the facility. A statement as to U.S. intentions would have impact.
5. The inclusion of Cuba on the State Department's list of state sponsors of terrorism. Unfortunately,

the Obama Administration is poised once again to certify in Spring 2010 that Cuba belongs on the list based on a claimed lack of cooperation on terrorism matters. The recent imposition of new intensive airport screening of those arriving from Cuba has exacerbated the ongoing negative public diplomacy impact of this issue. The Administration should explain its decision clearly, what Cuba has to do to get off the list and state that it recognizes differences between Cuba and other countries that pose a threat to the U.S.

6. U.S. claims against the Cuban government registered with the U.S. Justice Department. This is currently less controversial compared to the other five but the Administration might consider a statement, perhaps including a commitment by the U.S. Administration to

contribute funds to an eventual settlement of all claims.

## CONCLUSION

Public diplomacy is an essential part of any new U.S. policy toward Cuba. It will need to be a sustained campaign ring-fenced from political problems that are bound to arise with the Cuban government. Raúl Castro will be confident he can reduce or eliminate the impact of U.S. public diplomacy with his counter-diplomacy. He will expect that, just as in the past, Washington will change its approach due to congressional and other pressure. This time the United States should prove him wrong.

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### ABOUT BROOKINGS WORK ON U.S.-CUBA RELATIONS

The Brookings Institution's work on U.S.-Cuba Relations explores new policy approaches to break the stalemate in relations between the United States and Cuba. Through original research and frank dialogue among policymakers, academics, and other stakeholders, U.S.-Cuba Relations seeks to generate pragmatic strategies for engagement that serve U.S. interests in building trust, strengthening cooperation and improving the lives of the Cuban people.

#### Other publications on U.S.-Cuba policy:

##### ***Learning to Salsa: New Steps in U.S.-Cuba Relations***

By Carlos Pascual and Vicki Huddleston

Brookings Press, 2010

<http://www.brookings.edu/press/Books/2010/learningtosalsa.aspx>

##### ***The Obama Administration and the Americas***

By Abraham F. Lowenthal, Ted Piccone, Laurence Whitehead and Foreword by Strobe Talbott

Brookings Press, 2009

<http://www.brookings.edu/press/Books/2009/theobamaadministrationandtheamericas.aspx>

##### ***Cuba: A New Policy of Critical and Constructive Engagement***

By Carlos Pascual and Vicki Huddleston

Foreign Policy at Brookings, April 2009

[http://www.brookings.edu/reports/2009/04\\_cuba.aspx](http://www.brookings.edu/reports/2009/04_cuba.aspx)

##### ***The Odd Couple: The EU and Cuba 1996-2008***

By Paul Hare, former British Ambassador to Cuba

September 2008

[http://www.brookings.edu/papers/2008/09\\_cuba\\_hare.aspx](http://www.brookings.edu/papers/2008/09_cuba_hare.aspx)