

## **Testimony of Ignacio Sosa to the US House on Foreign Affairs**

**November 19, 2009**

Thank you, Mr. Chairman for the opportunity to speak here today. My name is Ignacio Sosa and I reside in Boston, Ma. I am a Cuban-American son, brother, nephew and cousin of Cuban heroes who have fought in the Bay of Pigs invasion and served time in Castro's jails.

As a Hispanic and a Republican, I am a member of two minorities in my home state of Massachusetts. However, I am part of a new and growing Cuban-American majority that seeks to end the isolation of Cubans and Americans from each other. This is why I am here today.

The ban on American travel to Cuba is an affront to those who believe that the right to travel is a fundamental right of all American citizens. We who believe in limited government object to the Orwellian notion of requiring a government license to travel to Cuba, the only country for which such a license is needed. The travel ban is also a violation of our inherent right to privacy.

In a globalized world, travel acts as a powerful transmitter of new ideas that enriches both the traveler and those in the country visited. Cuba today is an island isolated not only from its largest neighbor but also from the free flow of ideas and people. Yet the rise of independent bloggers on the island reminds us that even the most repressive of governments cannot stop new technologies from spreading timeless ideas of freedom and democracy. It's time for Americans to start developing relationships with Cubans from all walks of life. This is especially true as Cuba nears its rendezvous with leadership change. Sharing our hopes and dreams with those who live in the quiet despair of communist Cuba can only help reawaken the thirst for freedom that resides in every repressed Cuban heart.

To those who point toward the large numbers of Canadian tourists who travel to Cuba and say "how come Canadian tourism has failed to produce material change in Cuba?", I say this is a false analogy. The population of Canada is almost 1/10 the size of the US. Moreover, Canadian Hispanics and African-Canadians account for a combined 4% of that country's population vs. a combined 28% for those same ethnic groups in the US. So not only are the numbers of American tourists traveling to Cuba going to be much greater than those from Canada, but also the American tourists are much more likely to share demographic and cultural ties with the people of Cuba. Let's also not forget that 14% of Cuba's population lives in the US vs. a statically meaningless number for Canada.

The recent incident involving Cuban security forces beating and detaining three well-known dissident bloggers is a useful reminder of the totalitarian nature of the Cuban government. The assault and arrest of the bloggers occurred just when the US asked Cuba for progress on human rights as part of a potential roadmap to normalizing

relations. This is no coincidence. History is littered with instances of Cuba taking deliberate steps to sabotage American efforts toward rapprochement. It is clear that Cuba, like Iran, uses hostility from the United States as a way to legitimize its totalitarian government and explain away decades of failed economic policies.

President Obama and Secretary Clinton should not take the bait being offered by the Cuban government when it attacked the Cuban bloggers. It is important that the United States pursue policies that increase people-to-people contact between the two countries, regardless of whatever steps the Cuban government might take in response. Conditioning improvements in the effectiveness of U.S. policy to whatever actions Cuba pursues, effectively puts control of our foreign policy in the hands of the Cuban regime. Lifting the ban on American travel to Cuba and allowing more Cubans to enter the US on travel visas will do more to further the cause of freedom than the tit-for-tat of diplomatic gamesmanship. The real losers in that game are always the same; the long-suffering people of Cuba.

As we celebrate the twentieth anniversary of the fall of the Berlin Wall, it's important to remember that none of the Eastern European countries that threw off the yoke of communism were isolated from their western neighbors. Moreover, it was exposure to western travelers, media and a general familiarity with how the West works that inspired millions in Eastern Europe to seek a future free from communism.

Cuba is no different. It's time to put the Cuban government on the defensive by removing all United States government obstacles to the isolation of Cubans from Americans. If Cuba's government fails to respond with greater openness, the blame will fall squarely where it belongs, on the shoulders of the Cuban government. America should never again allow the Cuban government to use American policy as a scapegoat for that regime's many failures.

I finish by pleading with the members of this distinguished committee and house to pass The Freedom to Travel to Cuba Act. I also ask Senator Kerry, as chairman of the Senate Committee on Foreign Affairs, to co-sponsor and mark-up the senate version of The Freedom to Travel to Cuba Act. Thank you and may God bless America.