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House of Representatives

STATEMENT ON CUBA TRIP

HON. JOE MOAKLEY

OF MASSACHUSETTS
IN THE HOUSE OF REPRESENTATIVES

Thursday, January 26, 1996

Mr. MOAKLEY. Mr. Speaker, my recent visit to Cuba has been the subject of some controversy. Some of my colleagues, who have surprisingly never even talked to me about the trip, have cynically tried to characterize my views and the trip as insensitive to human rights and pro-Castro.

Mr. Speaker, that is a blatant distortion of the truth.

My position on Cuba is the same as that put forth by the conference of Catholic Bishops. My position is also the same as Cuba's Catholic Cardinal, Cardinal Jaime Ortega.

I might add, as well, that my position is the same as many of Cuba's leading dissidents—including Elizardo Sanchez, Martha Beatriz Roque, Vladimiro Roca, and Rene Gomez Manzano, just to name a few.

Are these people, some of whom have spent time in Cuban jails, insensitive to human rights? Are these people pro-Castro?

Their position, and my position, is that we can best encourage human rights reforms and begin a transition to a more democratic Cuba through increased relations and not by more isolation. They, like me, oppose the so-called Helms-Burton bill.

Mr. Speaker, I realize my public position on Cuba makes me the target of a very well-financed lobby here in the United States. But, let me say clearly and sincerely, I believe in my heart that I am advocating what is best for the courageous people who live on that island and who yearn for a day when human rights and freedoms are truly respected.

MOAKLEY STATEMENT ON CUBA TRIP

WASHINGTON. — Congressman Joe Moakley released the following statement from his office today on his recent trip to Cuba:

"I traveled to Cuba for two basic reasons—first, to try to create an atmosphere in which relations between the U.S. and Cuba could be improved; and, second, to find ways to support ordinary Cuban people.

My trip was hosted by the ABC Forum on Cuba, a non-profit organization dedicated to educating U.S. citizens on issues related to Cuba and to supporting the activities of NGO's promoting human rights and helping the Cuban people.

Our delegation consisted of 23 participants ranging from business leaders to NGO's like the Boston-based Oxfam America.

I met with a variety of people while in Cuba—including top Cuban government officials, church leaders, dissidents, NGO's, foreign diplomats, U.S. officials.

I even had the chance to visit a small group of farmers who are working with Oxfam on a project to increase agriculture production for sale on the open market. These farmers and all the ordinary people I had the chance to meet, were excited to talk with our delegation and candid about their hopes for closer ties with people in the United States.

In addition, my aide Jim McGovern and I had a 2 hour private meeting with Cuban President Fidel Castro. After which, the Cuban leader met with our entire group for another 2 hour session. I told President Castro that we are at a crossroads in terms of U.S.-Cuba relations, the United States Congress is nearing final action on the so-called Helms-Burton Bill which, if signed into law, will strengthen the current economic embargo and end any possibility for improved relations anytime in the near future.

I told President Castro that there must be more movement in Cuba with regard to human rights and economic reforms—and urge him to act now. He seemed responsive and pledged to give my request very serious and immediate consideration.

We also had an excellent meeting with Jamie Cardinal Ortega—the Roman Catholic Cardinal in Cuba. His Eminence told us that the official position of the Catholic Bishops was against the US embargo for humanitarian reasons. He also was very clear about his continued concerns regarding human rights abuses that currently exist in Cuba.

On a related matter, I raised with the Cuban leadership my hope that they would invite Pope John Paul II to visit Cuba during his visit to the Caribbean later this year.

My trip began and ended with important meetings with Cuban dissident groups. While these people suggested that the difficulties in Cuba run much deeper than the economic hardships, a majority of those we met expressed opposition to the Helms-Burton legislation.

One of the things that stunned me the most about my trip is the explosion of independent entrepreneurship. There are roughly 208,000 independent family businesses operating in Cuba. This entrepreneurship is allowing people greater personal freedom from government controls. When people are no longer dependent on the government for their jobs, they are freer from economic coercion. I got the sense that the Cuban government recognizes that these small businesses are necessary for the country's economic viability and are accepting the political space that they create.

In fact, Caritas (a Catholic charitable organization in Havana) described its plans to establish training programs to help these fledgling businesses succeed. Michael Ryan, President of ABC Forum on Cuba, which organized the trip said: "It was great to see our group get excited about helping support the

Cuban people, particularly in their efforts to form small businesses and independent NGOs. A number of our participants expressed a real desire to support these efforts after we concluded our trip."

The European Union is about to hold talks with the Cubans on closer economic ties—and is using this opportunity to urge the Cuban government to improve its human rights record. The United States could have ten times more leverage with Cuba than the Europeans if we got serious about improving relations. Right now the embargo leaves us completely out of the picture. I'm afraid if we let Helms-Burton become law, we will lose an important opportunity to improve the situation in Cuba. Of all the meetings I had, there was consensus on one thing—that the future of Cuba will be decided by Cubans on the island. The degree to which we can encourage positive change will depend on whether or not we defeat Helms-Burton.

[From the Boston Globe, Jan. 23, 1996]

OUR BAN IN HAVANA

(By H.D.S. Greenway)

HAVANA.—“Socialismo O Muerte”—Socialism or Death—say the graffiti scrawled on the walls of this once grand, now crumbly Caribbean capital. But as communists the world over have found, their “socialism” means a death of sorts: stagnation and decline, a slow demise of ambition and incentive and the equality of shared poverty.

There are only five countries left that call themselves communist: China and its three abutters in Asia—North Korea, Vietnam and Laos—and then Cuba. In all, to varying degrees, the communist leaders recognize the inadequacy of their economic system, but all want to cling to political power. With some justification they can point to the death of their great progenitor, the Soviet Union, as an example of what can happen when the reins of political power are suddenly dropped. In short, they want to eat the cake of capitalism without ingesting political freedoms.

All the ambiguities of this approach are evident in Fidel Castro, the last of the founding fathers of postwar communism. All the others—Mao Zedong, Kim D Sung, Ho Chi Minh—are dead, but Fidel remains. To some, America's most enduring bete noire is a Latin David to our gringo Gollath; to others he is an irredeemable tyrant.

Nine US presidents have tried to do him in—by invasion, assassination, economic embargo—but he lives on “to remind us of our failures,” as US Rep. J. Joseph Moakley put it.

For 30 years Castro had a free ride, strutting the world's stage as a symbol of independence to a world emerging from colonialism but in fact a kept man, his bills paid by the Soviet Union. After the demise of his patron, Castro and his economy went into a free fall, bottoming out in 1993.

In desperation, Castro and his lieutenants have planted the first, few seeds of a free-market economy here. The Yankee dollar is now a legal currency in Cuba alongside the peso. Joint ventures with foreigners are beginning to bear fruit, especially in the tourist industry. Some 208,000 Cubans are permitted to work in the private sector, but the state still remains supreme, and a gulf is widening between those who work in the dollar economy and those left behind in a land of unconvertible peace.

Small, private restaurants called “paladares” are springing up in people's homes, but the law allows no more than a dozen tables, and all the cooks and waiters must be family members because it is still illegal for one Cuban to hire another. Thus is entrepreneurship on the one hand encouraged while the other hand suppresses it.

Last week Moakley led a delegation of inquiry here of which I was a member. We talked to Castro, aging now but still in command. He is trying to probe for weak spots in the mortar of the embargo that the United States has imposed. Moakley, in turn, was trying to squeeze human rights concessions from Castro, concessions that Moakley could use back in Washing-

ton to defeat the Helms-Burton bill, sponsored by Sen. Jesse Helms of North Carolina and U.S. Rep. Dan Burton of Indiana, which would put even more restrictions on doing business with Cuba.

It seemed evident in conversations with Castro and his ministers that Cuba isn't going back on the meager reforms they have instigated. Castro said the changes are irreversible. But Cuba's leaders are afraid of moving forward too fast. Castro and his lieutenants appear to have no clear vision but are marking policy up as they go along.

Listening to Castro—his famous beard now gone gray—I was struck by how much the world had changed and how much Fidel has been bypassed since the heady revolutionary days of 30 years ago. Fidel Castro no longer presents the United States with the mortal threat of Russian missiles 90 miles offshore. His expeditionary forces no longer rampage through Africa, spreading socialismo and death. Nor are his agents stirring up trouble in the hemisphere. Che Guevara and the revolution he represented lie in an unmarked Bolivian grave.

In an era when the United States is helping North Korea with nuclear power, scrambling for investment in China and no longer involved with embargoing Vietnam, the present restrictions on trade with Cuba seem somewhat anachronistic. Castro may have suffered from the U.S. embargo, but he has also benefited enormously by having someone other than himself to blame for Cuba's economic inadequacies, able to wrap himself in the nationalist flag against the big bully of the North.

In the long run, communism in Cuba is doomed. Both the United States and Cuba have a convergence of interest in seeing that the transition is smooth and the landing is soft. A breakdown of order on the island would bring another vast armada of Cubans fleeing to our shores, and that would be destabilizing to both countries.

The best way to ensure a soft landing is to defeat counterproductive legislation such as the Helms-Burton “Cuban Liberty and Democratic Solidarity Act,” which would threaten our allies that do business in Cuba and tie even more restrictions on the present embargo. The bill will not help Cuba's transition to a market economy and could only retard the very forces of freedom and openness the United States wishes to encourage. The embargo is strict enough without additional baggage and should be used as a bargaining chip to nudge Cuba into the democratic and human rights reforms that will one day set its people free.

HAVANA, January 19.—Cuban dissidents have met a visiting U.S. congressman in public, the first time in years such a meeting has taken without interference from the authorities, one of the dissidents said on Friday.

Elizardo Sanchez told Reuters he and other dissidents met visiting Democratic Representative Joe Moakley of Massachusetts for several hours in the state-owned Hotel Nacional.

Sanchez, leader of the Cuban Committee for Human Rights and National Reconciliation, said he was surprised the dissidents had been able to hold a meeting in public without problems. Meetings with members of Cuba's small and illegal opposition groups generally take place in dissidents' homes or foreign embassies.

“We are not bothered (by officials) either entering or leaving (the hotel),” Sanchez said, adding that the group discussed issues such as proposals in Congress to toughen the longstanding U.S. embargo against communist-ruled Cuba.

Moakley, who also met the dissidents on Tuesday at the house of the senior U.S. diplomat in Cuba Joseph Sullivan, is on a fact-finding mission that included talks with President Fidel Castro on Wednesday night.

Moakley said on Thursday he found Castro flexible on the congressman's suggestion that if there were some change on the island it might help defeat moves to toughen the embargo.