
MARGOT ADLER: This is Justice Talking, from the University of Pennsylvania's Annenberg Public Policy Center. I'm Margot Adler. On today's show we take a look at U.S. relations with Cuba. It's been just over a year since Fidel Castro fell ill and temporarily handed over power to his younger brother. Now that Raul Castro is at the helm and Fidel is out of public view, is it time to end America's 45-year old embargo against Cuba?

Independent reporter Carole King went to New Jersey to talk with some Cuban-Americans.

CAROLE KING: A late afternoon sun beats down on a tiny square of a park no bigger than a typical urban New Jersey backyard. Four older men in shirtsleeves square off at a concrete and tile table, one in a white golf cap, another smoking a Cuban cigar. Others stand around watching. This is not bridge or chess, but a cut-throat game of dominoes. [MEN SPEAKING SPANISH TO EACH OTHER] It could as easily be a park in La Habana, Cuba as in Little Havana, Miami. [DOMINOES SHUFFLING] But this parquecito is in Union City, New Jersey, just across the river from New York City in what was once dubbed "Havana on the Hudson." And men who might have shared their retirement days in Cuba have instead carved out an island to themselves. Without even looking up from his game one man says he's against talking with Castro or lifting the embargo. With the enemy, he says, you don't talk to them, you hit 'em with a stick. Eighty-seven year old Antonio Mesas agrees.

ANTONIO MESAS: [RESPONDS IN SPANISH]

CAROLE KING: He says instead the embargo should be tightened. It's the only way to topple the one who's on top.

UNIDENTIFIED MALE: Well, I think the generation that fought the revolution, you know, they're in a death grip with Fidel Castro.

CAROLE KING: Frank Argote-Freyre is a second-generation Cuban immigrant, born in the U.S., and a history professor at New Jersey's Kean University.

FRANK ARGOTE-FREYRE: And they are, you know, Cold War warriors. It defines their life. They lost that struggle and it's a very bitter pill. You know, they lost their homes. They lost their professions and then they were sent into exile.

CAROLE KING: "No democracy, no trade" has been the mantra of Cuban exiles since the Kennedy Administration imposed a U.S. Trade Embargo against Cuba in 1962. But Cuba has survived nearly half a century of U.S. sanctions intended to topple the communist government of Fidel Castro. Freyre for years strongly supported the embargo and even wanted to strengthen it. Then he started writing a book on Cuba and he visited Cuba.

FRANK ARGOTE-FREYRE: And I realized what a total and utter failure the embargo was when I went there, because I noticed the government officials, they were living in better places.

And I have a feeling that there was no food shortage for them. But on the street there were a lot of people who, you know, did not eat three square meals a day. And I said this policy, if it's hurting anybody, it would be hurting the Cubans of little means. [DOOR CLOSING]

CAROLE KING: The divisiveness of this issue can be seen even in Freyre's own family. They sit around a kitchen table in Bergen, New Jersey. When talk turns to the embargo, they disagree.

UNIDENTIFIED FEMALE: To argue that the Cuban people are suffering as a result of the embargo is not true, not accurate. They're suffering because of the policies of the government. And that really annoys me because, you know, that's what, like, the Hollywood people want you to know. Oh the poor Cuban people suffering because of the embargo. Nothing could be further from the truth.

UNIDENTIFIED MALE: People are hungry for money and especially dollars. I think the great amount of capital coming in, it would help the economy right away and people would start wanting to have private business.

FRANK ARGOTE-FREYRE: Then why would you not want to lift the embargo?

UNIDENTIFIED MALE: Why? Because if you lift the embargo, Castro has the right to go to the banks, the international bank, and get money, and that money is for him. He's not going to give anything to the Cuban people.

CAROLE KING: It's well after dark now and the dominoes game in Union City is still going strong. On a park bench one of the older men sits apart from the others. Eighty-year-old Mario says he has played the game all day and finally wants to rest. "I want my brothers and sisters who are still alive in Cuba not to die in misery and anguish, and for us to die together in the land where I was born," he says. "I already lost brothers and two sisters who died in Cuba, and my mother and father too," he says. "It's time. Let there be an accord between the two presidents to give up this struggle, to bring Cuban families together again, because I lost everything. Everything," he says. With an ill Fidel Castro not seen in public for over a year and families still separated as an older generation passes away, the common enemy now may be time. For Justice Talking, I'm Carole King.

MARGOT ADLER: Back in July 2006 when Fidel Castro transferred power to his brother Raul Castro, the transition was unremarkable. There was no popular unrest in Cuba, no mass exodus of Cubans, no political challenges to Raul's leadership. My next guest says he's not surprised.

Brian Latell is the author of "After Fidel: The Inside Story of Castro's Regime and Cuba's Next Leader."

BRIAN LATELL: I've always believed that Raul Castro has been underestimated and misunderstood or poorly understood. He's really quite a powerful figure. He's been the only other indispensable figure in the Cuban revolution since the late 1950s after his brother Fidel.

Raul is the world's longest-serving defense minister by far. He's been defense minister in Cuba since late 1959 and he also controls the other two most powerful institutions in Cuba.

MARGOT ADLER: And those are?

BRIAN LATELL: The other two are the institutions of the intelligence and security services--they're all combined into the Ministry of Interior--and the third is the Communist Party.

MARGOT ADLER: Have you seen any changes since Raul Castro came to power?

BRIAN LATELL: There's been a tonal change. There's been symbolic change. There's been a change in rhetoric and in leadership style. The Cuban people have been, I think, very pleased with those changes. But there's not been very much substantive change. There have been a few changes in leadership positions in ministries and other senior posts, but Raul has not yet felt free to move out swiftly or sharply in beginning to abandon or substantially alter the policies that Fidel Castro supported for so many years.

MARGOT ADLER: And do you think that's because Fidel Castro is still alive or do you think that's because of who Raul is?

BRIAN LATELL: Well, I think it's largely because Fidel is still there on the scene and his health has been improving in the last several months. He came close to death it seems last summer, summer of '06 after at least two, maybe three or four surgeries, but he's gotten stronger in recent months and has been reasserting himself in leadership. He's been writing editorials, reflections they're called. One of them was called a manifesto. And there have been quite a few. I think there have been two or three dozen of these. And Fidel is staking out a position on policy that's basically advising the rest of the successors: Don't forget I'm still here. I'm still to be reckoned with. Although the truth is he's in greatly diminished condition.

MARGOT ADLER: Recently at a ceremony commemorating the Cuban revolution, Raul Castro acknowledged certain economic problems in Cuba and he said that the country may open itself up to further foreign investment.

BRIAN LATELL: Yes.

MARGOT ADLER: Was this a surprise? What is behind this?

BRIAN LATELL: Well, I've been expecting it. But it's one of those--it's one of those changes that--fundamental economic changes that he's probably having difficulty convincing his brother to accept. I believe, I've long believed, that Raul is very attracted to the China economic model, the Vietnam economic model. And I should be clear, because when I speak--

MARGOT ADLER: Well, he's traveled there. He's traveled to China several times, correct?

BRIAN LATELL: Oh yes. Yes, he has. He's been to China at least two or three times in recent years. When I say "China model" I should be very clear for your listeners. I mean the early years of Deng Xiaoping's experiments in modernizing, liberalizing, opening China's economy to market forces. And those reforms in China, beginning in 1979/1980, were first implemented in the agricultural sector. This, I think, is exactly what Raul wants to do.

MARGOT ADLER: Raul Castro has said he wants to open up Cuba to greater foreign investment. Has he said anything about the issues that Americans keep on thinking about? You know, political rights, liberties like freedom of expression. Have there been any changes in regard to that?

BRIAN LATELL: Sad to say there have not. His interest in the China model is quite precise. The China model is economic opening and continued political--absolute political control. No, Raul is not going to be opening up the political system.

MARGOT ADLER: Let's back up for a moment. What do we know about Raul Castro? He seems to have a very different personality than his older brother.

BRIAN LATELL: He's been relegated to the shadows through all of these years and he is content to serve in the shadows. He's very different from his brother. Where Fidel is charismatic and audacious and where Fidel is decisive and articulate, Raul is plodding. He's cautious. He's uncharismatic. He's poorly educated. Fidel is a visionary and Raul is a technician, a manager. In the book I used a metaphor that I think really, really does work for these two men. Fidel is the director of the drama of the Cuban revolution. Raul is its producer. Neither one could have succeeded without the other in my opinion.

MARGOT ADLER: Brian Latell is a former CIA Cuba analyst and the author of "After Fidel: The Inside Story of Castro's Regime and Cuba's Next Leader." Thank you so much for talking with us.

BRIAN LATELL: Thank you. I've enjoyed it.

MARGOT ADLER: Coming up on Justice Talking:

UNIDENTIFIED FEMALE: The nationalism that is inherent in Cuba's history and in the Cuban people that well precedes Fidel Castro is absolutely heightened by the perception that because of U.S. policies Cuba is aggrieved and is the victim, and is the David to our Goliath.

UNIDENTIFIED MALE: If the embargo didn't exist, and of course Fidel Castro would gain great international credibility if it were lifted, he would invent some other pretense, some other excuse to be in power.

MARGOT ADLER: Should the embargo be lifted? Stay with us.

MARGOT ADLER: This is Justice Talking, the public radio show about law and American life. I'm Margot Adler.

Versailles, a Cuban restaurant and coffee bar in Miami, Florida serves up the traditional café con leche to a politically spirited crowd of Cuban-Americans. [SOUND OF COFFEE MACHINE] Conversation about the future of U.S. relations with Cuba is commonplace among the people who gather here. We asked them what they thought of the embargo.

UNIDENTIFIED FEMALE: I think the Cuban embargo doesn't make a difference. It only hurts the Cuban people. It doesn't hurt the Cuban government. It makes it more difficult for Cubans to get the things they need like medicines or things they would normally get from the United States. But it doesn't make a difference. It doesn't hurt the Cuban government. They still have dollars and they still, um--the Cuban government is not suffering, just the Cuban people. So I don't agree with the Cuban embargo. It's not really fulfilling the purpose that it originally had. So I think it should be lifted.

UNIDENTIFIED MALE: It doesn't matter what we do here. The embargo is in some way helping the Cuban government to stay in the way that they are because still the country is hidden from the public opinion. That's number one. Number two: If we open the embargo we probably will give more dollars to them. But at the same time, if we open the embargo they are going to be flooded with the American culture, the democratic way of life. There are going to be thousands of tourists that will go there and the Cuban people will learn more of what is in the open.

UNIDENTIFIED FEMALE: I think that there shouldn't be an embargo. That's how I feel. I think, um, capitalism works. I believe in that. And I think, I think the only people suffering are the Cubans. I'm totally against the embargo.

UNIDENTIFIED MALE: But I don't believe that. The government has been using and doing commercial business with everybody. So the embargo is something like...a word. To me, it's just a word. It's not an embargo.

UNIDENTIFIED MALE: I think it should stick because I don't feel that we should do anything for the better of communism, for the better of Castro. I think they should stick with it and do it even more hard than what it is now. Don't let nothing go in or out of Cuba. Nothing. Nothing.

MARGOT ADLER: To debate whether or not the U.S. embargo should be lifted are Nicolás Gutiérrez and Julia Sweig. Nicolás is a lawyer in Miami and a member of the Cuba Legal Transition Committee of the Cuban-American Bar Association. Julia is a senior fellow and director of the Latin American Studies Program at the Council on Foreign Relations. Welcome both of you to Justice Talking.

JULIA SWEIG: Thank you so much, Margot.

NICOLÁS GUTIÉRREZ: Thank you, Margot.

MARGOT ADLER: The transfer of power from Fidel Castro to his younger brother Raul just over a year ago was a smooth one. Predicted unrest and a mass exodus of refugees did not materialize. Julia, does this show that U.S. policy toward Cuba has been a complete failure?

JULIA SWEIG: Well, yes it does. The regime-change policy as articulated just a couple of weeks before Fidel Castro turned over power provisionally to his brother was quite explicitly to interrupt the succession plans of the Castro brothers and to bring about a democratic transition through a variety of means. And that language sounds pretty soft by comparison to the way that same policy over the last 50 years has been articulated. The United States has been after overthrowing that regime since practically before Fidel Castro even took power. And it has been an abject failure as the last year has shown stable--pretty much business-as-usual on the island.

MARGOT ADLER: Nick, do you think U.S. sanctions and the embargo have been effective?

NICOLÁS GUTIÉRREZ: Yes, they have, Margot, to the extent that they have been applied. In other words, Castro has been effectively isolated internationally. They would have a much greater effect had they been fully enforced. Let's remember that the embargo was never intended to be an end in and of itself. It was certain--it was only a means, a blunt instrument designed to be used in conjunction with other pro-democracy U.S. policies. And if there's any criticism of the Bush administration it's for not going far enough.

MARGOT ADLER: Before I turn to Julia, let me ask you this, Nick: Doesn't the U.S. embargo allow the Cuban government to maintain popularity as an embattled tiny nation, you know, the sardine against the shark, fighting the military might of the greatest nation on earth?

NICOLÁS GUTIÉRREZ: No, Margot. I mean that's, with all due respect, almost nonsensical. If you speak to any Cubans on the island today, nobody believes Fidel Castro's lies and promises after almost 49 years in power. By now he's a laughing stock. So if the embargo didn't exist--and of course Fidel Castro would gain great international credibility if it were lifted--he would invent some other pretense, some other excuse to be in power. The Cuban people don't listen to Fidel Castro anymore. They're just subject to a totalitarian repressive security apparatus which does not allow them to engage in the normal political activity that anybody else in the world enjoys. Indeed you can't really speak about the U.S. embargo against Cuba without addressing the other embargo. And by the other embargo I mean the internal embargo that Fidel Castro has imposed on his own people, systematically denying them of all basic rights and liberties enjoyed by people elsewhere in the world.

JULIA SWEIG: I would just say that to say that Cuba or Castro is isolated is wrong. They have trade and diplomatic ties with over 150 countries right now. Cuba can pick and choose who it has--whose capital comes in, but in terms of isolation, U.S. policy has failed to accomplish that. The second thing is that the nationalism that is inherent in Cuba's history and in the Cuban people that well precedes Fidel Castro is absolutely heightened by the perception that because of U.S. policies Cuba is aggrieved and is the victim, and is the David to our Goliath. So I just want

to say that we absolutely do reinforce that nationalism with these policies, as ineffective as they are.

MARGOT ADLER: Raul Castro just made a speech saying he's considering opening up the country to greater foreign investment. Is this the time to engage with Cuba, Julia?

JULIA SWEIG: Well, I think absolutely this is the time to engage, because it is clear that Raul Castro is aware that he cannot deliver the bread-and-butter basic needs of the Cuban population with charisma and repression alone. One, he doesn't have the charisma, and two, the repressive apparatus is not as fully functional as it would have to be in order to deal with the heightened expectations of the Cuban people and their enormous pent-up demand for a better life. The United States right now has no influence, no leverage, no effective way of affecting what is happening inside of Cuba. So today, as Cuba does make this transition, is the moment. It doesn't mean sitting down and negotiating, our president to Raul Castro, whoever that president is, but it surely means freshening up our Rolodex, figuring out who is running those ministries, who's coming into office, who is in the second and third generation of individuals in Cuba in the economy, in the military, in various walks of life, that do see a future beyond the Castro brothers, and understand that because there are 11 million Cubans living in our country and because of geography and history, we're pretty much stuck with one another. So I absolutely think that there are ways to engage that are in the U.S. national interest. And we ought to start now.

MARGOT ADLER: Nick, how would you respond to that?

NICOLÁS GUTIÉRREZ: Well, precisely because Cuba can trade with the rest of the world, their argument that their people suffering is caused by the embargo is further undermined. Their people suffering is caused by the centralized command economy.

JULIA SWEIG: I didn't say their suffering was because of the embargo. I said there is reason to engage that has to do with the U.S. national interests and having an influence on that future in Cuba whether its economic or political or however it takes shape.

NICOLÁS GUTIÉRREZ: But Julia, what you fail to recognize is that future--that freshening of the Rolodex, as you put it--those relationships should be being made now not with the isolated, illegitimate, unelected, totalitarian regime and its top leaders but to the people. Section 109 of the Helms-Burton law, for example, authorizes and indeed encourages people-to-people contact, as did the Torricelli bill before it--dissidents--

JULIA SWEIG: But in the context of things, "Hey, Cuban government, we want to overthrow you but let us have contact with your people"--

MARGOT ADLER: Let me turn to another issue right here. Nick, you represent older Cuban-Americans who fled Cuba after the revolution whose land was seized by the Cuban government. Cuban exiles who live in Miami are often painted in the press as extreme and irrational in their hard-line stance against Cuba. You represent hundreds of Cuban-Americans. How would you describe this community?

NICOLÁS GUTIÉRREZ: Well, first of all, they're not all older because the older ones have children and grandchildren. In fact, I am a second-generation Cuban-American. We're not pushing for any type of right-wing or extremist agenda. We're simply pushing for such radical notions--and I use that term sarcastically--as democracy, the rule of law, people having sovereignty over their own country and selecting their own leaders. These are not radical proposals.

MARGOT ADLER: So let me ask two questions, one to each of you, that sort of deal in these issues. In Cuba there's no freedom of the press, there's no freedom of assembly. There are, you know, only limited elections, as you were talking about. There are political prisoners sitting in Cuban jails. If we lift the U.S. sanctions, Julia, aren't we essentially legitimizing an oppressive government?

JULIA SWEIG: Yes and no. This has been a political objective, a policy objective of Fidel Castro, for as long as our sanctions have been in place, to get them lifted, at least in terms of what he says he wants. What they really want is a different matter. So it would potentially look like we're making a big concession to the dictator, but we would not be doing that for a very important reason, which is that the external calculus for Raul Castro right now is very, very easy. He and the cast of characters around him know exactly what to anticipate when it comes to the United States. If we really want to pose a challenge in this time of transition we will unilaterally say: You know what? Let's just go for it. Let's talk. Let's begin ties. Let's allow the open society that is the United States of America and our values to actually make way down there and affect Cuba directly. That's why the answer is also no, because it would pose an enormous challenge to the status quo internally in Cuba and lift the Cuban population's expectations of its own government to take advantage of the opening the United States represents.

MARGOT ADLER: Now I want to turn to Nick and ask you: Are we as Americans projecting our notions about individual liberties onto Cuba? Hasn't Cuba made a choice that, let's say, education, housing, healthcare, are basic human rights that in their view are more important than free speech and freedom of the press? And isn't that their choice?

NICOLÁS GUTIÉRREZ: Margot, your question betrays a lack of touch with the reality in Cuba. If you talk to ordinary Cubans--I'm not talking about Communist Party hierarchy, I'm not talking about foreign investors--ordinary Cubans will tell you that their healthcare system is a shambles, that if you go to a hospital you have to bring your own lightbulb, your own sheets, your own sutures, that their education system is based on forced channelization into specialties that the regime wants where you don't get paid the money yourself, your salaries, it goes through the regime but then pays you a pittance in pesos. You have to, you have to quote-unquote "work voluntarily in the sugar fields" to pay for your education. So I mean that's just nonsense. Cuba has no independent economic sector. So if you lift the embargo, as Julia says, well that'll put a stress on the system. If you lift the embargo, who would American companies deal with in Cuba? They cannot deal with ordinary Cubans. They have to by definition deal with Cuban state agencies.

JULIA SWEIG: Kind of like we do in China.

MARGOT ADLER: Let's look at China for a minute. Is China a useful example? Here's an oppressive government, limited human rights for its citizens, a booming economy which the U.S. does business with but the business you could argue, Julia, hasn't helped democracy there. So what's the lesson for Cuba policy?

JULIA SWEIG: I am not saying that we lift the embargo and you get democracy tomorrow in Cuba at all. I don't think that's the case. There's a very limited history of republican democracy in Cuba before the revolution. But what I am saying is that the fact of our policy puts an enormous constraint on the body politic's ability to have a conversation about what kind of future they are going to have. Because the regime manipulates our policy to restrict that conversation. So, no, of course China isn't the model, but I think we ought to take ourselves out of Cuba's domestic politics. Right now we're a huge player indirectly.

MARGOT ADLER: The U.S.--Oh, go on, very brief response.

NICOLÁS GUTIÉRREZ: Talk about arrogance and condescension. We're going to condemn the Cuban people to such a gradual transition that in China 34 years after the Nixon opening, or 35 years after the Nixon opening, they're still a totalitarian Communist regime that's responsible for Tiananmen Square, etc. And even with China opening economic policies somewhat, Raul and Fidel have yet to open anything like China or even Vietnam has done economically.

MARGOT ADLER: Okay, so here's my last question to both of you. In 10 years, after Fidel Castro and most likely Raul Castro are both gone, what do you see as the future of Cuba? We'll start with you Julia.

JULIA SWEIG: I see a cautious society that will want to move on the economic reform front much faster than opening politically. I don't see a rapid transformation. I see a slow process of economic opening and a process in which the Communist Party may begin to allow some of the very vibrant debates that happen behind closed doors manifest more openly. I don't see a multi-party system, but I do see more of an opening economically. Having said that, should the United States follow my advice, I do think that we could anticipate more rapid change because there will be a clamor for more of an opening if we take the first steps not from the regime but from the Cuban people.

MARGOT ADLER: Nick? The future in 15 or so years.

NICOLÁS GUTIÉRREZ: What I see, I'm less pessimistic than Julia. I see Eastern Europe; I see the Czech Republic; I see Slovakia; I see Lithuania, Latvia, and Estonia; I see Eastern Germany: all examples where a radical break from the communist past was implemented, where properties were returned in large part to the legitimate owners, where the rule of law was restored. I want to see, Margot, the entrepreneurial energies of Cuban people, which I share Julia's assessment on, unchained. And I think a system of rule of law and multi-party democracy that unchains that energy will unleash a potential that has not been seen in Latin America ever.

MARGOT ADLER: Nicolás Gutiérrez is a lawyer in Miami. He is leading legal efforts by hundreds of Cuban-Americans who want to reclaim property that the Cuban government seized

during the revolution. Julia Sweig is a senior fellow and director of the Latin American Studies Program at the Council on Foreign Relations. Her latest book is "Friendly Fire: Losing Friends and Making Enemies in the Anti-American Century." Thank you both so much for coming on our show.

JULIA SWEIG: Thank you very much.

NICOLÁS GUTIÉRREZ: Thank you, Margot.

MARGOT ADLER: Coming up on Justice Talking, we'll talk with a journalist in Havana to hear what life has been like for Cubans under the U.S. embargo. And we'll find out how Havana became the playground for American tourists during Prohibition.

UNIDENTIFIED MALE: American bar owners just crated up their bars, their signs, their stools, their tables, everything, moved the whole thing--

MARGOT ADLER: And moved right to Havana?

UNIDENTIFIED MALE: Moved to Havana. Recreated American bars in Havana. Right down, as I say, to the furniture.

MARGOT ADLER: Also, American students get a free education courtesy of Fidel Castro.

UNIDENTIFIED FEMALE: You get everything. Everything is provided.

MARGOT ADLER: Don't go away.

MARGOT ADLER: This is Justice Talking, where we make the connection between law and American life. I'm Margot Adler. So far on our show we've heard varying perspectives on U.S.-Cuban policy. Some people think the U.S. should drop the embargo. Others think that the Communist government has got to go.

To find out what life is like for the Cuban people, I called former BBC correspondent Stephen Gibbs. We reached him at his home in Havana and I asked him how Cubans perceive the United States.

STEPHEN GIBBS: By and large the Cuban people have a friendly attitude towards the American people. I think there's no question about that. You have to remember that an awful lot of them have relatives there, both relatives who left at the beginning of the revolution and people who have been leaving since. And of course before the revolution there were lots of ties.

So the difference really is between the American people and the U.S. administration. And the Cuban government of course has long tried to make that distinction, saying we have no quarrel with the people of the United States. We do have a major quarrel with their government. And I'd say that most Cubans take that attitude. They are pretty unhappy with what successive U.S. administrations have done towards Cuba, but they don't really feel that they want to take that out on the American people themselves.

MARGOT ADLER: Have the Cuban people suffered under the embargo? It's gone on for, what, five decades? Is it something that the Cuban people are simply used to at this point?

STEPHEN GIBBS: Yes, I mean, this is revolutionary. Cuba, of course, is not a consumer society and was never set up as such. So, um, there aren't any--there are very few things in the shops anyway, whether they're from the United States or Europe or wherever. I think unquestionably the Cuban people have suffered. I think it has affected the economy and it has hit the Cuban people in terms of what they can get hold of.

MARGOT ADLER: Now I have read these stories that say that something like 7 percent of the imports still come from the United States. Is that true?

STEPHEN GIBBS: Well it is true that if you go to a Cuban hotel and order a Coca Cola, you can probably find one. Now the reason for that is that a lot of the subsidiaries of major U.S. manufacturers do get stuff into Cuba via other countries. The Coke, for example, if you look at the can, it comes from Mexico. And also there is within the embargo, because of a change that was instigated by President Clinton, food exports from the United States to Cuba are allowed. Occasionally, within the sort of tourist market and the more up-market supermarkets that foreigners largely use, you do occasionally see, come across things like American turkeys or American cheese and that sort of thing.

MARGOT ADLER: Tell us about life for the Cuban people. On the one hand you hear about free healthcare, free education, low-cost housing. On the other hand you hear about rationing, food shortages, people standing in line. How would you describe access to goods and services, education, medical care?

STEPHEN GIBBS: If you look at Cuba as a very poor country, um, given that background, it is true that relatively speaking the Cuban government has made a priority of things like education and health. And people get access to pretty basic medical services and education that is to a certain extent politicized. But it's all free. All children go to school. There aren't--unlike other Latin America countries you don't see children hanging around barefoot in the street. And anyone, as I say, can go and get medical care. Now the hospitals themselves are a bit run down. They are a bit short of supplies, surprisingly dirty, but the basic care is definitely there. Aside from that the life, everyday life, for Cuban people is a real struggle. And the key reason it's a real struggle is that Cuban people are basically paid a state salary of around 15 U.S. dollars a month. Now with all the extras that they get here--which is effectively free accommodation, subsidized basic food package--it's not enough to live on and so you have to spend a large part of your month trying to, as Cubans put it, "resolve the gap." And that means maybe going to the

black market. It means perhaps if you're living in Havana hustling the odd tourist, etc., etc. So there is a struggle going on here.

MARGOT ADLER: Stephen Gibbs is the former BBC correspondent in Havana. Thank you for talking with us.

STEPHEN GIBBS: My pleasure.

MARGOT ADLER: To hear more of my conversation with Stephen, log on to our website, justicetalking.org. I asked him what challenges he faced reporting for the BBC from Cuba.

STEPHEN GIBBS: Now personally, in fact, the relationship has become more difficult I think in the last 12 months since Fidel was taken ill. And I along with two other of the foreign correspondents here have not been reaccredited. We are leaving. BBC is sending another correspondent in.

MARGOT ADLER: Was it something that you did that they didn't like or anything specific? Stephen's answer and more on the Cuban perspective at justicetalking.org.

MARGOT ADLER: I'm now joined by veteran NPR correspondent Tom Gjelten. Tom is completing a new book called "Bacardi and the Long Fight for Cuba," due out next year. Welcome, Tom.

TOM GJELTEN: Terrific to be here, Margot.

MARGOT ADLER: The Bacardi family has a long and complicated history with Cuba. Their trouble with the government began way back before the communist era, before General Batista. Tell us a bit about that history.

TOM GJELTEN: Virtually every stage of Cuban history there's some Bacardi angle or some Bacardi who's somehow involved. Emilio Bacardi, who is the son of the founder of the company, was deeply involved in the first two Cuban independence wars. The wars for independence from Spain, the first one from 1868 to 1878, and of course the second one that began in 1895. He was very involved in the underground movement in Cuba and was really the main liaison with the rebels in Santiago, which is their city in eastern Cuba. During the U.S. occupation of Cuba from 1898 to 1902, Emilio Bacardi was the mayor of Santiago and had a very interesting and complicated relationship with Leonard Wood, who was the military--U.S. military governor.

MARGOT ADLER: So what did the American occupation mean to the Bacardi family?

TOM GJELTEN: To understand this you have to understand the Cuban revolution, which is something I think very few Americans really do. This was a revolution that was fought not only for the independence of Cuba from Spain but for racial equality. This was a huge issue in Cuba.

Antonio Maceo, who was the commander of the rebel army, was himself black. And a big part of the political program of the revolution was in the first place to end slavery, but also to have suffrage for all male citizens. No country in the world I think at that point believed in voting for females but the revolution was aimed at establishing universal male suffrage.

MARGOT ADLER: So at this time, since this was also the time, I gather, when the drinks Cuba Libre and Daiquiri were born, what did the "libre" mean? It was freedom for Cuba from what? From whom?

TOM GJELTEN: "Cuba Libre" was sort of the cause, the slogan that summarized the cause, and it was the idea of a free Cuba, a Cuba that was not only independent of Spain but also independent of the United States. And so the free Cuba was going to be a nation of Cubans that was a sovereign and independent of all great powers.

MARGOT ADLER: During Prohibition in the United States, Cuba closed its facilities in New York, but opened its beaches to American tourists. What was this time like in Cuba?

TOM GJELTEN: A lot of people think that was the golden age of Cuba. This was when American tourists just swarmed over Cuba because it was Prohibition in United States. You couldn't get a drink in the United States. So a lot of American bar owners just crated up their bars, their signs, their stools, their tables, everything, moved the whole thing--

MARGOT ADLER: And moved right to Havana?

TOM GJELTEN: Moved to Havana. Recreated American bars in Havana. Right down, as I say, to the furniture. And Americans went there. It was very cheap to get there and basically anything went in Cuba. They treated visiting American tourists so well, it didn't matter how stumbling drunk you got, no matter who you messed around with. You know, they didn't ask to see your driver's license or check your age or anything else. And there were opium dens and brothels. So this was a real playground for visiting Americans. Now after Prohibition ended, that sort of wave of tourism receded somewhat, but basically Cuba kept this reputation, you know, for the next 30 or 40 years, on up really up until the time Fidel Castro came to power.

MARGOT ADLER: Tell us about the relationship between the Bacardi family and Fidel Castro during the revolution and afterwards. I gather that it started in one way and ended in another.

TOM GJELTEN: It sure did. That's actually true for, I think, a lot of Cubans. The Bacardis were as a family probably Fidel Castro's leading financial backers. The money that they gave him was all in cash and it's--they don't like to talk about it now. So it's hard to say, but it was substantial, in the tens of thousands if not hundreds of thousands of dollars. So the Bacardis were in a sense sort of Fidel's favorite business. I think of all the Cuban businesses, they had perhaps the most progressive reputation. And they paid their taxes a year in advance when Fidel came to power because they wanted to help the treasury get on solid footing. They did not believe that they would ever be touched. But of course Fidel wanted to establish a pretty orthodox socialist regime in Cuba that did not really have room for big capitalist enterprises and it took him quite a while. It was well over a year and a half into his government before he

decided to do it. But in October 1960 he expropriated the Bacardi properties in Cuba. They felt betrayed. They felt double-crossed. They went into exile. And like so many other exiles, the fact that they had previously supported Fidel just made them all the more angry. And in exile they went from being Fidel's biggest backers to being Fidel's most powerful and well-heeled opponents.

MARGOT ADLER: NPR correspondent Tom Gjelten is completing a new book called "Bacardi and the Long Fight for Cuba," published by Viking and due out next year. Thanks for making me think about rum in an entirely new way.

TOM GJELTEN: It's my pleasure, Margot.

MARGOT ADLER: In September of 2000, Fidel Castro announced the creation of full scholarships for U.S. students of little means to go to medical school in Cuba. Some see the scholarships as a generous humanitarian gesture. Others think it's a sly public relations ploy by a cunning dictator. Regardless, American students are graduating from the six-year program and heading back to the United States to apply for residency in hospitals. Lillian Holloway is the U.S. delegation representative at Doctor Salvador Allende Hospital in Havana, Cuba, where she is a fifth-year medical student. She joins us from Philadelphia. Welcome, Lillian.

LILLIAN HOLLOWAY: Thank you very much.

MARGOT ADLER: Was it difficult adjusting to living in Cuba?

LILLIAN HOLLOWAY: A lot of people, when they come they say oh my god, it is so different! While people are speaking a different language, I see the similarities more than I see the differences.

MARGOT ADLER: Well let me ask you this. What has it been like taking medical classes in Spanish? Was this something that you knew or was this really difficult?

LILLIAN HOLLOWAY: I had studied Spanish in community college. I didn't know too much but I felt okay in Spanish. And when I got to Cuba I took a placement exam and I exonerated Spanish so they put me right in the pre-med. I felt like I could've taken a few classes because nobody really prepares you for Cuban Spanish. But in the long run people tell you, the students that are there previously, you know, you ask them, everybody seems really worried about the Spanish when they come in, and they say don't worry, that's the least of your concerns. And it's true. Once you get there the classes are so difficult, and the study and the Spanish is the least of your concerns. You will find a way to express yourself if you need to. And a lot of medical terminology and scientific terminology is the same because it has Latin, a Latin root, so.

MARGOT ADLER: What was the most difficult thing about the classes?

LILLIAN HOLLOWAY: The system is just different. First of all, we wear uniforms from the first day. Our uniforms are a short-sleeved lab coat and a blue bottom and, you know, closed-toe shoes. And we wear it from the very beginning. And, you know, Americans, we're more laid back in terms of like our dress and so the American students often come in and we're not ironed and get sent home. Or we're wearing flip-flops and you get sent home. And when the teacher comes in you have to stand up. And so those things were just--they were just different because we're not usually raised that way.

MARGOT ADLER: So everything is paid for? Books, lodging, food, everything?

LILLIAN HOLLOWAY: Books, everything, a stipend for things that you might need. It's not a big stipend, but it goes alright in Cuba. It's 100 pesos. You get even "asellos," like toiletries, you get toiletries once a month. You get everything, everything is provided.

MARGOT ADLER: Lillian, something we've all been wondering: Cuba's paying to educate you. It's paying to educate all these medical students at the same time that the U.S. is imposing a trade and travel embargo. You're not going to be staying in Havana to practice medicine. So what's in it for Cuba?

LILLIAN HOLLOWAY: I'll try to explain it the best way I can, the way I see it. One of the most common theories is that it's a political ploy to make them more favorable. I don't think that can possibly be the core element because it just doesn't make sense in the long run. In Cuba there's this really big concept of solidarity. And I think that as Americans we don't really fully understand that concept because there's nothing that we get or give for free here and not even in a bad way. It's just that here the idea of giving something to someone is like, oh, you donate food to the poor starving people in Africa or something. But in some way we're still getting a benefit. We're still saying that I gave to this person who is on some level lesser than me or on some level, um, less fortunate than me but it gives me a boost in some way.

But they don't really use solidarity in that concept. They use it more in this idea of I don't agree with the U.S. government but I feel a common core with the people that are there and I want to give you the best of who I am because I believe in your possibility, and I want to insure that you have the things that you need. And so they often say that their solidarity is in giving what "lo que te sobre." It's not giving the leftover food that you have on your plate because you weren't going to use it anyway. Rather it's this idea of giving what is precisely hard for you to give. I mean, Cubans have lots of doctors but it's not like they don't need their doctors, and the education is free for us. But it's not free for them to offer it. It's definitely very costly for them. And so they're giving all these black and Latino, poor black and Latino kids a free education with everything free with their only obligation to go back to the States and serve their underserved communities. It just seems like a stretch to be a ploy.

MARGOT ADLER: Lillian Holloway is the U.S. delegation representative at Doctor Salvador Allende Hospital in Havana, Cuba where she's a fifth-year medical student. She's in Philadelphia for the summer. And thank you so much for being with us.

LILLIAN HOLLOWAY: Thank you.

MARGOT ADLER: To hear the experiences of a couple of Lillian's classmates, log on to justicetalking.org.

UNIDENTIFIED MALE: I learned to be with other people that not only speak different languages but also have very different sense of political value.

UNIDENTIFIED FEMALE: The best thing for us, coming back as U.S. students, you know, we're going to help be able to implement a possible universal healthcare. If Cuba can do it, I feel that someone, you know, in the United States Congress and many others will be able to. And we just want to be a part of that.

MARGOT ADLER: Let us know what you think about Cuba, the U.S. embargo, and the Castro government at justicetalking.org. While there, check out our blog, where the opinionated reveal their thoughts on law and American life. Thanks for listening. I'm Margot Adler.
