



COMMENTARY

Lift the hurdles for travel to Cuba

By Doug Jaraczewski

When I was a student at St. Hyacinth Polish Catholic Church's grade school on the Northwest Side, my family contributed to the collection basket at Sunday Mass to support the Polish Solidarity movement in the 1980s.

Back then, Polish-Americans and Polish immigrants were encouraged to travel to Poland, as were other Americans, to spread the message of freedom and democracy to an oppressed people engaged in a freedom fight against a totalitarian Soviet satellite regime.

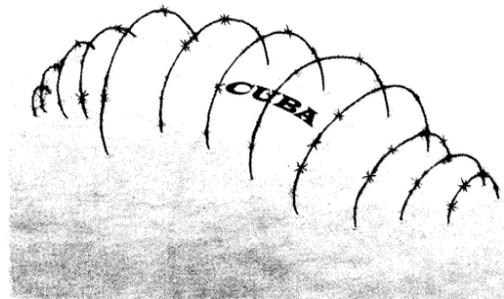
President Ronald Reagan supported that effort, as did House Speaker Tip O'Neill, and many members of Congress. The federal government didn't restrict U.S. citizens from traveling to Communist Poland. It was the Communist government in Poland that restricted emigration

and travel.

Even Pope John Paul II supported traveling to Poland. His visits to his homeland helped lead to the downfall of the Polish Communist government. No regime can stop the eventual freedom of all humankind.

I remember seeing the enthusiasm of Polish-born Americans when John Paul II visited the United States at the beginning of his papacy. I'll always remember my enthusiasm when I found myself 20 feet away from him in 1979 as he visited Brighton Park's Five Holy Martyrs Church.

I imagine that there was that same kind of enthusiasm in Cuba when John Paul II traveled there in 1998. John Paul II did not boycott Cuba, he engaged it. He understood the powerful ideals of freedom and the effect they had in Poland and across the Eastern Bloc. The pope clearly did not believe that the stale rhetoric of isolating Cuba was helping the



PEDRO X. MOLINA ILLUSTRATION

Cuban people. He understood that he needed to engage Cuba to change Cuba, as the United States must do now.

Engagement works, even if it takes time.

The U.S. House is considering a bill to ease restrictions on Americans traveling to Cuba.

Engagement with Poland led to democratization. Why would it not work with Cuba?

The U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops, United Methodist Church, Human Rights Watch, American Baptist Churches USA, Episcopal Church, the U.S. Chamber of Commerce, the National Farmers Union, the American Farm Bureau Federation, and the American Society of Travel Agents all support an end to the ban on all Americans traveling to Cuba.

Cuban-Americans can currently travel to Cuba, as well as their spouses, to visit relatives on the island. However, my Polish-American family, which contributed to the demise of European Communism, cannot.

Much of the world has opened up to Cuba.

Why does the United States continue to cling to an isolationist policy that hurts only two groups: Cubans and the American people?

Doug Jaraczewski is a political consultant in Washington, D.C.