

NO ES FACIL: IT'S NOT EASY

COVER STORY: It's downright difficult living in poverty under a brutal dictator's thumb, but an army of compassionate Americans could help churches better the lives of poor Cubans | *by Marvin Olasky in Havana*





Waiting for food rations
in Pinar Del Rio

SPENCER PLATT [GETTY IMAGES]

Four years ago both the United States and Cuba were deeply into the Elian Gonzalez debate. The 6-year-old boy found off the Florida coast on Thanksgiving Day and seized by federal immigration agents in a predawn Miami raid on April 22 was in a legal tug of war that would end with his return to Cuba on June 28.

Since then Cuba has largely been off the American radar screen. Journalists have written much about some Middle East terrorists imprisoned at Guantanamo, the U.S. base on the southeast Cuban coast, but little recently about how Fidel Castro's regime, now celebrating its 45th year in power, imprisons the 11 million people of Cuba. The only recent attention came in Oliver Stone's pro-Castro HBO documentary last month.

And yet, Cuba is inescapably on our radar because of proximity (90 miles away from Florida) and history (the United States liberated Cuba from Spain little more than a century ago, only to see it fall into the hands of various dictators). The four-decade-long U.S. embargo—no trading with or regular tourist visits to Cuba—forced the Castro regime to make some concessions to reality in the early 1990s, but the Clinton administration loosened restrictions and the Bush administration this month is deciding whether to tighten them (see p. 72)—and if so, how?

LETTING OTHERS EAT

Three Spanish expressions common in Havana summarize what I saw during a recent trip to Cuba. First, heard regularly: *No es facil* (It's not easy). Every aspect of life—from gaining basic material sustenance to traveling across town to remaining psychologically relaxed when any neighbor or associate might be an informer—is difficult.

Second, heard as an explanation of why a failing government resents attempts to fill the gaps, *Ni comen ni dejan comer* (They don't eat, neither do they let others eat). Churches are ready and willing to do better than the government in helping the poor and particularly the elderly, but it is officially and ideologically the responsibility of the state to provide all social services. Officials turn down church requests to build homes for the elderly and even citizen attempts to organize the collection of garbage that is rotting in the streets. Everything compassionate people do is an indictment of government failure—and Cuba's Communist Party is desperately trying to avoid facing the truth.

Third, abundantly seen on billboards, the favorite Castroite slogan: *Un mundo mejor es posible* (A better world is possible). Marxist sloganeering tends to have three stages: belief, cynicism, and flipping the slogan on its head. Some Cubans may still believe that the regime can produce a better world; many appear to be cynical; but the future is with Christians who have faith that a better world is possible and



The Evangelical Church of Canaan in central Cuba

are willing to take reasonable risks in striving toward that goal.

Probably 500,000 Roman Catholics attend mass in Cuba weekly, and several million more feel some Catholic connection. The largest growth of biblical sensibility in recent years has been among Protestants, who now number between 600,000 and 2 million. A precise number is hard to come by because fewer than 200,000 Cubans adhere to establishment



denominations that make up the *Consejo de Iglesias*, the Cuban Council of Churches, a leftist body tightly connected to and directed by government authorities.

The explosive growth has come in unregistered *casas cultos*, house churches. The largest denominations—such as the Baptist and Assembly of God conventions—generally scorn the Council. Those in the free churches are desperately

trying to extend their territory both in evangelism and in the provision of social services. Here are five typical faces:

- **Leoncio Veguilla**, president of the Baptist Convention of Western Cuba, sits in an office decorated with, among other items, 18 Don Quixote statuettes. The kindly 73-year-old did hard labor in prison from 1965 to 1970 for not toeing the Party line. He spent time in a forced labor camp, cutting sugar cane

alongside criminals and other religious prisoners labeled by the government as “social scum.” He looks back on that time as “very difficult, but an opportunity to preach the gospel to prisoners,” many of whom became Christians. Released and told not to preach again, he started up immediately and recently celebrated his 50th anniversary as a preacher.

Rev. Veguilla is hoping for the opportunity to do more for the elderly. The government allows Baptists to run one home with room for 30 *ancianos*, pays for a doctor and two nurses whom the Baptists can select, and recently gave permission to enlarge the home so that 15 or 20 more can live there. But Baptists have not gained permission to open up other homes for the aged or to have the opportunity to do more in other areas. Nevertheless, Rev. Veguilla is reading Abraham Lincoln biographies—“I love the history of Lincoln, how he worked to free the slaves”—and still hopes that freedom will come to Cuba without more blood being shed.

• **Efrain Paz**, some 20 years younger than Rev. Veguilla, wears a baseball cap that shades his broad, friendly face, and rides a 1963 Czech motorcycle. An Assemblies of God church group used to crowd into his living room, but the government gave him permission to put a covering over his backyard so members could gather there. Instead of a patio, though, they built four years ago a stand-alone sanctuary, which has room for 84 battered folding chairs, 12 white plastic porch chairs, 28 wooden seats from a movie theater, and a pulpit.

A year later a government official came and was angry to find a building, not just a roof, in Rev. Paz’s backyard. The official pressured the pastor by pushing one woman to accuse him of rape, but that accusation was obviously false. Another person said the church had given medicine to needy people without being licensed as a medical clinic, but it was hard to throw the pastor in jail for



Veguilla

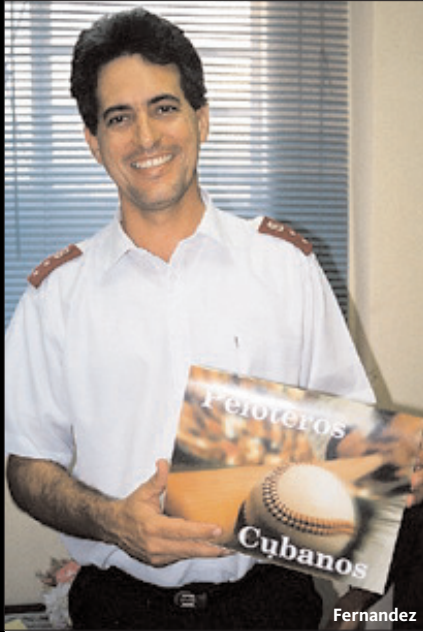
helping the sick when the state health service is so obviously failing. The stalemate continued for four years, but several months ago the building finally gained legal approval. The lesson Rev. Paz has learned: “Officials say, ‘You can’t do it, can’t do it, can’t do it.’ But if you’ve already done it and enough people like it, they may say, ‘so be it.’”

Rev. Paz points out that the number of Assemblies of God churches has jumped from 200 in 1980 to over 2,600 now, with 130,000 adult members plus many children in attendance. He says, “The politics of the government are slowly changing,” as desperate officials give churches limited opportunity to take over social functions: “If the Assemblies of God had freedom, we would set up homes for the elderly . . . and distribute medicine to those in need.”

• Salvation Army Captain **Odilio Fernandez**, born in 1963, is a baseball fan with a U.S.-made calendar displaying 12 Cubans (such as “El Duque” Hernandez) who became major-league stars in the United States. A lean, third-generation Salvation Army leader, he explains that the SA came to Cuba in 1912 and by the 1950s had built numerous homes for the elderly and programs involving activities for children and food distribution for the



Paz



needy. The Revolution grabbed everything from the SA except for one home for the aged—the smallest one.

That smallest one, though, is operating well without any restrictions at present. At one prayer meeting at the home, 16 elderly women, bright-eyed and alert, some holding Bibles, asked God for wisdom in using their time and for His mercy in the lives of each others' children and grandchildren. Thirty

other aged men and women live there in dignity, with three to five to a room; one helper used a file on the toenails of a 92-year-old. The bathrooms were clean.

Only three of the 46 persons at the home are SA members, and one resident who died recently was a Communist Party member. The government pays for the salaries of not only the one doctor and three nurses but some attendants as well, all of whom the SA can choose.

Capt. Fernandez explained that the government is trying to maintain the status quo: "Inside our facility we can do what we want, but when we asked permission to open another home for the elderly, in a vacant building that would have worked well for that purpose, the government said no. The government always says 'this far and no further.' If we had freedom we would open up elderly homes everywhere."

- Walk up two flights of dark and narrow stairs, enter a small room with cracked vinyl couches and an artificial Christmas tree on one desk: Welcome to the office of 3-year-old MANA, an interdenominational *Ministerio de Ayuda a Necesitados y Ancianos* (help for the needy and the elderly). MANA director **Dulce L. Montalvan Diaz** has linked her program to 40 churches throughout Cuba and has 70 employees and volunteers who respond to requests for emergency help: "We'll help everybody. You don't have to be a Christian."

In 1980 Mrs. Montalvan was in desperate need. Her husband escaped to Miami, leaving her alone with an 8-month-old daughter. With neighbors yelling in bullhorns that she was a traitor and family members "not helping because they would also be judged," she "met people who were going to church, so I went there also, I felt at home there. Pastors prayed for me. I became a different woman."

Now, Mrs. Montalvan tries to keep track of resources and needs on a "Frankenstein computer" that was constructed part by part from computers that died. She says, "I don't have

a budget. I scrounge. I go to this house and ask for lemons. . . . A non-Christian who worked in a bar gave me part of his tips. He had been very critical of Christianity, but then he saw that we try to put it into practice. Now he goes to church, and he and his friends find milk" for distribution to children. If the government did not interfere, she says, "I would love to have a home for the elderly and a hospital. . . . The need for medicine is great."

- Many Catholic priests and nuns also distribute medicine and other material help to church members, even though state health officials threaten them with "severe sanctions" for doing so. For example, **Eduardo Pini** of the *Orden de las Escuelas Pias* passes out on Tuesdays medicines donated by Spanish friends and brought to him by trustworthy tourists from Barcelona: "The needs of the people are so great that the political cost of shutting us down is too great for the government. . . . They don't facilitate, but they don't send police to shut us down—for the moment." The need for vitamins, antibiotics, and Advil-type pain relief, and for medication to



Salvation Army home for the elderly

KEVIN ABEGG

deal with diarrhea and hypertension, is particularly severe.

Milk is also in short supply. Children to the age of 7 and elderly people are entitled to a state-provided quart of milk per week, but the reality is different: “Will the warehouse have milk? Did the warehouse manager sell it? The truck driver?” Rev. Pini noted that about seven years ago Catholics tried to bring in through the port a large container of powdered milk: “It was stuck in customs for a long time, and a friend kept an eye on it. The government eventually said that the acidic content of the milk was too high, so the milk had to be thrown out. But the friend reported that the milk ended up in ice cream for tourists.”

Rev. Pini and others plead for help from those tourists: “In our weakness we have lost all shame. We don’t ask for clothing, but we ask tourists to leave all their clothes except those they are wearing home. We ask for the little pieces of soap in hotel rooms.” Most church leaders do not expect any help from government: “State officials use the desire of humanitarian organizations to make the state look better. . . . But even the state doesn’t get what it wants. Corruption is the norm in any state-run activity. Stealing is the norm.”

DOLLAR DEMAND

Leaders from different denominations have in common a desire to set up homes for the elderly and also to help regular church members and others survive day by day. But *No es facil* (It’s not easy): Most Cubans have to break the law regularly by buying needed food on the black market, or by paying for medical care when the state health system fails them.

To start with the material basics: In accord with Communist principles the government offers rations to all, but the quantities—even when they are available in reality and not just on paper—are insufficient. Josef Stalin was famous for justifying his murders by saying “You can’t make an omelet without cracking eggs,” but not many real eggs are cracked in Cuba: The ration is eight per person per month in Havana, four or five per month elsewhere.

The rice ration is six pounds per person, which works out to be about three ounces per day. Beans are another staple, but a common complaint is that the *canasta basica* (ration book) includes less than ever. Nor are the rations free: Prices have increased in recent years but wages have not. Beef, except in tourist hotels, is not available, and Cubans joke that cows are

revered in their country as they are in India: “Everyone steals, but cattle theft can yield 20 years in prison.”

In a society long known for being child-friendly, the milk shortage greatly distresses Cubans. When a baby is born, parents get a card that is supposed to entitle them to a quart of milk per week until the child is 7 years old. But Cubans regularly say that some milk never shows up and other portions are watery. They say the type of milk distributed to children ages 3 to 6 is of such low quality that many children have stomach problems.

Surely the vaunted health-care system is an exception to this dismal picture? Not according to the doctors with whom I spoke and the pharmacies I visited. Medical visits are free but medicine is scarce; hospitals (except those restricted to Communist leaders and foreigners) are seen as unhygienic, and at one hospital the new tradition is BYOX—Bring your own X-ray film. At a pharmacy that’s supposed to be one of the best-stocked, since it’s across the street from the Havana Children’s Hospital, I flipped

through one price list (dated 2002) that hung next to the counter, not knowing that perusal of it is restricted to MDs. The impressive list even showed that 20 50-mg tabs of Vitamin E could be purchased for \$1.20. The pharmacist, though, had no vitamins.

“Luxuries” like coffee (ration: enough to make four to five cups once per month) or soap (one small bar per person per month, which is heaven for small boys but hard on others) are particularly hard to come by. Three groups of people can afford “luxuries”—those who receive money from relatives in the United States, those who work in the tourist industry and pick up tips, and those who work the streets and pick up European or Canadian visitors looking for relatively inexpensive prostitutes. All of them gain dollars that allow them to move from “peso stores”—where little is available and that which is may be rotten—to “dollar stores,” where much is available but at prices only the Cuban wealthy can afford.

For example, at one Havana dollar store a little fan that costs \$8 at a Target store in Texas costs \$24. A mini-refrigerator costs \$240, two C batteries \$5, and a bar of soap 35 cents. Since Cuban wages range from the peso equivalent of almost \$4 per month for an unskilled laborer, to \$8 per month for a typical worker, \$16 per month for an experienced lawyer, and \$20 per month for a judge, all those prices are high: A minimum-wage American earns \$5.15 per hour, or \$10,300 over a 50-working-week year, over 200 times what an unskilled Cuban worker earns. If the fan in the Cuban dollar store were priced at an equivalent amount (per earning power) as the one in my local Target store, it would cost about \$5,000.





A "dollar store" in Havana

Those who get money from relatives or tourists can do better—yet, as one African scholar who has lived in Havana for many years says (I'm withholding her real name because she could be deported), "the nonmaterial problems may be even more severe" than the economic ones: "Young people see few opportunities and are tired of having no control over their own lives. . . . People generally have learned to be two-faced, super-friendly on the outside but ready to stab you in the back if they need to in order to survive."

Even baseball has fallen. One evening the team from Santiago, Cuba's second-largest city, was playing Havana's famed Industriales, the top team in Cuba's National League and the former home of players like "El Duque" Hernandez—but only several thousand people were rattling around in the 60,000-seat *Estadio Latinoamericano*. The poor attendance seems related not to ticket prices—admission for Cubans costs the equivalent of one cent—but to Havana's transportation collapse: Private cars are rare and buses few and unreliable.

Of course, maybe the dirty and trash-strewn stadium, with its stinking urinals, led fans to think the televised game could be more pleasantly viewed at home. The stadium displayed a big sign disparaging players who have escaped to the United States—"Our principles are not negotiable"—but the Cuban with me said, sadly, "People don't even believe in baseball anymore." That may be an exaggeration, yet even games at Boston's Fenway Park where the Red Sox have blown leads did not seem as funereal as this one in Havana.

SLOW GOING

Unless some true believers are still to be found in the Communist Party, it appears that the churches are now the main centers for hope in Havana. The government, though, harasses church attempts to help the poor and the elderly because within Communist ideology it is the responsibility of the state to provide all social services: *Ni comen ni dejan comer* (They don't eat, neither do they let others eat).

Cuba's Communist Party, desperately trying to avoid facing the truth about Marxism's failure, blames economic problems on the U.S. embargo: For 40 years now the United States government has banned virtually all trade between the United States and Cuba. It's true that lifting the embargo could help Cuban children and the poor—but only if Cuba had a democratic government that cared more about people than about preserving Communist hegemony. It's important to understand that in Cuba the normal rules of humanitarian aid do not apply. Many Cubans see their government now as perhaps two-thirds kleptocracy and one-third ideology, with most officials in the game to steal what they can.

Generally, both Cuban resources and those flowing from abroad, once they fall into the hands of Cuban officials, either go to the privileged few or are wasted in unrealistic schemes. For example, Cubans tell of a French NGO that donated toothpaste to be given to poor Cubans, only to learn that the toothpaste ended up in dollar stores that the poor cannot afford to patronize. Nongovernmental organizations that collaborate with

the government fall under government control; when a European organization told one Cuban official that it would work with NGOs but not the government, the official is said to have responded, *No problema*: The government has NGOs. Whether joke or real, the statement rings true.

In some ways the problem of helping Cuban children and the poor generally is similar to the problem of helping children of U.S. welfare parents. If the parents are responsible, material help will be used for the benefit of their children; if the parents are irresponsible, help will not make it to the children no matter how well-intentioned their benefactors are. When conservatives talk of sanctioning those welfare parents who would rather drink or do drugs than face reality and go to work, liberals and some welfare moms use their children as hostages. Cuban officials who demand an end to the embargo are also using children as hostages.

We've seen in the United States that material resources given to addicted parents feed their addiction, not their children. Similarly, any humanitarian aid sent to Cuba through official government channels or through governmental pseudo-NGOs like the Cuban Council of Churches goes to strengthen the totalitarian apparatus. Once in a while material brought into the Port of Havana can get into the right hands, but the cost is high: About four years ago a bribe of \$1,500 brought in some boxes of medicine. Even if those offering charity choose to ignore the regime-strengthening effects, they still fail in their attempts, because kleptocracy swallows all: Milk shipped in for children turns into ice cream for tourists.

A better alternative is already showing itself to be possible: Some individuals, such as those who on humanitarian visas bring in small amounts of medicine or 20 to 120 pounds of powdered milk packets with their personal luggage, do get help to those truly in need. Church-related groups distribute medicine or transport milk to the eastern part of Cuba, where shortages are particularly severe. There, it is distributed by bicycle. . . all very discrete.

It's slow going, and some say it has to be. The African scholar in Havana put it this way: "Anything possibly threatening to the government has to be done very quietly. . . . Maybe a church can get a computer, a fax machine, if it's discrete." She noted that one faster approach (shipping through the port) would not work because of government kleptocracy, and the only other faster approach—instead of having a handful of people bringing in what's needed, have many—seems impractical: "You'd need large quantities. You'd need a whole army of people to bring in bags of medicine."

RAISING AN ARMY

"You would need an army of people."

Hmmm. Where have we heard expressions like that before? Ah—George W. Bush said in 1999 (and since then), "We will rally the armies of compassion in our communities. . . . This will not be the failed compassion of towering, distant bureaucracies. . . . In every instance where my administration



A pharmacy in Havana

sees a responsibility to help people, we will look first to faith-based organizations."

What if an army of compassion would enlist to bring in medicine or milk? Or books about freedom and the failures of Communism that could be passed along from one person to another? Ironically, the one success of the Revolution, making literacy virtually universal, brings with it the seeds of its own destruction. More Cubans, now literate, have developed patterns of critical thinking, and brave Cubans now stock 80 independent libraries—sometimes corners of apartments—that circulate books by Orwell, Solzhenitsyn, and Cuban dissidents. The government hates the libraries but is in a tough position, because Fidel Castro insists that Cuba does not ban books.

An army of compassion entering Cuba, two by two, could provide milk for the hungry, medicine for the needy, and books for the yearning—but it would also contribute to the



building of civil society. Churches and other nongovernmental organizations that now distribute milk are learning to take action outside of government control by working with each other and developing new connections in their communities. In essence, they are preparing for a democratic transition in Cuba, helping new centers of governance to emerge alongside the tottering offices of the old.

Alongside the person-to-person approach could come a denomination-to-denomination approach. U.S. evangelical denominations could take the lead not only in urging members to visit Cuba, but in pressing to be allowed to send material aid for the construction of homes for the elderly (evangelical after evangelical in Cuba saw that as a great need and a great opportunity) on a denomination-to-denomination basis: Southern Baptists helping Cuban Baptists, U.S. Assembly of God congregations helping their Cuban counterparts, and so forth.

None of this can be done through the Cuban Council of Churches, for sending aid that way is like directing it to the government. Instead, the Bush administration should make it a prime part of policy to further *effective compassion*. Cuban officials will of course resist, but not as much as if Americans were attempting to build schools there: Cuban hardliners still have hope for the future through the propagandizing of children, but they may be willing to allow the elderly a dignified demise. As denominations took on greater organizational and construction tasks, they would again be learning to govern more effectively and humanely than the current governors do.

Building centers of governance parallel to those of the official government. Hmm. Where have we heard that before? Look at Lenin's article, "Letters from Afar . . . The First Stage of the First Revolution," which he wrote (and the newspaper *Pravda* published) in March, 1917, eight months before

STONE COLD

THIS ARTICLE HAS CONCENTRATED on the work of church leaders who are pushing against humanitarian restrictions but are not politically involved. We should also pray for the 75 prisoners of conscience (aka dissidents) jailed by the Castro regime a year ago, and the thousands who have been imprisoned longer. They have it rough.

Here's the first paragraph of a March 14 e-mail from one grieving mother, Alcira Avila: "On February 4, 2004, I got an anonymous call, telling me that my son, Leonardo Bruzon Avila, was defecating and vomiting blood. Our entire family and some friends went to the Combinado del Este prison. We found out that the authorities had taken my son to the section known as the 'triangle of death.' We began to pressure the authorities to let us see him. Coronel Rojas from Villa Marista was there, and he told me that I could not see my son who had been placed where he was because he was very rebellious."

Cuban officials play rough in other ways as well. I met in Havana with the wife of one of the 75 dissidents arrested a year ago. She is 26 with one child and a sweet smile that can't avoid a down-turned corner. When Cuban State Security agents interrogated her last fall, they threateningly asked her, "Do you love your son?"

A kiss-up-to-Castro documentary by Oliver Stone that HBO ran last month and will probably run again showed astounding ignorance, or worse. The online magazine Slate ran an interview of Mr. Stone that included a segment beginning with this question by interviewer Anne Louise Bardach: "When you were talking to the prisoners who tried to hijack a plane, one told you he was a fisherman, and you said, 'Why then didn't you take a boat?' Why did you ask that?" Mr. Stone: "Well, it seemed to me that if they were familiar with boats, it seemed to be the best way." Ms. Bardach: "Did you know that in Cuba there



Castro and Stone

are virtually no boats? The boats that are used for fishermen are tightly controlled. One of the more surreal aspects of Cuba, being the largest island in the Caribbean, is that there are no visible boats." Mr. Stone: "I see."

Another segment showed Fidel Castro meeting with the eight prisoners who had tried to escape from Cuba. The prisoners, as Ms. Bardach put it, "happened to be wearing perfectly starched, nice blue shirts. . . . Cuba's leader for life is sitting in front of these guys who are facing life in prison, and you're asking them, 'Are you well treated in prison?' Did you think they could honestly answer that question?" Mr. Stone replied, "I must say, you're really picturing a Stalinist state. It doesn't feel that way." Ms. Bardach: "What about when you ask them what they think is a fair sentence for their crimes, and one of them starts to talk about how he'd like to have 30 years in prison?" Mr. Stone: "I was shocked at that. But Bush would have shot these people, is what Castro said."

One more striking segment: Ms. Bardach asked, "Did it strike you as interesting that at one point in the scene with the prisoners, Castro turned to the prisoners' defense lawyers, who just happened to be there, and he says, 'I urge you to do your best to reduce the sentences?'" Mr. Stone: "I love that. I thought that was hilarious. . . . the prosecutor and Fidel admonishing them, to make sure they worked hard. There was that paternalism. I mean 'father knows best,' as opposed to totalitarianism. It's paternalism, that's what I meant. It's a Latin thing." ☺

the Bolshevik seizure of power. Lenin wrote, "Side by side with this government . . . there has arisen the chief, unofficial, as yet undeveloped and comparatively weak *workers' government* . . . the *Soviet of Workers' Deputies* in Petrograd." Lenin called the Soviets "the embryo of a workers' government, the representative of the interests of the entire mass of the *poor* section of the population, i.e., of nine-tenths of the population, which is striving for *peace, bread, and freedom*."

Maybe it's time to stand Lenin on his head by building parallel institutions to Marxist autocracy. One of Havana's numerous propaganda billboards quotes Jose Marti, the late 19th-century Cuban fighter for liberty, as saying, "*El triunfo sera necesariamente de los mas preparados*" ("The triumph will necessarily go to the most prepared"). Rev. Eduardo Pini predicts that a post-Communist Cuba will include much "bloodshed, since now we have much hatred. Families have been destroyed by informants, so we have many suspended vendettas waiting to happen. We will have at first lots of blood in the streets." That may happen if the only reply to 45 years of dictatorship is vengeance. But what if organizations are helped to prepare now for a productive transition?

When will that transition occur? No one expects it to be during the lifetime of Fidel Castro, and a Cuban typically doesn't even refer to Mr. Castro by name; a Cuban moves his hand under his chin as if stroking a beard. Yet, all know that the beard is 77 and has sounded shaky in some recent speeches. Cubans in various camps—dissidents, reformers, generals thinking of becoming the great capitalists in post-Castro Cuba—are all waiting for a fatal subtraction. In the meantime, many are bicycling along in a *peleton* worthy of the Tour de France. They watch each other nervously and wonder whether to try a breakaway that could work exquisitely well if the timing is right, but could end in a drag-back to the pack or even prison if the quickened pace is premature.

While Cubans wait, the application of compassionate conservatism's principles to Cuba could help many and teach a vital lesson to all. The beard blames the United States for his regime's economic failures but justifies his ideological dictatorship by saying the world presents only two choices: his orthodoxy or criminal capitalism, symbolized by the pre-Castro Batista regime and its 1950s alliance with Meyer Lansky and the Mafia. Is there a third way grounded in free markets and Christian faith?

One of Havana's many ironies is that just across Havana harbor from *Habana Vieja* (the Old City) stands a 48-foot-tall statue of Christ, unveiled on December 25, 1958, just one week before the beard triumphed. He has never crushed or removed it the way he removed the eagle from the top of the monument to the *U.S.S. Maine*, the battleship blown up in Havana Harbor in 1898. *Habana Vieja*, with its cobblestone streets, lovely pocket parks, Spanish architecture, and 16th-century forts, is gorgeous by day but groaning by night. That's when prostitutes take to the street for money to spend in the dollar store—but under the sight of *Estatua Cristo de la Habana* evening compassionate conservatism could help to dissipate even that ugliness.



A wall in Havana reads "A Lifetime with Fidel"

SACRIFICE BUNTS

The United States now offers humanitarian visas to those bringing in desperately needed items: That opportunity should be greatly advertised and promoted, with groups equipping travelers to bring in milk, medicine, or books. Organizers could enlist Americans into this army of compassion, and journalists could publicize their efforts. The travel costs are not high: a \$50 Miami airport tax (which the U.S. government could arrange to waive for those bringing in supplies), a \$25 Havana airport tax, and a ticket costing \$225 from Miami or double that through Nassau or Jamaica.

One small but energetic group, Evangelical Christian Outreach for Cuba (ECHO-Cuba), has two persons once a week each bringing in 20 pounds of powdered milk packets directly from Miami; that's what I brought in on my trip. Those who fly through Jamaica or the Bahamas can bring in 120 pounds of packets. What if more Americans, traveling on humanitarian licenses, came to Cuba, until an army of compassion was regularly moving in and out?

Bold members of the army of compassion could also bring in laptop computers and shortwave radios, which are much sought-after for the link they can provide with the outside world: Many Cubans not only thirst for milk and medicine but for information and the ability to communicate readily with each other. Cuban authorities, of course, could confiscate milk or medicine, and especially electronic equipment, but they are desperate for tourist dollars.

Couple the person-to-person inflow with a loosening of what humanitarians could bring back to the United States—say,

\$200 or \$400 worth of cigars and other goods rather than the current \$100—and Cuba would have powerful reasons, green ones, to minimize hassling. Furthermore, many European countries have criticized the regime for imprisoning 75 dissidents a year ago and giving them jail sentences that average 18 years (see sidebar). Seizing milk or medicine, and perhaps even communication tools, would deepen Cuba's international black eye.

Denomination-to-denomination help could also gain momentum. If the United States (particularly with support from European countries) were to make it a policy priority to allow Southern Baptists to work with Cuban Baptists to open a new home for the elderly in Havana, and colleagues in other denominations to do the same, Cuba again would have a hard time saying no. That slogan *Ni comen ni dejan comer* (They don't eat, neither do they let others eat) makes sense in Cuba's twisted political structure, but it's hard to explain to a watching world.

Little efforts could add up to major improvements. On my last night in Havana I attended a Cuban major-league baseball game and enjoyed a pitcher's duel that left the game scoreless until the bottom of the 7th. That's when the Industriales drove in two runs on a daring squeeze bunt that traveled all of 15 feet; the pitcher fielded the ball and threw wildly to the plate, allowing not only the runner who had been on third but the one from second base as well to score.

Although home runs set off fireworks at many parks, bunts that advance the runners and rattle the defense can win close games, and that's what I propose: bunts involving milk, medicine, information provision, and homes for the elderly. The beard says *Un mundo mejor es posible* (A better world is possible). Indeed it is. 🌍