

EDITORIAL/OPINION

America's 30-Year Cuban Pique

By STEVE CHARNOVITZ

On Feb. 2, 1962, President John F. Kennedy telephoned his press secretary, Pierre Salinger, to ask him to buy as many "Petit Upmanns" as he could. Mr. Salinger quickly rounded up 1,000 of these Cuban cigars. When he brought them to Mr. Kennedy the next morning, the president smiled and then proceeded to sign a proclamation banning all trade with Cuba.

Thirty-three years later, the Cuban embargo is still mired in contradiction. The threat of "Sino-Soviet Communism," which Mr. Kennedy had cited in imposing the embargo, has long since disappeared. The human rights situation in Cuba remains bad, of course. Yet there are many countries, such as Burma, Rwanda and Syria, with equally bad or worse human rights records with whom the United States merrily trades.

The U.S. stance toward Cuba is also inconsistent with that of other countries. The United States is the only country that still bans trade with Cuba. The Organization of American States lifted its Cuban embargo 20 years ago. Last October, the U.N. General Assembly reproached the U.S. government for persisting with the trade ban. Criticism continued at the recent Miami hemispheric summit.

Our current Cuban embargo constitutes poor trade policy. To begin with, such discrimination violates the rules of the World Trade Organization. The embargo also has spawned congressional efforts for enforcement through extraterritorial laws, which exacerbates our trade relations with Canada and the European Union. Continuing the embargo also undermines whatever moral justification there is for trade sanctions. Sanctions may be proper as a reprisal to a heinous act, but are inappropriate for a 30-year pique.

The embargo is also troubling because Cuba was once America's closest trade ally. In 1902, it became the first country to sign a treaty with the United States to liberalize trade. In 1934, it became the first country to enter Cordell Hull's reciprocal trade agreements program. But today,



Cuba gets *disfavored* nation treatment from Washington.

The Cuban embargo also constitutes poor human rights policy. In 1993, the Clinton administration linked China's trade status to human rights. (Previously, it had been linked only to emigration.) In 1994, the administration retreated and "de-linked" the human rights issue. It strenuously argued that promoting closer economic relations with China would foster human rights in that country.

The jury is still out on that prediction. But whatever the Yankee influence on China, the liberalizing impact of trade is almost certain to be far greater for Cuba, given its physical prox-

imity and cultural linkages to the United States. So the case for de-linkage is stronger for Cuba than for China.

Looking back 33 years, the U.S. embargo on Cuba cannot be rated any higher than a dismal failure. Fidel Castro has outlasted eight American presidents. The reason why the embargo has not been lifted is that our Cuban policy has been captured by special interests.

Such "protectionism" is indefensible. This is the type of Cold War cobweb the Clinton administration should scrape away. Doing so would manifest leadership. The modest economic liberalization now occurring in Cuba makes such action all the more timely.

The president has statutory authority to end the embargo at any time. President Bush should have done this, but he did not want to take the political heat. In view of the likely demagoguery and charges of flip-floppery that would ensue if Mr. Clinton acted on his own, he should ask Congress to assent to this policy change, either through legislation or by supportive resolutions. A similar approach was used last February when Mr. Clinton lifted the embargo on Vietnam following a resolution from the Senate.

The administration also must devise a strategy for helping Cuba democratize. Right now it has none. The U.S. policy is one of destructive disengagement. But after the embargo is lifted, the State Department should use the available tools, such as exchange programs and trade missions, to promote pluralism and industry in Cuba.

As President Clinton has noted, "Experience shows us over and over again that commerce can promote cooperation, that more prosperity helps to open societies to the world."

It's true that the current embargo does cause Cubans pain. But it is not doing anything positive to promote political or economic liberalization. After three decades of contradiction and ineffectiveness, America's trade embargo against Cuba is overdue for change.

Steve Charnovitz writes on trade and competitiveness issues from Washington.