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Cuba and the new normal

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There is deep ambivalence in our community over normalizing relations with Cuba. For the first wave of Cubans, those relations will never be normal. Not when their homes, stores, factories, farms and fincas are in the hands of Cuban communists who essentially stole them. The most important thing the first wave lost, of course, was their country.

President Obama seems determined to give it back to them, what's left anyway, even if it's almost unrecognizable. Most of all, President Obama seems determined to give Cubans on the island a chance to build a civil society, a better life that's not dependent on their government. Therein lies the challenge: Can a civil society develop in Cuba, with U.S. help, under a repressive, totalitarian regime? The Obama administration thinks it can and is trying an end-run around the Castros. To do so the administration has given up a lot — I would say too much — just to get a dialogue started.

The dialogue had barely begun in January when Raúl Castro popped off at the CELAC meeting in Costa Rica to say the revolution would never change and no accommodation would be made to the U.S. on human rights or anything else. Oh, yes, he also said the price of renewed relations would be compensating Cuba more than \$100 billion for damages done by the embargo, which must be lifted, and taking Radio and TV Martí off the air, as well as giving back Gitmo. Some of that, no doubt, was posturing to mollify hard-liners back home. But Castro's list of demands can't be ignored.

If you listened carefully to what Cuban negotiator Josefina Vidal said last Friday in Washington after the second round of talks (I was in the State Department auditorium), she also made it clear that in key areas Cuba will not compromise or make concessions.

U.S. authorities want back cop-killer Joanne Chesimard, or any other felon who's been given sanctuary? Forget it, Forget it, she said, because Cuba is a sovereign country. As for human rights, sure, the Cubans will talk about it, but will likely bring up the Eric Garner incident in New York; the death-by-cop shooting of Michael Brown in Ferguson, Missouri or, possibly, Trayvon Martin.

Our skirts are not entirely clean, to be sure, but we have a Constitution that guarantees equal rights and due process and a judicial system to enforce it. That's a crap shoot in Cuba.

Several foreign businessmen who invested millions in "joint ventures" in Cuba — the government's normal 51-percent interest consists of letting the deal go through — have been arrested on what look like spurious charges. Two British men whose company pumped millions into renovating the Hotel Saratoga in Havana, hard by the Capitolio, were arrested and spent two years behind bars before being released. The boutique hotel, which looks charming from its web site photos, is the favored choice of U.S. congressional delegations, despite the fact that it was stolen, twice, by the Castro regime.

House Minority Leader Nancy Pelosi and her entourage stayed at the Saratoga recently on a visit during which they studiously avoided meeting with prominent human-rights and pro-democracy activists. That apparently was a condition set by the Castro government after Sen. Patrick Leahy and his group met a few months ago with leading dissidents and made a big deal about what they had suffered.

Pelosi said her trip was all about furthering travel and trade; guess it was just coincidence that she was there during some of the worst winter storms Washington has seen in years.

But back to our ambivalence. While many Cuban Americans denounce the president for trying to establish diplomatic relations with the devil, others are preparing to do business with him. Virtually every large law firm in Miami has Cuba specialists advising clients on how to navigate the new policy as determined by regulations issued by Treasury, Commerce, ICE and other federal agencies.

Some investment firms have created venture capital funds for Cuba. Teo Babun, who has encyclopedic knowledge of Cuba's port and transportation infrastructure and has directed religious missions to Cuba, has resigned to go to work for Thomas J. Herzfeld Advisors of Miami Beach. Babun says they're creating a \$500-million investment fund for those willing to take big risks to reap big rewards.

Given its checkered history with foreign investors, I don't see how anyone in their right mind could invest in Cuba now. There appears to be no reliable remedy for civil disputes in Cuban courts, and the government can capriciously bring criminal charges. This is, after all, a country where "dangerousness" is a crime.

Vidal, on the other hand, is charming. And almost persuasive. The head of Cuba's Foreign Ministry for North America, she says Cuba is open to full and frank discussions of disputed issues in the hope of establishing diplomatic ties with the United States. Vidal pronounced last week's second round of talks "good" and "productive."

Her U.S. counterpart, the redoubtable Roberta Jacobson, also called the talks "productive" and "surprising in their frankness." She says they're already far enough along that full-fledged embassies could be open in Havana and Washington in time for the Summit of the Americas in Panama in April. That's extremely optimistic, but it's possible a target date for opening the embassies could be announced by the start of the meeting.

When the embassies eventually open, look for Secretary of State John Kerry to be in Havana to cut the ribbon, or whatever diplomats do. And before December 2016, expect President Obama to fly to Havana to shake hands with Raúl Castro to cement the new era in U.S.-Cuba relations.

Many in our community will be heartsick to see it. Others will quietly rejoice and look for ways to profit. In fact, they already are.

