

U.S./CUBA YOUTH DEBATES SCHEDULED FOR HAVANA

by John Tredway

Background

In late 1997, I made contact with representatives of the Cuban government to bring a group of American high school students to Cuba to have an open discussion of issues separating the two countries. The United States government would not permit such a visit in 1998.

The nearly 40-year old U.S. embargo against Cuba was tightened during the 1990's to the point that relatively few Americans--mostly journalists, government officials, university researchers and Cuban Americans visiting ailing relatives--are granted licenses by the Office of Foreign Assets Control in the U.S. Treasury Department.

The situation changed with the January 5, 1999 announcement by President Clinton that he wanted to see more people-to-people contact with Cuba. In May 1999, I was granted one of the first licenses by the Office of Foreign Assets Control allowing secondary schools the opportunity to make legal visits to Cuba.

Havana Negotiations

I met for three days with representatives of the Union Jovenistas de Comunismo (the Young Communists) in Havana. We negotiated a mission statement and an agreement on free speech to bring students for a series of debates, January 18-25, 2000 in Cuba. The debates will center around the embargo, human rights conditions, the flow of refugees to the United States, international athletic competitions, access to the internet by Cuban students and the most important question for future leaders of both countries: mindful of differences in the past, where do we go from here?

Project Innovation

Few Americans travel to Cuba and even fewer go with the permission of the U.S. government! This project will be a first

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for secondary schools and the debates will give U.S. and Cuban youth the first real discourse about a unique and troubled relationship between the U.S. and Cuba. According to Larry Corwin, Assistant Public Affairs Director at the U.S. Interest Section in Havana: "The debates are a shining example of President Clinton's plan to increase people-to-people connections between U.S. citizens with Cubans."

Trip Itinerary

The itinerary for the trip will feature these highlights:

- *Debates at three high schools in Havana.
- *A basketball game between U.S. and Cuban students.
- *Three nights of disco in Havana and one night in Cienfuegos.
- *A visit to a pediatric hospital where American students will bring medical supplies from community hospitals in Oregon.
- *A one night stay in a "Young Pioneers Camp" in Veradero.
- *Debates at the Latin American School of Medicine in Havana.
- *Visit to the People's National Assembly.
- *Visit to the Museum of the Revolution.
- *Visit to Havana School of Music.
- *Visit to the U.S. Interests Section

Since we don't have diplomatic relations with Cuba, the USIS operates under the auspices of the Swiss Embassy.

Congress Agenda

I am not expecting Cuban students will be able to argue a position contrary to official policy but the Congress format will enable us to have a debate. Cuban students will submit five bills/resolutions and we will do the same. Some possibilities include:

- *A bill to end the U.S. embargo (this will be a Cuban bill)
- *A resolution for the U.S. and Cuba to agree to the U.N. Declaration On Human Rights (we plan to submit this resolution)
- *A bill to allow Cuban sovereignty over the U.S. base at Guantanamo (Cuban)
- *A bill to allow access to the internet for Cuban students (U.S.)
- *A resolution for independent drug testing at international athletic competitions (Cuban)

Delegates Selected

A student group of 26 from Oregon will form the U.S. delegation: 17 from Ashland High School, four from Glencoe High School, one from Grant High School and four from North Eugene High School. All students have completed at least two years of Spanish and several are NFL members.

This will be the first time in nearly forty years that citizens of the U.S. have traveled to Cuba for the purpose of holding formal debates about policies dividing the U.S. and Cuba. While we have seen baseball teams and choral groups performing in Cuba, it is exciting to have a discourse between future leaders of both countries. During this historic time in January 2000, we plan to remember the past while communicating possibilities for the future.

My work in NFL over 28 years is the real inspiration for this project. The debate process is the best forum for building international relations and I have great confidence that our Congress format will open new avenues of communication.