

No normalization when Cubans are still subject to special U.S. entry rules

By Tom Whitney

The U.S. government has long applied contradictory regulations to Cubans wanting to enter the United States. Now contradictions fly in the face of normalization of U.S./Cuban relations, which President Obama on December 17, 2014, held up to the nation as his administration's new goal.

His government in 2016 denied entry visas to [81.9 percent](#) of Cubans wanting to visit the United States for tourism or business purposes. This was the highest rate of rejection among all the world's nations. Next in line was Afghanistan with a 73.8 percent rate, followed by Mauritania at 71.5 per cent and Liberia at 70.2 percent.

Within the new context of renewed diplomatic relations, U.S. visitors flooding to the island, and executive orders modifying the economic blockade, Cubans might have expected that arrangements would be in place for them to visit with family members in the United States, see the sights there, present a paper at a symposium, or do some shopping. Visiting did increase markedly after January 2013 when Cuban authorities eased exit regulations.

In 2014, 41,001 Cubans obtained entry visas for short visits and 22,797 in 2015. In 2016, however, the State Department [granted only](#) 12,218 such visas. The categories included 2,424 visas for business or professional reasons, 7,583 for tourism or family visiting, and 2,211 visas for combined purposes.

Official explanations for the refusals were lacking, but analyst Andy Gomez [theorizes](#) that the Obama administration was fearful that Cuban visitors might remain in the United States and "take advantage of social benefits." The Cuban government, however, claims that only 5.7 percent of Cubans visiting from 2014 through 2016 "decided to declare themselves as emigres."

Contradictions are obvious. Most glaringly, the U.S. government in 2016 classified Cubans as the least welcome people in the world for short visits. Yet relations were supposed to be improving.

The U.S. government's "wet foot, dry foot" policy based on the Cuban Adjustment Act of 1966 was another anomaly. That policy enabled all Cubans arriving in the United States without a visa to remain permanently, and receive U.S. social services. Migrants from no other nation in the world enjoyed such special dispensation.

Additionally, these multitudes of irregular Cuban immigrants were being welcomed while in 2016 the great majority of Cubans who actually applied for non-immigrant visas were being turned down.

Nevertheless, on January 12, 2017, the Obama administration did end the blanket acceptance of all irregular Cuban migrants. It also discontinued, on that same day, the Cuban Medical Parole Program, which the George W. Bush administration had created in 2006. Under that policy Cuban doctors working in foreign countries gained

authorization for a permanent move to the United States. The doctors applied at a U.S. embassy and were on their way.

The two policies presumably served the same purpose — to show off life in Cuba as oppressive enough to force people to leave. The medical parole program had the additional goal of helping to bring down Cuba's exemplary project of medical outreach to the world.

Ostensibly, the Obama administration actions on January 12 did away with special deals for would-be Cuban migrants. But finishing off the medical parole program had loose ends.

News reports appeared saying that [1200 Cuban doctors](#) who applied before 5 PM on January 12 could still count on living in the United States. [A group](#) of them arrived in February. Cuban-American representatives from Florida [are agitating](#) for the medical parole program to be resumed.

The fact of discordant results is not new. The two nations agreed in 1994 that the United States would accept 20,000 legal immigrants who would be randomly selected by lotteries in Cuba. That plan was part of an overall agreement aimed at solving the so-called rafters' crisis of that era, when thousands of Cubans were heading to Florida by the only means possible. They were responding to economic distress after the fall of the Soviet Bloc.

Lotteries did take place in Cuba, but in practice the U.S. government issued far fewer entry visas than the agreed-upon number. In a communication March 29 to Walter Lippmann's "Cuba News" list serve, Karen Lee Wald, who has lived in both countries, commented on her experience then in directing a study program in Cuba for U.S. and Canadian university students.

She recalls that, "The political officer [in the U.S. Interests Section] who spoke to the group said quite candidly that they automatically refused 90% of all visa requests." She adds that, "the objective was to make Cubans so dissatisfied with life under Castro ... that they would act to change their system (that is, overturn their government)."

Wald thus demonstrated that U.S. officials at that time were offering a clear, reasoned — if callous — explanation for how the U.S. government dealt with Cuban migration. However, what's behind U.S. migratory policies may be unclear now. As a result, they are inconsistent, even contradictory.

That may be a perverse product of eased U.S./Cuba relations. Formerly officials dealing with a nation assumed to be an enemy operated with clear strategic goals. Now an altered approach may have led to mixed ideas of what to do and, therefore, conflicting policies. In any case, the likelihood is great that, within the U.S. government, there still remain those who regard Cuba as a special case, a nuisance. And it shows.