

U.S. abstains in UN vote on Cuba, breaks with history

By Tom Whitney

On October 26 for the 25th consecutive year, the United Nations General Assembly voted on a Cuban resolution expressing “the necessity” for the United States to end its decades-long economic, commercial and financial blockade of the island. Something new happened; 191 nations did vote in favor, as they did in 2015, but this time no nation opposed the resolution and the United States and Israel, the two contrary nations in 2015, abstained.

For the entire quarter century no more than three nations ever voted No. The many abstentions of the early years had become a mere handful. Now the standby No votes were gone.

Prior to the vote, delegates of 39 countries spoke in the Assembly, including those of Cuba and the United States, plus delegates of eight nations representing both regional blocs and their own nation, plus 29 others speaking on behalf of their country. U. S. Permanent Representative Samantha Power, elicited applause **when she announced** the United States would abstain. Predictably, she expressed concern over “serious human rights violations” in Cuba and insisted that U.S. blockade regulations fit with international law.

The tone of her remarks, however, was conciliatory and oriented to the future. She conceded that her own country has “work to do in fulfilling these [human] rights for our own citizens.” She took note of U.S. isolation in regard to Cuba, “including right here in the United Nations.”

Importantly, she praised Cuba for “advancing the welfare of its people” and peoples abroad. She mentioned Cuba’s efforts in combating West Africa’s Ebola epidemic in 2014 - 15 and took note of Cuba’s Henry Reeve Brigade, a disaster-relief medical unit named after a Brooklyn man who in the 19th century fought for Cuban independence in Cuba.

Samantha Power cited Cuban physician Felix Sarria Baez’ explanation as to why he returned to Sierra Leone after recovering from Ebola: “I needed to come back. Ebola is a challenge that I must fight to the finish here, to keep it from spreading to the rest of the world.” For Ms. Power, Baez epitomized both multi-national collaboration and “what the United Nations looks like, when it works.” She expressed hope that the “U. S. embargo” would end “once and for all.”

Cuban Foreign Minister Bruno Rodriguez spoke at length before the General Assembly, outlining a scenario for defeating the blockade. Already in place, he observed, were the “heroic resistance of our people;” “Cuban youth, heirs of this long glorious struggle;” and the “powerful political and ethical message that this Assembly sent to the peoples of

the world.” He lamented that most U.S. executive-branch regulations applying to the blockade are unchanged, and that President Obama has left many of them intact, although he has “ample executive prerogatives” for removing them.

Obama’s modifications announced October 14 fall short, he said: “Instead of benefitting the Cuban people, they favor the United States.”

Rodriguez thinks facts themselves are more important for “taking down” the blockade than “speeches, press statements, and even the vote of one delegation in this room.” In particular, “All Cuban families and sectors suffer from its effects, in health care, education, food, services, prices, salaries, and pensions.” He reminded delegates of a central thesis of his ministry’s recent report to them: “The blockade is the principal obstacle to the economic and social development of our people.”

The Foreign Minister promised Cuban “values and symbols” will be defended and that struggle to build a “sovereign independent, socialist, democratic, prosperous, and sustainable nation” will continue. And, lifting the blockade is the “key factor for advancing toward normalization of relations with the United States. Doing so “will give significance, depth, and validity to what we’ve achieved.”

At the very end of his speech, Rodriguez spoke to the U. S. people, extending “our sincere gratitude for their growing support for this worthy purpose.” Thus activists in the “belly of the beast” (Martí) were reminded of their outsized role in the worldwide battle for justice, once and for all, for Cuba.