

US government scraps anti-Cuban migratory regulations

By Tom Whitney

The U.S. Department of Homeland Security [announced January 12](#) that “The United States is revoking the so-called “wet-foot/dry-foot” policy for Cuban migrants...in place since the mid-1990s.” Henceforth, Cubans “who attempt to illegally enter the United States will be subject to removal.” The United States also ended its “Cuban Medical Professional Parole Program,” which encouraged Cuban doctors working abroad to move to the United States.

Each of the policies exerted destabilizing effects and served propaganda purposes. The common theme was that Cubans gain migratory privileges not enjoyed by others.

The news was important enough in Cuba to warrant four pages of coverage in *Granma*, organ of the Communist Party and the country’s most authoritative newspaper. The *New York Times* ran front page articles on January 13 and 15. The U.S. action is in line with [U.S. efforts at rapprochement with Cuba](#), in effect since President Obama’s announcement December 17, 2014. The two nations [re-established diplomatic relations](#) on July 20, 2015.

Cuban Adjustment Act fatally weakened

The U.S.-Cuba migratory agreement of 1995 (“wet-foot/dry-foot”) enabled Cubans arriving in the United States without papers to remain. Originally, however, it was the 1966 Cuban Adjustment Act (CAA) that allowed all irregular migrants from Cuba to stay and gain permanent residence. Pending congressional repeal, the CAA remains in force, but Obama’s executive action has [weakened](#) it fatally.

By facilitating emigration from Cuba, the CAA enabled U.S. propaganda to portray Cuba as a totalitarian state. In recent decades, however, most Cuban arrivals have been economic rather than political migrants. Departing Cubans responding to the appeal of the CAA had a deleterious economic and intellectual effect on the island. Having induced migrants to cross the Florida Straits in small boats, the CAA is responsible for untold thousands of drowning deaths.

The new U.S. policy resulted from an agreement negotiated over the course of a year. Cuba promised to accept migrants rejected by the United States, provided that no more than four years elapse between departures from the island and the beginning of deportation proceedings.

In an about-face, Cuba also agreed to accept Cubans being deported from the U.S. because of criminal behavior, in particular the [almost 500](#) remaining of the 2,746 Cubans tagged as criminals who had arrived in 1980 as part of the Mariel boat lift. The U.S. government will continue annually to take as legal immigrants 20,000 Cubans selected through a lottery.

U.S. policy-makers were facing pressures unrelated to the normalization process. Some [Cuban-American politicians](#) are calling for revising the CAA, mainly because arrivals return frequently to the island and thus undermine the CAA's propaganda line of a totalitarian state.

And, migration paths have shifted to overland routes passing through South and Central America to the U.S. southern border. Masses of Cuban travelers have crossed borders illegally and were prey to human smugglers and other criminals. Countries in the region identify the CAA as a cause of much grief.

On their assumption that repeal of the CAA was imminent, with U.S.-Cuban relations improving, migrants had been heading for the United States in increasing numbers; 24,278 entered in 2014, "[almost double](#)" that in 2015, and 46,635 in the first ten months of 2016.

Doctor-poaching

The Cuban Medical Professional Parole Program was less visible in its operation than the CAA. Since 2006, the State Department had used it as a tool to entice Cuban medical workers, mainly physicians, to abandon health-care or teaching assignments overseas and move to the United States.

The Program took root in concert with schemes for a replacement Cuban government presented by the Bush administration's "Commission for Assistance to a Free Cuba." Official descriptions of the program claim Cuban doctors working abroad represent "state-sponsored [human trafficking](#)," saying they've been "[conscripted](#)."

In any given year, tens of thousands of Cuban physicians are serving two-year terms abroad. Targeting Cuban healthcare providers in 70 countries, U.S. officials persuaded some to visit U.S. embassies where they were approved for entry into the United States. Many received free [air travel](#). In all, from 2006 on, some 7,000 have entered the United States, [1,663 in 2015 alone](#). It's "a true [moral scandal](#)," says one Cuban journalist.

Cuba sends health workers abroad to fulfill ideals of human solidarity. But some host countries, notably Brazil and Venezuela, pay for their services, thus easing Cuba's chronic shortage of hard currency. At any given time since 2004, over 12,000 Cuban health professionals have been serving in Venezuela. Venezuela pays for their work, in part, by guaranteeing predictable shipments of low-priced oil to Cuba. They've been [targeted](#) on the theory that trouble in Venezuela is harmful to Cuba.

The parole program tarnished Cuba's much-praised medical internationalism, interfered with the flow of income for the country, reduced its store of trained health workers, and chipped away at the country's sovereignty.

Commentary on the U.S. turn-about is mixed. Mexico's [La Jornada](#) newspaper welcomed an "end to...a migratory strategy that discriminated against all other

immigrants [entering] the United States.” Cuban analyst [Iroel Sánchez](#) thinks the policy adjustment “can be considered a victory for Cuba [and for] common sense...and a big defeat for those who feed confrontation.” One of those would be New Jersey Senator [Bob Menendez](#), who said, “We should never deny a Cuban refugee fleeing a brutal regime entry into the United States.”

Thus a key element of systematic U.S. hostility against Cuba has all but disappeared. Still to go are the U.S. economic blockade, U.S. occupation of territory in Guantánamo Province, and recruitment of a political opposition in Cuba.