

Obama Puts His Foot Down: U.S. Ends “Wet Foot, Dry Foot” Policy

*By Kate Terán,
Research Associate at the Council on Hemispheric Affairs*

On January 12, with less than ten days left in his presidency, President Barack Obama announced the ending of the Clinton Administration’s ‘Wet Foot, Dry Foot’ policy, effectively removing this unique Cuban exemption from Washington’s standard immigration policies. The announcement, the result of nearly 18 months of secret talks with the Castro Administration, has been met with differing reactions on both sides of the legislative aisle. Senator Patrick Leahy (D-VT) stated on January 12, “This is a welcome step in reforming an illogical and discriminatory policy that contrasted starkly with the treatment of deserving refugees from other countries. Refugees should all be treated the same way.”ⁱ Former White House Staffer and Cuban-American Felice Gorordo agreed with the White House’s new policy stating in an interview with the BBC that the change of immigration policies is “an important step in the normalization of the process and a bold move in the President’s final days [in office]. Cuba will be an integral part of Obama’s legacy.”ⁱⁱ

This new announcement was kept largely under wraps in hopes of avoiding a flood of hopeful migrants taking to the seas trying to beat the deadline. Since the first announcement of the normalization of ties between the United States and Cuba in 2014, the number of Cubans coming to the United States increased from 4,890 migrants in 2013 to 53,416 migrants in 2016.ⁱⁱⁱ The change is, in part, due to the number of migrants venturing to leave Cuba for political purposes, mainly to improve their personal economic standing. Even though the United States is ending the “Wet Foot, Dry Foot” policy, Cubans will still be eligible to apply for political asylum. Cuba has praised the Obama administration for its change in its restrictive rules and looks upon the new agreement as an important step in advancing relations. The six points outlined by the Cuban and United States governments places emphasis on achieving full normalization of relations, nondiscriminatory practices in the application of migration and asylum laws, and bilateral cooperation to “prevent and prosecute trafficking in persons as well as crimes associated with migratory movements that endanger national security including the hijacking of aircraft and vessels.”^{iv} As part of the agreement, the United States will continue to “guarantee legal migration from Cuba for a minimum of 20,000

people a year.”^v Additionally, any Cuban immigrant turned away or sent back from the United States, as well as any citizen who has been out of the country for at least four years, will be allowed to return to Cuba in an attempt to update their immigration status. The existing Cuban Family Reunification Parole program also remains in effect, allowing family members of those already legally residing in the United States to apply for special residency privileges on behalf of their family members in Cuba.^{vi}

The change of relations between the two ancient foes has not been well received by everyone. For most of the twentieth and twenty-first centuries, US foreign policy towards Cuba has been the “carrot and stick” approach: the “stick” being the embargo which can only be overturned by Congress, and the “carrot” being the exceptionalism immigration policy.^{vii} Critics of the Cuban government additionally cite the government’s restriction of some civil liberties such as freedom of press as well as other political rights and the occasional detention of political dissidents.^{viii} Hardliner Senator Bob Menendez (D-NJ) condemned the White House’s executive order and expressed disappointment that Congress was not consulted. He argued that the Obama Administration is “seeking to pursue engagement with the Castro regime at the cost of ignoring the present state of torture, oppression, and its systemic curtailment of freedom. [The] announcement will only serve to tighten the noose the Castro Regime continues to have around the neck of its people.”^{ix} Cuban mechanic Mario Garcia, who works in Little Havana in Florida, agrees with Senator Menendez, arguing that “It’s not like communism has ended in Cuba so why stop this that has saved people’s lives?”^x Senator Marco Rubio (R- FL) thinks the Trump Administration should reverse the part of the executive order that ended the Medical Parole system, which allowed Cuban medical professionals to go abroad for humanitarian purposes and clinical training. This parole system has led to a rise in the number of medical professionals rushing to leave Cuba by seeking parole status at US embassies abroad. This has inevitably led to a shortage of trained medical personnel on the island.^{xi} It is likely that the new Republican majority in the Senate will resist lifting the 54 year old trade embargo. Rubio argues that the “policy shift is based on an illusion that more commerce and access to money and goods will translate to political freedom for Cuba.”^{xii}

In the end, US immigration policy was not a policy at all, but a reflected status of vintage Cold War ideology that was not aimed at resolving differences effectively. The Obama Administration belatedly changed the policy toward Havana intentionally which meant to isolate Cuba from the rest of the inter-American community. This turned out to have the opposite effect, since Washington’s stance in isolating Cuba deeply offended the island nation’s neighbors. The White House’s myopic strategy did little to achieve its goal in aiding the Caribbean nation in saving the lives of innocent men, women and children as they embarked on their perilous journey to enter mainland US.

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- ⁱ "Obama ending special immigration status for migrants fleeing Cuba." The Washington Post. January 12, 2017. Accessed January 18, 2017. https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/national-security/obama-ending-wet-foot-dry-foot-policy-allowing-cubans-reaching-us-soil-to-stay-and-receive-residency/2017/01/12/21bbaac2-d912-11e6-b8b2-cb5164beba6b_story.html?utm_term=.4ca32f8e989d.
- ⁱⁱ "US visa-free residency for Cubans ends." BBC News. January 13, 2017. Accessed January 18, 2017. <http://www.bbc.com/news/world-us-canada-38605338>
- ⁱⁱⁱ "Obama ending special immigration status for migrants fleeing Cuba." The Washington Post. January 12, 2017. Accessed January 18, 2017. https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/national-security/obama-ending-wet-foot-dry-foot-policy-allowing-cubans-reaching-us-soil-to-stay-and-receive-residency/2017/01/12/21bbaac2-d912-11e6-b8b2-cb5164beba6b_story.html?utm_term=.4ca32f8e989d.
- ^{iv} Rt-mk, TeleSUR /., By Luis Gómez Romero, By Thomas Pepinsky, Jr. By Hector Perla, By John Pilger, and By Amílcar Sanatan. "Obama Announces End to Cuban 'Wet Foot, Dry Foot' Policy." News | teleSUR English. January 12, 2017. Accessed January 18, 2017. <http://www.telesurtv.net/english/news/Cuba-US-Obama-to-End-Wet-Foot-Dry-Foot-Policy-20170112-0026.html>.
- ^v Rt-mk, TeleSUR /., By Luis Gómez Romero, By Thomas Pepinsky, Jr. By Hector Perla, By John Pilger, and By Amílcar Sanatan. "Obama Announces End to Cuban 'Wet Foot, Dry Foot' Policy." News | teleSUR English. January 12, 2017. Accessed January 18, 2017. <http://www.telesurtv.net/english/news/Cuba-US-Obama-to-End-Wet-Foot-Dry-Foot-Policy-20170112-0026.html>.
- ^{vi} Zengerle, Patricia. "Obama administration ends special immigration policy for Cubans." Reuters. January 13, 2017. Accessed January 18, 2017. <http://www.reuters.com/article/us-usa-cuba-immigration-idUSKBN14W2ZO>.
- ^{vii} "US visa-free residency for Cubans ends." BBC News. January 13, 2017. Accessed January 18, 2017. <http://www.bbc.com/news/world-us-canada-38605338>
- ^{viii} "Obama ending special immigration status for migrants fleeing Cuba." The Washington Post. January 12, 2017. Accessed January 18, 2017. https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/national-security/obama-ending-wet-foot-dry-foot-policy-allowing-cubans-reaching-us-soil-to-stay-and-receive-residency/2017/01/12/21bbaac2-d912-11e6-b8b2-cb5164beba6b_story.html?utm_term=.4ca32f8e989d.
- ^{ix} "Obama ending special immigration status for migrants fleeing Cuba." The Washington Post. January 12, 2017. Accessed January 18, 2017. https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/national-security/obama-ending-wet-foot-dry-foot-policy-allowing-cubans-reaching-us-soil-to-stay-and-receive-residency/2017/01/12/21bbaac2-d912-11e6-b8b2-cb5164beba6b_story.html?utm_term=.4ca32f8e989d.
- ^x "Obama ending special immigration status for migrants fleeing Cuba." The Washington Post. January 12, 2017. Accessed January 18, 2017. https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/national-security/obama-ending-wet-foot-dry-foot-policy-allowing-cubans-reaching-us-soil-to-stay-and-receive-residency/2017/01/12/21bbaac2-d912-11e6-b8b2-cb5164beba6b_story.html?utm_term=.4ca32f8e989d.
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^{xii} Davis, Julia H., and Frances Robles. "Obama Ends Exemption for Cubans Who Arrive Without Visas ." New York Times. January 12, 2017. <https://www.nytimes.com/2017/01/12/world/americas/cuba-obama-wet-foot-dry-foot-policy.html>.