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April 6, 2017

Ms. Jillian St. John
National Security Council
The White House
1600 Pennsylvania Ave., NW
Washington, DC 20500

Dear Ms. St. John:

I am writing to express my appreciation that the administration has undertaken a review of U.S. policy toward Cuba and also my hope that it will consider the views of stakeholders with extensive on-the-ground experience dealing with Cubans and who have worked on a bipartisan basis with the goal of normalizing relations.

By way of background, I am the founder and executive director of the Center for Democracy in the Americas (CDA). Since 2006, our organization has led more than 60 trips to Cuba for bipartisan delegations of Members of the Senate and House; trade missions for the governors of New York and Virginia; U.S. Mayors; CEOs and trade associations; and leaders in philanthropy, women's issues, and the arts, including the President's Committee on the Arts and the Humanities.

For us, the primary considerations for evaluating the policy are how best to support and improve the well-being of the Cuban people while also advancing the national interests (including the national security interests) of the United States.

While reasonable persons of good will can differ over those goals and how to realize them, we believe there is substantial evidence that Cuba is a society in transition; that there are changes now underway, driven by decisions by Cuba's leadership, and validated in vivid and important ways by the Cuban people; and that these developments are in alignment with the goals and values of U.S. foreign policy. Accordingly, the most consequential question that will inevitably arise from the policy review is whether the decisions the administration makes going forward will continue to support that progress in the years ahead.

There are numerous examples of how Cuba is in transition. We believe that some of the most significant among them are as follows:

- By February of next year, goals contained in the Helms-Burton legislation (namely, that the government of Cuba is no longer run by Fidel or Raúl Castro) will be met when Cuba's next president takes office.
- By December of this year, it is likely that Cuba will enact laws and new procedures to amplify the role and responsibilities of the National Assembly, while also making certain changes to its electoral laws.
- By design and by necessity, Cuba's non-state economy will continue to encompass an increased share of the country's GDP thanks, in part, to policy decisions taken by the previous administration to increase travel to and trade with the island. These decisions including – removing limits on family travel and lifting all limits on

remittances to Cubans, relaxing restrictions on people-to-people travel, and actions to license U.S. business activity on the island – spurred demand for services by Cubans engaged in private sector activity.--Cubans today have vastly expanded access to information, and greater connections to the world outside the island, than ever before.

- With more than 500,000 positions eliminated from the state’s payroll, and with an equivalent number of Cubans now licensed for work in the private economy, more than 30% of whom are women, this has created a constituency working within the rules of the state but whose interests differ, in important ways, from those of the Cuban Communist Party. This makes Cuba more pluralistic.
- Steps taken by Cuba’s government – for example, the opening of 327 Wi-Fi hotspots across the country, and the small but growing number of residences being wired for Internet access; roaming deals with U.S. carriers that in turn increased demand among Cubans for cellular telephones – have given Cubans greater unfettered access to information never before available. In fact, according to a 2017 survey of the internet and social media message in nations across the globe, Cuba ranked Number 1 in the largest percentage growth in social media users in the world – a 368% increase – versus 2016.
- As the Columbia Journalism Review noted only last year, “while the vast majority of newspapers and magazines continue to be run by the state, there are exceptions, and a growing number of mostly online outlets are in the hands of private groups and individuals.” These include “(T)wo journals published by the Catholic Church, Espacio Laical and Palabra Nueva...and OnCuba, a magazine published with staff in both Miami and Havana that is headed by a Cuban American, has a Cuban Web editor, and is credentialed to operate on the island.”
- Religious pluralism and tolerance in Cuba is increasing. Since 1992, when Cuba classified itself as a secular state, all religious denominations have reported increased participation. "There's a revival of these churches, of the most diverse denominations in the country, and all of them are growing, not just in the number of members, but in their capacity to lead and act in society," according to Presbyterian pastor Joel Ortega Dopica, president of Council of Churches of Cuba, an association of 32 Protestant denominations, reported the Associated Press in March 2017.

Against the American stereotype of a closed and never-changing Cuba, transformations have already taken place and are still underway that have engaged Cubans across the island in a search for a better life in their country. With greater economic growth and increased information, with the prospects for change in Cuba’s leadership and electoral laws over the next year, U.S. policy is well-positioned to offer support for decisions taken by the Cuban government that benefit the lives and aspirations of Cuba’s people. In doing so – in supporting the transition underway – we are also contributing to political stability in Cuba which, in turn, reduces pressure on the U.S. economy and U.S. security as well.

We have made six trips to the island since November 2016, including a recent delegation composed of five Republicans Members for the U.S. Congress. During these trips, it has been our privilege to visit with people inside and outside government, with Cubans of varied interests and beliefs, in their homes, offices, places of worship, and elsewhere. All of them expressed their support for a continuation, even an expansion, of U.S. policy so that they have the greatest latitude and opportunity to build a future for themselves in Cuba. It is our hope that this conclusion will be reinforced by the policy review, and that it will guide decisions on policy in the days and months ahead.

If you are interested in learning more, either from CDA or others, we would be happy to put a group together for a joint meeting, or to provide additional information relating to the views expressed here or on other matters that interest you and other policymakers.

Thank You,



Sarah Stephens
Executive Director