

Engage With Cubans

Isolating Ourselves From Cuba Has Disengaged The U.S. From Effecting Change

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Senator Blanche Lincoln (D-AR) first considered the Cuban embargo while at home on her father's rice farm.

"My dad was a rice farmer and even before I came to Washington as an elected official there was always conversation about how important trade with Cuba had been before the 1960s and the fact that after the 1960s embargo it was a marketplace we didn't want to lose and shouldn't have lost," she said.

Lincoln was elected to the U.S. House of Representatives in 1992 and served until 1997. In 1998 she became the youngest woman ever to be elected to the Senate at age 38 and continues to serve.

"I think I became a lot more aware of the configurations of the embargo when I came to Congress. Before that, just coming from a farm family, I had experienced more of the frustration of it. However, here I became aware more of the details politically as well as the way it was fashioned in relationship to other trade negotiations."

In 2000 Lincoln made a trip to Cuba and found it very obvious that the policy the United States had initiated and been engaged in for almost 40 years had not done what it was intended to do in terms of trying to move the Cuban people away from their leadership.

"We met with the Cuban leadership, the minister of agriculture, the minister of commerce, Fidel Castro and some of the people," she said. "The way our policy had been designed isolates the Cuban people from America and American products, and it had not been productive in terms of changing their minds. Really, it had just caused a great disadvantage to the Cuban people while not producing anything in terms of a change in Cuba. It had been really counterproductive to what we had wanted it to do."

Lincoln feels you can't affect people if you're not engaged with them. "You can't affect their thoughts, their premise of where they want to go, what they want to do and what they want to create for themselves and their country if you're not engaged with them. This idea of isolating ourselves and disengaging ourselves with Cuba really made us a non-entity and certainly unable to affect them."

Lincoln has supported elimination of the embargo, becoming very proactive in terms of the bills she has supported and the votes she has taken.

"I think it has been very, very obvious that I've been supportive of eliminating the embargo, for multiple reasons, obviously one is it's important to Arkansas. Between our poultry production and rice production it's an important marketplace for us. Our potential there in the Cuban market for U.S. rice is about 600,000 metric tons annually and that's at a minimum."

Cubans are very receptive of American rice, they love American rice. They have to throw away about 15 percent of the Vietnam rice they are presently buying because it's cracked and just not any good. They have to wash it thoroughly before they can even cook it. They would buy from the United States if things would be easier.

"That's been my point a lot in these discussions on the farm bill. I want to make sure others understand the safety net we provide rice growers. We grow rice differently than other crops. We grow in a controlled environment and it's a capital intensive crop. Some of the programs as they are restricted are less likely to be supportive of rice. We are the third largest exporter of rice behind Vietnam and Thailand, neither of which have a clean water act. Vietnam waters its rice from rivers that have direct sewage access so countries which receive that rice certainly have to take precautions by washing the rice. It's also of lesser quality because they don't have the efficiency and effectiveness our farmers have. Our rice is a better quality and people want that, but of course that's why we have a 400 percent tariff on rice in Japan. And Korea won't even entertain the idea of taking our rice because they know their people will find it's a better quality of rice."

Lincoln said her colleagues who support the embargo don't spend much time talking to her because they "pretty much know they're barking up the wrong tree."

"The rice, poultry growers and others in my state know it is an enormously important economic issue and it's hard for those in favor of the embargo to argue we've made any progress over the last 40 years with the policy we have. So when you come back with the argument of 'do you think we've made any headway with the policy we've had' they don't really have an answer to that either."

After 40 years, it's not a priority for some legislators whose states it does not affect.

"Members from non-farm states and non-farm districts have continually said 'why can't your farmers just use the marketplace like other businesses and other industries have to do? Well, ours is a different marketplace in global trade because we do have much more restrictive trade parameters on agricultural products because most countries get it. They know you've got to eat and they also know that they have to maintain a certain amount of domestic production. We allow them the ability



Senator Blanche Lambert Lincoln during a recent news conference.

to restrict some of our trade or the acceptance of our commodities into their countries so that becomes a difficult thing. Agriculture is not a glamorous issue. It's one that most people have begun to take for granted so those people who don't have a huge vested interest in their states or district don't want to get entwined in that."

Presently there are a couple of bills proposed in Congress to open trade.

"There are a couple of bills out there, there always have been. Senator Dorgan has a bill and Senator Baucus as well."

Senators in favor of eliminating the embargo include Senator Max Baucus (D-MT), Senator Byron Dorgan (D-ND) and the Honorable Rodger Johnson, North Dakota Agricultural Commissioner, who's been to Cuba several times.

"I would assume people from Missouri would also be in favor," Lincoln said. "Jo Ann (Emerson) and I traveled to a trade meeting together in Mexico to speak out on this. It was pretty interesting. There were definitely some very hot and cold sides of this topic when we were there. I think Jo Ann and I were very interested to see some of the push back that we got."

Younger Cuban-Americans could put their foot down and change things, but it may take 20-30 years.

"Well it could and I think that's why it's so important for this administration or hopefully the next, to seize the opportunity with a change of leadership in Cuba.

"Having traveled down there eight years ago, and watching the joint ventures between the Dutch and the Cubans, I think the Germans as well, there are other countries that are building joint ventures with the Cubans, whether its for tourism or other trade mechanisms they want to put into place," Lincoln said. "I think we need to get our head out of the sand and figure out that this policy we've engaged in over the last 40-plus years has been unproductive so how can we change it? How do we reengage ourselves, not in miniscule ways, so that we can open trade again?" "In 2005 there was some of that, but we still had these unbelievable restrictions in terms of payment in advance from the OFAC office.

"We've put pressure on OFAC and now they've made some other considerations but there's still this lingering tension around trade with Cuba. We're making it as difficult as we possibly can from our government's standpoint. It's time to step up to the plate and say 'let's readdress our relationship there, let's figure out what our objective is, and how do we more productively in the 21st century reach that objective.' If we were to engage with the Cubans and open a greater relationship, we're going to have a much better opportunity at affecting the health and well being of the lives of Cubans which is what has been our ultimate goal all along. We have wanted to affect in a positive way the health and well being of the Cuban people. You just can't do that by trying to isolate them." Δ

The eighth part in this continuing series, "Drink The Kool Aid", will be published on July 11, 2008. This article will focus on an interview with U.S. Congresswoman Jo Ann Emerson.