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# My Father's Stand on Cuba Travel

The present travel restrictions are inconsistent with traditional American liberties," the then-U.S. attorney general argued in a behind-the-scenes debate over the ban on U.S. citizens traveling to Cuba. I hope that this will soon be the position advanced by Attorney General Eric H. Holder Jr. as the Obama administration ponders its next step on Cuba — which should be to move beyond allowing only Cuban Americans to travel freely to the island and to address the rights of all Americans, most of whom are still not free to go.

In fact, this position was put forth by the attorney general in 1963, my father, Robert Kennedy. The history of his efforts to end prosecutions of U.S. citizens who challenged the travel ban, and to rescind those restrictions altogether, supports including travel-for-all as part of the "new beginning with Cuba" that President Obama commendably announced at the Summit of the Americas last weekend.

In December 1963, the Justice Department was preparing to prosecute four members of the Student Committee for Travel to Cuba, who had led a group of 59 college-age Americans on a trip to Havana. My father opposed those prosecutions, as well as the travel ban itself. The prohibition only enticed more students to defy the ban, he believed, and more were likely to travel to Cuba over the coming Christmas vacation.

"There are realistically only two courses open to us in these circumstances," he wrote, in a Dec. 12, 1963, confidential memorandum to Secretary of State Dean Rusk: "First, to make every effort to curtail trips to Cuba; two, to withdraw the existing regulation prohibiting such trips. The first is unlikely to meet the problem and I favor the second."

My father's principal argument for lifting the ban was simply that restricting Americans' right to travel went against the freedoms that he had sworn to protect as attorney general. Lifting the ban, he argued, would be "more consistent with our views as a free society and would contrast with such things as the Berlin Wall and Communist controls on such travel."

Despite its clarity, my father's position did not carry the day. Instead, the Johnson White House sided with the arguments put forth by the State Department: "relaxation would appear as a softening of our policy toward Cuba"; our travel controls "are part of a joint effort by the U.S. and other American Republics to iso-

*Ending the ban made sense in 1963. It makes even more sense now.*

late Cuba", and "a relaxation of U.S. restrictions would make it very difficult for us to urge Latin American governments to prevent their nationals from going to Cuba."

Forty-six years later, however, none of these arguments remains a relevant justification for a punitive policy that violates the constitutional rights of U.S. citizens to freely travel abroad. The original rationale for the ban — to ensure the United States did not appear hypocritical when it pressured Latin American nations to hook their youth from flocking to Cuba — has long been relegated to the dustbin of history. Since the mid-1970s, when the Organization of American States voted to lift multilateral trade sanctions against Cuba, most Latin Americans have been free to travel to the island — and many have. In recent months, the presidents of Brazil, Chile, Argentina, Venezuela, Guatemala and the Dominican Republic, among other leaders, have paid high-profile visits to Havana to meet with Raul and Fidel Castro — making very public statements to their countrymen, and to Washington, that there is nothing wrong with going to Cuba.

Those same leaders are making a joint effort to engage the Castro regime and re-integrate the island into the Western Hemisphere. As Obama learned at last weekend's summit, the Latin American leaders have adopted a coordinated message on Cuba: This is the time to normalize relations with Havana and take Cuba off the hemispheric agenda for good. By continuing to try to isolate Cuba, they essentially told Obama, Washington has succeeded only in isolating itself.

Much as there is no longer an international constituency that wants the United States to maintain a hard line on Cuba, there is no longer a domestic constituency. CNN polling this month found that 64 percent of U.S. citizens support free travel to Cuba and that 71 percent believe that Washington should fully restore diplomatic relations. More important for the president's political calculations, 67 percent of Cuban Americans in the Miami area favor lifting restrictions on travel to Cuba for all U.S. citizens, according to a Bendixen and Associates poll released this week.

Obama's declaration last weekend — "There are critical steps we can take toward a new day" in U.S.-Cuban relations — and his decision to rescind all restrictions on Cuban American travel could become momentous steps toward ending five decades of hostility in Washington's approach to Havana. The next step should be a White House endorsement of the Freedom to Travel to Cuba Act recently introduced in Congress and a presidential initiative to restore the constitutional rights of all U.S. citizens to travel to Cuba.

The goal is not only the advancement of democracy in Cuba, but, as Robert Kennedy believed, a policy consistent with the sanctity of traditional liberties and the values of a free society — our own.

*Kathleen Kennedy Townsend served as lieutenant governor of Maryland from 1995 to 2003. The documents cited above can be read on the Web site of the National Security Archive, [www.nсарchive.org](http://www.nсарchive.org).*