

**Prepared Testimony of Sarah Stephens, Center for Democracy in the Americas
Before the U.S. House of Representatives
Committee on Oversight and Government Reforms
Subcommittee on National Security and Foreign Affairs
April 29, 2009**

"National Security Implications of U.S. Policy toward Cuba"

Thank you Chairman Tierney, Ranking Member Flake, and members of the Subcommittee for the opportunity to appear before you today.

I serve as executive director at the Center for Democracy in the Americas, an independent, not-for-profit, non-governmental organization. Our Freedom to Travel Campaign¹ has taken bi-partisan delegations with over sixty Members of the House and Senate and their professional staffs to Cuba since 2001.

With the prospects for talks between the U.S. and Cuban governments increasing, having a discussion now about engagement and how best to serve our nation's security and broader interests could not be more timely.

Earlier this year, our organization published this report, "9 Ways for US to Talk to Cuba and for Cuba to Talk to US".

Our contributors – who include a former combatant commander of SOUTHCOM, a homeland security appointee from the Bush administration, energy scholars from the James Baker Institute at Rice University, and authorities on issues from migration to academic exchange – all argued this: rather than refusing to engage with Cuba diplomatically, our country could best promote our national interest and our values by engaging Cuba's government in talks about problems that concern us both.

This report is a direct outgrowth of our organization's trips to Cuba. Our delegations speak to government officials, The Catholic Church and civil society, foreign embassies and foreign investors, artists and ordinary people, about everything from their private aspirations to their views about U.S. policy.

These conversations drive home to our policy makers the cost of our isolation from the Cuban people in powerful and practical ways beyond simple commerce. Isolation stops us from working with Cuba on issues we've heard about today, like migration and counter-narcotics that lie at the core of our neighborhood's security. It prevents our diplomats at the U.S. Interest Section from doing what their counter-parts at foreign embassies do – traveling the island or meeting with officials.

Many Cubans find our refusal to sit down with their government and acknowledge its sovereignty disrespectful to them and their country, and this isolation from Cuba reduces the United States to by-stander status as Cubans seek to determine their future.

¹ Previously housed at the Washington Office on Latin America (2001) and The Center for International Policy (2002-2006).

After these trips, almost every member of our delegations asks “why aren’t we talking to these people?”

We do not propose talk for its own sake. Instead, experts like those here today and the exceptionally qualified scholars we recruited for our book have identified proposals that would allow Washington and Havana to work together on issues of concern to both countries.

Let me highlight just a few of those recommendations.

On security issues, they urge increased dialogue between the Cuban armed forces and the U.S. Southern Command; greater intelligence sharing to fight drug trafficking; and increasing contacts between DEA, the Marshals Service, Immigration and Customs Enforcement and their Cuban counter-parts.

To help with hurricane preparedness and civil defense, they suggest allowing Cuban scientists and emergency managers to visit the U.S. and share information on evacuation plans, post-disaster medical support, and citizen disaster preparedness education programs, and permitting U.S. scientists and emergency managers to visit Cuba and observe storm evacuations in real time.

On medical research and academic exchange, they advocate removing Cuba from the ‘State Sponsors of Terrorism’ list to allow exchanges of professionals in health care and research; lifting restrictions on educational trips to facilitate medical education; and, including Cuba in the Fulbright Program and the Benjamin A. Gilman International Scholarship Program.

In every case, these recommendations – and others in the report – can offer tangible benefits for both Cubans and Americans and improve the prospect that our governments will address issues that have divided us for so long.

Engagement is not a panacea. We know that the differences between the U.S. and Cuba cannot be papered over, and that the U.S. has profound disagreements with Cuba about how best to advance the ideas of democracy and human rights.

But the message today is this: if we wait for Cuba to capitulate as a precondition for our talking to them, or if Cuba waits for us to repeal the embargo before they will talk to us, nothing will ever change, and the status quo is increasingly harmful to U.S. national and diplomatic interests.

Mr. Chairman and Members of the Subcommittee, we need to accept these facts and take the initiative, not in leaps and bounds, but with small steps on concrete issues where cooperation is in our national interest and likely to yield real results. The administration appears ready to follow this approach, and it is our hope that ideas like those in our “9 Ways” report will be helpful to them – and to this Committee – going forward.

Thank you.