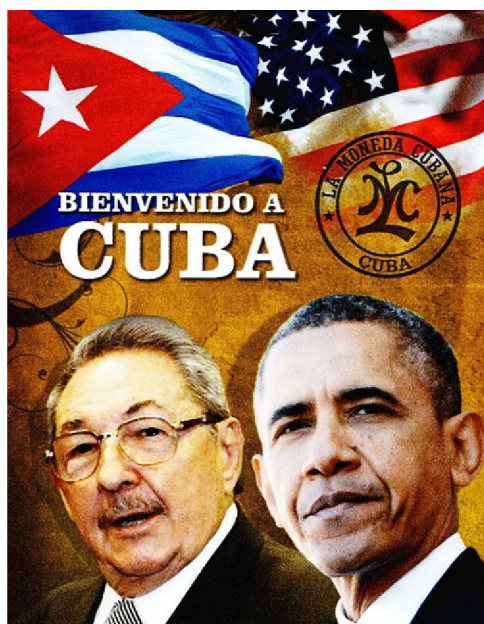




Air Force One arriving over Havana (Reuters)



Posters throughout Havana



Overlooking Cathedral Plaza on Sunday

Reflections on President Obama's March Visit to Cuba

Fundación Amistad's founder, Luly Duke, and Board member Stephen Johnson were privileged to be in Cuba at the time of President Obama's visit and attend a number of the events with his delegation during the President's three days in Havana. Fellow Board member Michael Parmly, former Chief of Mission of the US Interests Section in Havana, closely watched the proceedings from his home in Geneva. Fundación Amistad has been working for nearly two decades on cultural and people-to-people exchanges in Cuba, and in humanitarian efforts that mirror the President's focus on improving and empowering the lives of the Cuban people. We offer our observations and reflections on this historic week.

How Historic?

This was the first visit by a sitting US President in nearly 90 years, and the spirit of Barack Obama's journey was starkly different from that of Calvin Coolidge in 1928. The trip symbolized the two countries moving towards the normalization of their relations after 57 years of fierce antagonism. Since December 17, 2014, when the break-through was announced by Presidents Obama and Raul Castro, and last summer when the two countries re-opened embassies in their respective capitals, the two sides have been engaged in talks to shape a positive forward agenda. In February, we participated in the Howard Baker Forum's Cuba Consortium in Washington, DC, with a number of representatives from The White House senior staff and cabinet, and were briefed on the intensity and underlying purpose of these talks. Still, it took a Presidential visit to Cuba to make clear the determination of the two countries to change the nature of their relations.

The President is conscious of the fact that, in less than a year, he will no longer be in the Oval Office and has no guarantee that a Republican-led Congress will be open to changing core elements of punitive US legislation on Cuba. So along with repeating his call for a lifting of the US embargo on commerce with Cuba, he also brought 39 Senators and Congressional Representatives with him from both sides of the aisle – on Air Force One. Here his audience is in part the American people – the progress we are making is helping both American interests and the Cuban people and is profound enough to be irreversible.

One of Obama's core messages on the trip was to underline US respect for Cuba and the Cuban people, and to overcome the many decades of anti-American propaganda that the Cuban regime has aimed at the United States. In our week in Havana it was clear that virtually all Cubans were proud that Obama had come. American flags were everywhere – on buildings, homes, lapels, T-shirts, and other parts of the body – and the sincerity was unmistakable. Cubans and tourists alike were fascinated by "The Beast (La Bestia)", the Presidential tank-like armored Cadillac limousine. And while the Cuban authorities ensured that the crowds were kept to an absolute minimum through directives to close shops and stay at home – to the degree that lively Old Havana seemed like a ghost town – the natural spontaneity of all Cubans had them waving from windows and shouting greetings to the First Family all through the visit.

In Old Havana and at the Cathedral

The arrival of Air Force One also brought with it a driving thunderstorm, and the First Family's tour of Old Havana – led by FA's great friend, Eusebio Leal Spengler – was an exercise in avoiding puddles on wobbly cobblestones streets. Later, Leal explained to us the protocol of "black" umbrellas for key members of the President's party and "blue" umbrellas for others. We situated ourselves with the news photographers and others at Le Patio restaurant in the Plaza de la Catedral, and cheered – with some emotional tears – as the President climbed the steps of the beautifully lit Cathedral and was greeted by Padre Yosvany. In a private meeting with us on Wednesday, Padre Yosvany shared a number of intimate moments for the Obama family in the Cathedral, and the warm thank you to Cardinal Ortega and the Church for all its help in facilitating the initial steps in reconciliation.



CNN cameramen awaiting Obama arrival



Luly Duke being interviewed by Radio Havana



Cubans on the streets of Havana to welcome Obama

While Sunday's tour and visit to the Cathedral were not "official" meetings involving the two governments, the importance of the Catholic Church and its role in Cuba cannot be underestimated. It is one of the only institutions in Cuba that has a "higher calling" that the State, and provides guidance and services to the Cuban people that is sorely needed. Fundación Amistad is working with Padre Yosvany to fund several pre-schools whose children are largely from single-mother families, and we are about to embark on a three-year expansion of that program with the Cathedral throughout Cuba.

That evening, Luly gave an interview to Radio Havana offering her impressions and hopes for Obama's visit.

Monday

The President's first official act was a wreath-laying at the monument to José Martí, Cuba's George Washington-like revolutionary hero, in the middle of Havana's Plaza de la Revolución – right across from the headquarters of the Cuban Communist Party. The huge wrought-iron profile of Che Guevara stared down from the Ministry of the Interior, and Obama made the daring move to his entourage to conduct a photo-op in front of the iconic profile.

While news of the President's precise schedule was kept secret from nearly everyone, that morning our Cuban colleague, Martica, had heard that Obama would be traveling on Paseo to go to the Plaza de la Revolución and went there with her husband Remberto. Initially there was no one else around them, but in five minutes the blocks up to the Monument were jammed with people cheering for Obama. As the President's car drove by, Remberto became very emotional along with many others along the route, and ran after the car to see the ceremony. The Star Spangled Banner was played by the Cuban National Marching Band, and Obama's gesture of shaking the hand of the band leader was a hit in the minds of many Cubans.

Following this public event, the two Presidents met along with their advisors, and later conducted a press conference that was an unprecedented event – the Cuban President answering questions from journalists on live television. Even if the body language was awkward and the answers not fully satisfying, the point about beginning to listen to others was not missed. Obama then followed his speech with a meeting at the US Ambassador's Residence (built in the 1930's with an eye to receiving Franklin Roosevelt, but never actually host to a US President until Obama) with leaders of Cuban civil society. The Administration also ensured that contact was made with key independent figures who were not at the Residence. That afternoon, Deputy National Security Advisor Benjamin Rhodes, Obama's key advisor on Cuba who has led the US/Cuba contacts for the past several years, met with Cuba's leading blogger Yoani Sanchez in Sanchez' home.

Looking at Cuba's future, arguably the most engaging event of the three-day visit was the two-hour session with Cuban private entrepreneurs and US business representatives (held in a relatively small venue – one of the private restaurants now populating all of Havana – we were not able to secure tickets from the Embassy or White House). In a lively exchange hosted by former CNN anchor Soledad O'Brien (herself a Cuban-American émigré), Obama went back and forth listening to young Cubans recount their hardships and triumphs in starting kiosks and restaurants, beauty and barber shops, and rudimentary start-ups – encouraging the young people to keep up their efforts. The session was extraordinarily empowering for the private entrepreneurs who by some estimates now make up close to a third of the employment in a country which only a few years ago had virtually no jobs outside the State sector.



Tuesday

President Obama's speech to the Cuban people at the Gran Teatro was the most anticipated part of his agenda. Luly was at the security gates at 7am and met up with the other "Four Originals" who started various programs to assist the Cuban people two decades ago and were among the first ones to enter the theater. As the theater began filling with guests and dignitaries, Cardinal Ortega warmly greeted Luly with a hug. After a small confusion about the seats – initially sitting in the seats reserved for Raul Castro and his advisors! – Luly and the Four Originals found their way to the second balcony and sat with Carlos Acosta, the son of the late Juan Formell (director of Los Van Van), Carlos Saladrigas, and Andres Fanjul.

Upon entering and being welcomed with cheers and clapping, President Obama began his speech by quoting Marti's "cultivo una rosa blanca" which brought tears to the eyes of many in attendance. It was an astonishingly direct speech – about the struggles of both countries, about race, and about individual responsibility. He spoke as a friend to the Cuban people, and addressed the issues that really mattered to so many. To Cuba's youth and in reference to Germany's transformation he said "there is no wall to tear down, it is up to you to bring Cuba up". It was an unforgettable experience.

The Baseball Game

After the speech we raced to get to the Estadio Latinoamericano – we were meant to be in our seats by 11am – only to discover that all traffic was being held at the outskirts of Old Havana to make way for the President's entourage and our pre-arranged taxi was not able to get to us. All taxis were absent from the hotels, but we were able to commandeer an energetic and adventurous driver in a classic Chevy convertible to take us through the few open streets in the back roads of Old Havana to get us there in time. We sat with the stakeholders group for the Tampa Bay Rays close to the seats for the Congressional delegation and enjoyed seeing our representatives and cabinet members clearly having a fine time in casual clothes – some smoking Cuban cigars!

The 55,000 seat stadium was filled with Cuban fans – this is one of the most baseball crazy countries in the world - who were thrilled to be in the stands with the President of the United States to watch their favorite game.

The President arrived with his family and the widow and daughter of Jackie Robinson, who had practiced on this very same field prior to going to New York and joining the Brooklyn Dodgers in 1947 as the first African-American baseball player in the professional American leagues in the modern era. Clad in sunglasses but no ties, Presidents Obama and Castro sat next to each other and bantered throughout the first two innings of the game (which was finally won by the Tampa Bay Rays, 4-1). A moment of silence started the event in respect for the victims of the terrorist attack in Brussels that morning.

Wednesday

On Wednesday after Obama's departure, we had the opportunity to meet in individual, private meetings with a highly diverse and respected group of leading Cubans – Padre Yosvany (Rector of the Cathedral), Miguel Barnet (President of UNEAC), Eusebio Leal (City Historian), Miguel Coyula (City Planner), and later dinner with two of Cuba's most prominent architects, Jose Antonio Choy and his wife Julia León. We heard a wide variety of opinions with respect to Obama's visit – ranging from hope and joy to skepticism and "so what?" Coyula noted "you can't put it all back in the box now", referring to the aspirations for change. Barnet said that Obama was wrong about moving beyond the history of the two countries, saying "we cannot forgive the past", referring to his view (later repeated by Fidel Castro) of the US transgressions on the Cuban government and people. That evening we were invited to attend a reception at the Ambassador's Residence, and enjoyed the insights of Ambassador Jeffrey DeLaurentis and his wife Jennifer.

President Obama in the Gran Teatro



President Castro with Alicia Alonso



Luly and Stephen at the Stadium



Obama greets the players



Ambassador DeLaurentis at his Residence

Two of the Cubans we spoke to noted that the Communist Party Congress would be meeting in several weeks – starting on April 16th – and that one outcome of the Congress may be the separation of power in the leadership of the Party and the leadership of the government, though such a seismic shift is unlikely to be accomplished quickly.

Thursday

On Thursday we met with Paola Larghi of CISP, the Italian NGO with whom we are partnering on an agricultural reform symposium, and later met up with René Perez Grossman, noted agricultural specialist, at the airport. Again, many divergent views about the Obama visit!

The dramatic increase in travel and tourism that has already happened in Cuba is impacting the ability of the airport and staff to accommodate the number of travelers. Baggage handlers and equipment are in short supply, and arriving planes and passengers may wait hours to receive their baggage – and the enormous amount of clothing and goods being brought to the island. This impacts the turn-around and loading of departing flights, and as a result we spent seven hours at the Havana airport. During that time, we saw the arrival and departure of US Air Force cargo planes, loading up “The Beast” and all the SUV’s and other security vehicles accompanying the President’s visit.

If we’d been delayed any further we might have made it to the Rolling Stones concert!

Afterwards

Concrete agreements and business deals are starting to emerge, such as the Starwood/Marriott deal to manage three Cuban hotels including the Angleterre and Santa Maria, a Caterpillar offer to help with construction equipment, and the establishment by Google of a training site in Havana. But throughout his visit, Obama emphasized how much more the Cuban authorities need to do to attract US business and investment.

On Monday, Fidel Castro offered his view of Obama’s visit in his column in the State newspaper, Granma. “We don’t need the Empire to give us anything” he said, noting “we were supposed to risk a heart attack upon hearing these words of the President of the United States...after a merciless blockade that has lasted almost 60 years? And those who have died in the mercenary attacks on Cuban ships and ports, an airliner full of passengers detonated in mid-air, mercenary invasions, multiple acts of violence and force?”. He added, “Nobody should be under the illusion that the people from this noble and selfless country will renounce to the glory and the rights, and to the spiritual wealth it has earned with the development of education, science, and culture.”

Also on Monday, Ambassador DeLaurentis spoke at Columbia University in New York, briefing his alma mater on the visit and answering questions from students, faculty, and guests of the School of International and Public Affairs. Throughout he reiterated the Administration’s position that the US policy is not to interfere with the Cuban government or constitution, but simply to help the Cuban people and that Cuba’s future must be decided by Cubans, and not anyone else.

“El future de Cuba tiene que estar en las manos del pueblo Cubano”

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Air Force cargo plane loading “The Beast”

