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# A presidential paradigm shift: Changes in presidential rhetoric regarding Cuba

Alyssa Chellan Dixon  
*University of Northern Iowa*

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A PRESIDENTIAL PARADIGM SHIFT:  
CHANGES IN PRESIDENTIAL RHETORIC REGARDING CUBA

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Alyssa Chellan Dixon  
University of Northern Iowa  
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\_\_\_\_\_  
Date

\_\_\_\_\_  
Ryan McGeough, Honors Thesis Advisor, Communications Dept.

\_\_\_\_\_  
Date

\_\_\_\_\_  
Dr. Jessica Moon, Director, University Honors Program

## Introduction

On March 22, 2016, United States President Obama and Cuban President Raúl Castro sat side-by-side in the Estadio Latinoamericano baseball stadium, watching the Tampa Bay Rays and the Cuban national team face off in a historic game.<sup>i</sup> Such an event would have been unprecedented in the several decades prior to its occurrence. Indeed, though at the U.S.-Cuba game Obama and Raúl Castro were even as friendly to have participated in doing “the wave” together,<sup>ii</sup> relations between the U.S. and Cuban governments were anything but, even during the preceding U.S. presidency of George W. Bush.

The United States has had a strained relationship with Cuba for decades, and that relationship began to be transformed during Barack Obama’s term as president. During his presidency, Obama declared a shift from trade embargoes and harshly restricted travel to a policy that would be incrementally more open, his stance offering a stark contrast from his post-Cold War predecessors. Further, there has been a drastic shift in public opinion of Cuba accompanying this change in policy – 54 percent of Americans viewed Cuba positively according to a 2016 Gallup poll, an increase of 33 points in just 10 years.<sup>iii</sup> In order to investigate the relationship between rhetoric, policy change, and policy acceptance, I analyze the shifts in President Obama’s rhetoric regarding Cuba that accompanied his policy changes. To do so, I compare his rhetoric with that of President George W. Bush who preceded him and maintained the embargo.

The United States’ relationship with Fidel Castro’s Cuba began to sour not long after the Cuban Revolution ended in 1959. At this point, the 61 year-old country of Cuba underwent an exchange of power when Fidel Castro’s coup succeeded in overthrowing President General

Fulgencio Batista, an action supported by the United States through means of an arms embargo on the Batista administration. This early support, and the belief that Fidel Castro would be a more democratic leader than Batista, led to an initially positive relationship between the United States' and Castro's Cuban government. However, the United States did express concerns over Fidel Castro's communist ideas and execution of hundreds of Batista supporters.<sup>iv</sup>

Although Fidel Castro visited the United States within the first four months of his regime and even met with Vice President Richard Nixon while in D.C.,<sup>v</sup> within two years Fidel Castro had enacted several communist policies – from seizing public land to nationalizing hundreds of private companies. He also heavily taxed American products, causing American exports to Cuba to be cut in half.<sup>vi</sup> The Eisenhower administration responded with trade restrictions,<sup>vii</sup> but when Cuba subsequently increased trade with the Soviet Union, the United States cut diplomatic ties with Cuba.<sup>viii</sup> Soon after, President Kennedy expanded the trade restrictions to create a permanent trade embargo on Cuba, referring to the threat of the island nation's communist ties.<sup>ix</sup>

In the early 1960s, the U.S. repeatedly attempted to assassinate or depose Fidel Castro through multiple operations including the failed Bay of Pigs Invasion, worsening the relationship between the Cuban and United States' governments.<sup>x</sup> The “darkest moment in the countries' relationship” occurred in 1962, however, when the Soviet Union placed missiles in Cuba, threatening the security of the United States.<sup>xi</sup> The world held its breath for the resulting 13-day standoff known as the Cuban Missile Crisis that TIME refers to as a “white-knuckled nuclear face-off”. Almost two decades later, in 1980, the economic downturn in Cuba caused many Cubans to seek asylum in the United States. Although Castro initially gave his blessing and even announced to Cubans through which port they could leave Cuba, when they wanted to return home, the regime further strained relations with the United States by refusing to take them back.<sup>xii</sup>

The United States proceeded to tighten and ease embargo trade restrictions several times after its initial issuing, though always keeping it in place.<sup>xiii</sup> In 2014, however, the administration of then-president Barack Obama announced plans to end the embargo and strengthen the relationship with Cuba.<sup>xiv</sup> Obama's sudden change of U.S. policy from one that supported the over 50-year-long embargo to one that denounced it and moved toward closer relations with Cuba was groundbreaking considering the long-standing rift between the U.S. and Cuba. Interestingly, the policy change occurred alongside a sudden shift in public opinion. As presidential rhetoric relates to both government policy and public opinion, I investigate the role rhetoric played in the United States' shift in relations with Cuba. The significance in this analysis, therefore, is the presentation of how subtleties in rhetoric can and are used to support foreign policy objectives, and particularly how it can be done even when the result is a historic break, as has occurred with the United States' changing relationship with Cuba.

### **Literature Review and Methodology**

With the changes in the United States' foreign policy for Cuba being announced so recently, there has been little analysis of Obama's recent rhetoric in support of improved relations between the United States and Cuba. Additionally, there is relatively little research on American presidential rhetoric regarding Cuba, presumably due to the fact that the rhetoric has maintained a consistent tone for so long. However, researchers have analyzed presidential rhetoric as whole, and identified some key differences between Bush and Obama's individual rhetorical approaches to Cuba.

Rhetoric scholars consider presidential rhetoric to be highly influential on public opinion. Erwin Hargrove claims presidential rhetoric influences how the public perceives current events. He explains that the first task of the president is "to 'teach reality' to publics

and their fellow politicians through rhetoric,” explaining contemporary problems and issues and relating them to “the perennial ideals of the American experience”.<sup>xv</sup> Statements from the president thus play a key role in how the American public makes sense of complex events, including those regarding foreign policy. This great influence is why rhetorical scholars describe the president as the “interpreter-in-chief” who helps the public understand what certain events in the world mean for America and the world at large.<sup>xvi</sup> This idea of the strong influence of rhetoric is heightened in Karlyn Campbell and Kathleen Jamieson’s assertion that rhetoric itself aids a president in achieving his/her goals through its impact on opinion,<sup>xvii</sup> expanding presidential rhetoric’s effects to a global scale. Thus, presidential rhetoric has the power to affect public perceptions of a situation and to build public support that can help further a presidential agenda.

Scholars have analyzed the rhetorical styles of George W. Bush and Barack Obama, revealing different tones that correlate with their differing foreign policy goals for Cuba. Bush made several moves during his presidency that presented himself as hard on Cuba: putting “hardline” Cuban-Americans on his team, cracking down on travel to Cuba, and vowing not to ease the embargo on Cuba.<sup>xviii</sup> Analysis of Bush’s rhetoric regarding Cuba has been described as evoking an air of “neglect and arrogance”, which is unsurprising considering Bush’s Cold War-style statements on containing Cuba.<sup>xix</sup> Obama’s rhetoric stands in contrast to this. Though Obama’s specific rhetoric regarding Cuba has not been extensively explored, Kundai Chirindo and Ryan Neville-Shepard noted that Obama’s rhetoric in general tends to emphasize mutual interests, at one point quoting President Obama as saying, “Recognizing our common humanity

is only the beginning of our task.”<sup>xx</sup> I argue this pattern in his rhetoric remains the same in relation to Cuba, and is a prominent part of rhetoric necessary for normalizing relations.

Few scholars directly compare the rhetoric of the two presidents on the topic of Cuba. As an exception, Abraham F. Lowenthal directly addresses a shift in rhetoric from George W. Bush to Obama in his 2010 paper “Obama and the Americas: Promise, Disappointment, Opportunity”. He recognizes Obama as (1) taking a very different strategy toward Cuba compared to George W. Bush and (2) conducting his strategy with a different “style”.<sup>xxi</sup> Within the analysis of the policy and “style” change, Lowenthal touches on the change in rhetoric but does not go as far as analyzing it. Moreover, Lowenthal wrote near the beginning of Obama’s presidency, limiting his access to President Obama’s rhetoric on Cuba.

To answer the question of what rhetorical shifts took place between the Bush and Obama administrations, I conduct a rhetorical analysis of their Cuba-relevant speeches from their presidencies. Selecting a representative five speeches from both of the presidents, I identify patterns in their respective rhetorical styles. The speeches selected for George W. Bush are, in chronological order, “Remarks on the Observance of Cuban Independence Day” from May 18, 2001; “Remarks on the 100th Anniversary of Cuban Independence in Miami, Florida” from May 20, 2002; “Remarks Announcing the Initiative for a New Cuba” from May 20, 2002; “Remarks on Cuba” from October 10, 2003; and “Remarks on the Situation in Cuba” from May 21, 2008. The speeches selected for Barack Obama are, in chronological order, “Statement by the President on Cuba Policy Changes” from December 17, 2014; “Statement by the President on the Re-Establishment of Diplomatic Relations with Cuba” from July 1, 2015; “Remarks of President Barack Obama as Delivered” from February 20, 2016; “Remarks by President Obama



and President Raúl Castro of Cuba in a Joint Press Conference” from March 21, 2016; and “President Obama Delivers Remarks to the People of Cuba” from March 22, 2016. These speeches were selected for analysis due to the diversity of content they provide, with other speeches containing similar wording and/or ideas. Speeches and statements that were reviewed and not selected for analysis can be found under “Other Orations”.

With Bush maintaining policy that isolates Cuba, and Obama attempting to encourage a movement toward friendly relations, their rhetorical strategies revolving around Cuba differ greatly. Using the rhetorical aspect of *persona* to offer insight into how the rhetors interpreted the situation for various publics, I analyze Bush and Obama through the lens of the first, second, and third personae to determine how their rhetoric supported their policy goals.

First persona is the identity rhetors rhetorically construct for themselves, or how rhetors present themselves to their audience.<sup>xxii</sup> According to Palczewski, Ice, and Fritch, this form of persona tells audiences who the rhetor is or what the rhetor’s role is, and is derived from the rhetor’s presented authority and image. While historian Daniel Boorstin claims the characteristics presented must be believable in order for audience’s perception of the rhetor to be as the rhetor intended,<sup>xxiii</sup> it is important to note that the first persona a rhetor creates is just that – created – and does not necessarily represent actual characteristics of the rhetor.<sup>xxiv</sup>

Second persona is the persona the rhetor constructs for “the implied audience[s] for whom a rhetor constructs symbolic actions.”<sup>xxv</sup> Palczewski, Ice, and Fritch describe second persona as the “You” to whom the rhetor is speaking and attempting to affect. Indeed, audiences are capable of being “molded by the rhetoric addressed to them”, or by the identities created for them by a rhetor.<sup>xxvi</sup> In this way, a rhetor can interpret an audience to the

audience itself. However, just like first personae, second personae are simply rhetorical constructs of identity, and are not necessarily representative or fixed.<sup>xxvii</sup>

Finally, rhetorically constructed third personae embody the identities rhetors create for audiences that are not present and/or are rejected or negated through the speech/speaking situation, as defined by rhetorical scholar Philip Wander.<sup>xxviii</sup> Palczewski, Ice, and Fritch further describe such an audience as follows: “The third persona is the group treated as an object and dehumanized, while the second persona is the audience treated as a subject and recognized or commended”. This third persona can take place as a result of rhetors not being able to speak to all audiences, needing to only address a specific audience, creating a scapegoat, or creating a false universality that excludes certain groups or values.<sup>xxix</sup> The persona a rhetor creates for this group is also not necessarily representative of actual characteristics of the audience and is not fixed.<sup>xxx</sup>

The way Bush and Obama construct these three forms of persona exposes how they represent or interpret the situation in Cuba for their audiences. Analyzing the rhetorical shift between the two presidents in this way thus allows for a thorough analysis of their administrations’ chosen communication methods in talking to the public about Cuba.

### **Analysis of First Personae**

Analysis of the first personae of Bush and Obama reveals a key difference between the identities the two presidents constructed for themselves in talking about Cuba. George W. Bush portrays himself as a stern savior of the Cuban people, and Barack Obama portrays himself as a bridge-building partner for Cuba as a whole, constructions that create scope for the personae the presidents construct for the Cuban government and Cuban people.

## First Persona: Bush

Bush depicts himself as being focused on helping the oppressed Cuban people, and presents himself as being a stern figure on this point. This is visible in the way the he refers to his Cuba policy, and in his overall tone. Bush discusses his policies as being innately for the sake of helping the Cuban people: “Today I'm announcing a series of actions that will directly benefit the Cuban people and give them greater control of their economic and political destiny.”<sup>xxxix</sup> He further discusses points of his policy plan with emphasis on the aid it provides to the Cuban people. One example of this is when he talks about aiding Cuban refugees: “My administration is improving the method through which we identify refugees and redoubling our efforts to process Cubans who seek to leave... We will increase the number of new Cuban immigrants we welcome every year.”<sup>xxxix</sup> With descriptions that emphasize how his policies aid the Cuban people, Bush presents himself as an altruistic leader who is thinking of the Cuban people first and foremost. He interferes to improve their lives.

However, though Bush presents himself as an altruistic figure, he also uses strong language that implies that he is firm in his assessment of the Cuban situation and in his chosen methods with which to provide them support. For example, he discusses United States citizens' illegal travels to Cuba with firm language:

That [travel] law is on the books, and it must be enforced... Exceptions are too often used as cover for illegal business travel and tourism or to skirt the restrictions on carrying cash into Cuba. We're cracking down on this deception...Illegal tourism perpetuates the misery of the Cuban people.<sup>xxxix</sup>

With this and other statements, Bush connects opposing his policies with harm to the Cuban people, reiterating that the Cuban people are of primary concern. Bush adopts this persona throughout his speeches and in his presentation of the second and third personae, presenting himself as a savior willing to be stern for the sake of helping the miserable Cuban people.

### **First Persona: Obama**

Obama creates for himself the persona of a bridge-building partner for both the Cuban government and the Cuban people. He does this by emphasizing mutual benefit and partnership, as well as commonalities between Cuba and the United States. He presents himself as focused on mutual benefit with statements such as “...I’m confident that my visit will advance the goals that guide us—promoting American interests and values and a better future for the Cuban people, a future of more freedom and more opportunity”<sup>xxxiv</sup> and “It does not serve America’s interests, or the Cuban people, to try to push Cuba toward collapse.”<sup>xxxv</sup>

Obama additionally emphasizes partnership with the Cuban government as it relates to several issues, such as when he says, “...We’re moving ahead with partnerships in health, science, and the environment,” or “...We’re working to deepen our law enforcement coordination, especially against narco-traffickers that threaten both of our peoples.”<sup>xxxvi</sup> President Obama emphasizes policies that portray him as a partner to the Cuban government and Cuban people.

Beyond addressing points of policy collaboration, President Obama frequently points to commonalities between the two countries, further presenting himself as a cultural bridge-builder. For example, Obama discusses the short distance of 90 miles between Havana and Florida in his speeches,<sup>xxxvii</sup> and refers to the humanity, love of family, commitment to education, and other values individuals in the countries share.<sup>xxxviii</sup> Obama also discusses other

commonalities between the two countries, including having a fan-base of the Rolling Stones<sup>xxxix</sup> and other pop cultural similarities: “In Miami or Havana, you can find places to dance the Cha-Cha-Cha or the Salsa, and eat ropa vieja. People in both of our countries have sung along with Celia Cruz or Gloria Estefan, and now listen to reggaeton or Pitbull.”<sup>xi</sup> He additionally draws connections by referring to the countries as being bound by family ties of Cuban-Americans<sup>xii</sup> and by otherwise emphasizing unity between the nations with statements like “...*Todos somos Americanos*” or “...We are all Americans.”<sup>xiii</sup> In these ways, Obama consistently presents himself as a bridge-builder by emphasizing Cuban connections with the United States, despite the troubled relationship the countries have had. This, combined with his expressed focus on mutual benefit and partnership, reveals Obama’s efforts to rhetorically construct himself as a bridge-building partner to Cuba.

### **Analysis of Second Personae**

#### **Identification of Rhetorical Audiences**

Second personae represent the identities constructed for intended audiences of a rhetor. The clearest intended audience for both Bush and Obama is the American public, as several of these speeches were specifically broadcasted to the American people. Both Bush and Obama mention the American people and American activities repeatedly.

Beyond the American people, both presidents also spoke to the Cuban government through their speeches. Bush’s speeches continuously reference the Cuban government and his stipulations regarding the Cuban government’s actions. Bush also specifically addresses Fidel Castro in his speech “Remarks on the Observance of Cuban Independence Day”. Obama similarly discusses subject matter that is of interest to the Cuban government and occasionally details specific foreign policy steps he plans to take regarding the island country. Further,

Obama, having spoken in Cuba, also addresses the Cuban government directly throughout his multiple Cuba-based speeches. In these ways, it is clear that both presidents considered the American people and the Cuban government to be primary audiences of their speeches.

Due to the audiences the presidents have in common, the differences between Bush and Obama do not lie in the audiences they address but in the personae they construct for them. While both presidents may touch on similar points, my analysis centers on the attributes the presidents emphasized for their audiences and thus the differences in the personae the presidents assigned. The construction of these second personae reflects further their “savior” and “partner” first personae, as well as the perception priorities each president saw fit for supporting their respective policies.

### **American Public: Bush**

In appealing to one’s national audience, presidents commonly draw attention to applicable national values and beliefs. President Bush, in constructing himself as savior of the Cuban people, focuses on American values of political freedom and democracy. Bush points to ways these values are not being realized in Cuba, thereby justifying Bush in enacting his policy goals to ensure a way of life for the Cuban people that the American public would deem acceptable. He says the following in “Remarks on the Situation in Cuba”:

We have hope because we see a day coming when Cubans will have the freedom of which they have dreamed for centuries, the freedom that is the eternal birthright of all mankind. And many of you here are working to hasten that day, and I thank you for your efforts.

In this statement, Bush draws attention to both the value of freedom U.S. citizens hold and suggests that the Cuban people do not enjoy this right, and further informs Americans that American citizens are already fighting this offense. In Bush's speech "Remarks on Cuba", he describes the American people explicitly as pro-freedom when he says, "This country loves freedom, and we know that the enemy of every tyrant is the truth. We're determined to bring the truth to the people who suffer under Fidel Castro". Here, again, he ties the American people to his administration's initiatives and methods aimed at saving the Cuban people. Finally, he specifically refers to America's value of democracy when he says in "Remarks on the Observance of Cuban Independence Day", "We welcome the opportunity to build diplomatic relations with Cuba when the Cuban Government is a democracy, when the Cuban people can be free from fear to say what they think and choose who shall govern them." In applying these statements to the American people, Bush highlights the values of political freedom and democracy his American audience holds, and ties these values to his savior role and foreign policy toward Cuba.

### **American Public: Obama**

Barack Obama also describes the American public through emphasizing certain American values, though the values emphasized are different. Obama, acting as a partner to the Cuban people and Cuban government, emphasizes American commitments to economic freedom, diplomacy as a means, and family. This allows him to depict an American public whose ideals align with a partnering relationship with Cuba. In terms of economic freedom, Obama discusses business between the United States and Cuba frequently. Obama directly tells his American audience that they are supporters of economic freedom in Cuba, claiming that the

American people overwhelmingly support opening up trade between the two countries.<sup>xliii</sup> He presents the idea of economic freedom in Cuba as being for both the sake of Cubans and Americans, saying “increased commerce is good for Americans and for Cubans,” and “I believe that American businesses should not be put at a disadvantage.”<sup>xliv</sup> Obama further plays on Americans’ valuing of economic freedom in saying that American companies starting to do business in Cuba are “helping to nurture private enterprise and giving Cuban entrepreneurs new opportunities.”<sup>xlv</sup> Describing the businesses as *helping* implies that private enterprise and entrepreneurship are positive changes that are inherently supported by the American people. These statements imply the American audience is deeply committed to economic freedom, private enterprise, and entrepreneurship.

Obama also evokes a persona of the American people that is pro-diplomacy. Obama does this both by speaking about resuming diplomatic ties with Cuba as positive and by referring in a positive manner to diplomatic cohesiveness with other countries. In his speech “Statement by the President on Cuba Policy Changes”, Obama says, “I’ve instructed Secretary Kerry to immediately begin discussion with Cuba to reestablish diplomatic relations that have been severed since January of 1961... I believe that we can do more to support the Cuban people and promote our values through engagement.” Here, Obama states that from diplomatic relations American values can be promoted to the Cuban people. Obama can say this with the understanding that the American people believe in change through diplomacy. Obama additionally makes statements such as “No other nation joins us in imposing these [economic] sanctions,”<sup>xlvi</sup> which only serve as support for Obama’s policy change if the American people see diplomatic relations and acting in cohesion with other countries as



priorities. The fact that Obama still used this statement shows his attempts to rhetorically construct a vision of an American public that supports acting through diplomatic means.

Finally, Obama's speeches mention family ties regularly. Obama implies that he sees his audience of the American people as embodying the value of family. Obama mentions family in all of his sampled speeches, and refers to family in providing support for why re-establishing diplomatic relations with Cuba represents a positive change. Obama's constructed importance of family to the American people is visible in his referencing family as bonding the United States in Cuba with statements like "After all, our nations are separated by only 90 miles, and there are deep bonds of family and friendship between our people."<sup>xlvii</sup> This emphasis on family is additionally used to justify positive relations with Cuba when Obama mentions that USAID sub-contractor Alan Gross was released by Cuba and is "reunited with his family at long last."<sup>xlviii</sup> Finally, family is linked to the policies that Obama is pursuing: "...We lifted restriction for Cuban Americans to travel and send remittances to their families in Cuba. These changes, once controversial, now seem obvious. Cuban Americans have been reunited with their families..."<sup>xlix</sup> This statement shows how the Obama administration depicts the American public as seeing the reuniting of families as preferable to preventing these interactions for the sake of changing Cuba's political structure. Indeed, Obama's frequent references to family and the ideals of economic freedom and diplomacy change focus from Bush's emphases to depict an American public whose ideals could be best reached by partnering with Cuba.

### **Cuban Government**

While the two presidents both address the Cuban government in their speeches, the leadership in Cuba experienced a change in the final year of Bush's presidency as a result of

Fidel Castro's illness.<sup>i</sup> After nearly two years as Cuba's President of the Council of State, Raúl Castro was announced to be his brother Fidel Castro's successor on February 24, 2008.<sup>ii</sup> Though Fidel Castro's influence remained present until his death eight years later in November of 2016,<sup>iii</sup> American public discourse around the Cuban government changed from one about Fidel Castro to one about the governance of Cuba as a whole.

### **Cuban Government: Bush**

Bush, the savior, assigns Fidel Castro's regime the persona of a tyrannical, untrustworthy, and evil regime. Bush directly refers to Fidel Castro as "the tyranny that rules Cuba today",<sup>liii</sup> "a tyrant who uses brutal methods to enforce a bankrupt vision... who has turned a beautiful island into a prison",<sup>liv</sup> and "a brutal dictator who cares everything for his own power and *nada* for the Cuban people."<sup>lv</sup> Bush thus directly constructs Fidel Castro as a brutal tyrant to the Cuban people living under his rule.

Additionally, the Castro regime is assigned a childish untrustworthiness in Bush's speeches. In "Remarks Announcing the Initiative for a New Cuba", Bush says the following:

Let me read Article 71 of the Cuban Constitution. It says, "The National Assembly is composed of deputies elected by free, direct, and secret vote." That's what the constitution says. Yet since 1959, no election in Cuba has come close to meeting these standards. In most elections, there has been one candidate, Castro's candidate. All elections in Castro's Cuba have been a fraud.

Bush establishes what law in Cuba states, shows how Fidel Castro does not uphold that law, and then openly calls Fidel Castro a fraud. This discrediting of Fidel Castro takes place in Bush's other speeches, including in "Remarks on Cuba" when he says, "Clearly, the Castro regime will

not change by its own choice,” and additionally in “Remarks Announcing the Initiative for a New Cuba” when he says, “I also challenge Cuba's Government to ease its stranglehold, to change its stranglehold on private economic activity.” Bush’s tone in talking about Cuba implies a childish untrustworthiness by not only discrediting Fidel Castro’s regime, but also speaking about Cuba with language that implies Cuban subordination. Bush claims that Cuba will not change on its own, just as a child needs outside influence to learn; rather than calling Fidel Castro to change, Bush “challenges” Fidel Castro to change. Even after Raúl Castro began to rule Cuba, Bush continues referring to Raúl Castro’s declared dedication to improving the lives of the Cuban people as “so-called reforms” that will do little to help the Cuban people.<sup>lvi</sup> This language overall discredits the Castro regime as a credible ruling power.

Finally, Bush constructs an evil persona for the Cuban government, highlighting the wrongs the regime has enacted on the Cuban people. Indeed, Bush tends to go into detail as to what the offenses Fidel Castro’s regime has committed are:

In April, 75 peaceful members of Cuban opposition were given harsh prison sentences, some as long as 20 years. Their crimes were to publish newspapers, to organize petition drives, to meet to discuss the future of their country. Cuba's political prisoners are subjected to beatings and solitary confinement and the denial of medical treatment. Elections in Cuba are still a sham. Opposition groups still organize and meet at their own peril. Private economic activity is still strangled. Non-government trade unions are still oppressed and suppressed. Property rights are still ignored. And most goods and services produced in Cuba are still reserved for the political elites.<sup>lvii</sup>

Bush specifically states details of the malicious behavior of the Cuban government, presenting examples that directly contrast basic values of political freedom and democracy Bush emphasizes when describing the United States. He does this frequently, and in “Remarks Announcing the Initiative for a New Cuba” additionally shows that other powers outside of the United States find issue with the Cuban government’s actions as well:

He is a dictator who jails and tortures and exiles his political opponents. We know this. The Cuban people know this, and the world knows this. After all, just a month ago the United Nations Commission on Human Rights, in a resolution proposed by the nations of Latin America, called upon Cuba's Government to finally—to finally— begin respecting the human rights of its people.

With these statements, Bush constructs the Cuban government as an evil ruling body, objectively oppressing its people. By referring to Fidel Castro as a “tyrant” and “brutal”, painting the regime as untrustworthy, and detailing malicious actions the regime has taken, George W. Bush presents the Castro regime as a government whose opposition to American ideals of political freedom and democracy make it objectively bad for its people, a second persona that justifies a savior’s intervention.

### **Cuban Government: Obama**

In contrast, Barack Obama assigns the Cuban leadership the persona of a leadership not solely at fault, a legitimate government capable of reasonable discussion, and one that is simply mistaken and capable of change. Obama frequently refers to the embargo-based United States policy as a perpetuating factor in Cuba’s problems, and suggests that the Castro regime is not wholly at fault for ideological differences and other disagreements with the United States. He

describes the embargo policy in the following ways: “[It is] an approach that does more to keep Cuba closed off from an interconnected world;”<sup>lviii</sup> “It shuts America out of Cuba’s future, and it only makes life worse for the Cuban people;”<sup>lix</sup> “It is an outdated burden on the Cuban people.”<sup>lx</sup> Obama also explicitly ties to the embargo policy and the negative impacts it had with statements like “Instead of supporting democracy and opportunity for the Cuban people, our efforts to isolate Cuba despite good intentions increasingly had the opposite effect – cementing the status quo and isolating the United States from our neighbors in this hemisphere.”<sup>lxi</sup> This way of presenting the embargo and issues in Cuba attributes some of the fault to the United States government, rather than placing all blame on Cuban government oppression.

Additionally, Obama portrays Cuban leadership as a body capable of reasonable discussion. He does this by explicitly referring to conversations he has had and plans to have with the regime. In “Statement by the President on Cuba Policy Changes”, Obama discusses conversations he had with Raúl Castro regarding “Alan’s case, and other aspects of our relationship”, as well as the means of release of “one of the most important intelligence agents that the United States has ever had in Cuba, and who [had] been imprisoned for nearly two decades”. He shows the benefit in such conversations with the Cuban government by showing how the conversations led to favorable ends for the United States. Obama does the same in mentioning how agreements had been reached on restoring direct flights and mail services between the two countries,<sup>lxii</sup> and how such discussions have led to the re-opening of their embassies.<sup>lxiii</sup> He emphasizes the benefit he sees in this open dialogue with statements like “President Castro, I want to thank you for the courtesy and the spirit of openness that

you've shown during our talks. At our meeting in Panama last year, you said that we're willing to discuss every issue, and everything is on the table,"<sup>lxiv</sup> and presents even "frank"<sup>lxv, lxvi</sup> conversations in a positive light by describing them as "good" and "healthy"<sup>lxvii</sup> and as something that will allow for the countries to learn from each other.<sup>lxviii</sup> Obama further establishes that such conversations will continue with statements like "I'll meet with President Castro to discuss how we can continue normalizing relations."<sup>lxix</sup> By focusing on the presence of reasonable discussions with the Cuban government, as well as the benefits that result thereof, Obama presents the Cuban government as a reasonable body worthy of having a dialogue with.

Obama goes further than presenting the Cuban government as reasonable: he also paints the Raúl Castro regime as a legitimate government and friend in the hemisphere. Obama highlights the reasonability the Cuban government had employed in the recent past when he points to the Cuban government's release of Alan Gross on what Obama refers to as "humanitarian grounds",<sup>lxx</sup> by referring to Cuban criticism of the United States government as "constructive dialogue",<sup>lxxi</sup> and even painting Raúl as a jokester, a stark contrast to how the Cuban government had been portrayed by presidents before Obama. Obama most notably implies legitimacy of the Raúl Castro regime by referring to the leader as "President Castro". He does this in all of his sampled speeches, whereas Bush referred to Fidel Castro as simply "Mr. Castro" or even just "Fidel Castro". Indeed, legitimization of the Cuban government takes form in Obama thanking President Raúl in his speeches<sup>lxxii</sup> and in asking for the leader's "indulgence" to speak for an extended period of time.<sup>lxxv</sup> Obama even goes as far as to refer to the relationship between Cuba and the United States as a potential friendship in four of his five

sampled speeches.<sup>lxxvi</sup> This way of speaking presents the Cuban government as an equal and respectable government, rather than an untrustworthy and tyrannical one.

Finally, Obama refers to the actions of the Cuban government that clash with American values in a way that makes the Castro leadership seem to be mistaken rather than evil, and suggests that the Cuban government may change in the future. Obama does not ignore differences between the United States and Cuban governments, but tends to refer to the ideological differences as though they are based on mistaken perceptions instead of stemming from the Castro regime's evil. In "Statement by the President on Cuba Policy Changes", Obama says "Now, where we disagree, we will raise those differences directly – as we will continue to do on issues related to democracy and human rights in Cuba," and requests that Cuba adjust its thinking with the statement: "We are calling on Cuba to unleash the potential of 11 million Cubans by ending unnecessary restrictions on their political, social, and economic activities." However, this remains a request and not a demand. Obama describes the differences between the U.S. and Cuban governments as "real" and "important",<sup>lxxvii</sup> and speaks firmly and in detail about some of the thinking he sees as needing amendment in Cuba when he discusses how "the United States believes that no Cubans should face harassment or arrest or beatings simply because they're exercising a universal right to have their voices heard."<sup>lxxviii</sup> However, he talks about these differences as reason for discussion rather than as reason for rifts. Obama continues to reverse the demonization of the Cuban government by also painting the possibility that politics in Cuba may change in the future. He communicates this with statements like, "...I am convinced that through a policy of engagement, we can more

effectively stand up for our values and help the Cuban people help themselves as they move into the 21st century”<sup>lxxix</sup> and the following:

I’ve always said that change won’t come to Cuba overnight. But as Cuba opens up, it will mean more opportunity and resources for ordinary Cubans. And we’re starting to see some progress.<sup>lxxx</sup>

In these ways, Obama constructs Cuba as potentially changing to more align with United States ideals in the future. These statements combined with others that paint the Cuban government as simply misguided, but legitimate and reasonable, the persona Obama paints of the Cuban government is markedly more positive than the persona painted by Bush. This puts Obama in a position to be better able to have public support in creating a partnering relationship with Cuba.

### **Analysis of Third Personae**

The third persona refers to the audience that is referenced but not spoken to directly and/or is otherwise alienated by the rhetor. In comparing George W. Bush and Barack Obama, the two do not mutually create an objectified audience. While Bush alienates the audience of the Cuban people by speaking for them as their savior, Barack Obama speaks directly to the Cuban people as their partner during his historical visit to Cuba.

#### **Cuban Public: Bush**

President Bush consistently iterates in his speeches the suffering of the Cuban people and the United States’ ideas of what needs to be done to better the Cuban people’s situation. However, Bush rarely specifically addresses Cubans still living in Cuba, and his speeches are unlikely to be heard by the Cuban people because of the Cuban government’s control over



broadcasting. Therefore, with Bush representing the Cuban people and determining ideal policy for them without having direct interaction, the persona Bush creates for the Cuban people represents a third persona.

Bush creates for the Cuban people a persona of an oppressed people who have been denied the proper tools to improve their situation. Bush consistently refers the Cubans struggling to obtain rights and freedoms. He references the sacrifices the Cuban people are making in claiming their rights through statements like "...this leader instead chooses to jail, to torture, and exile Cuban people for speaking their minds"<sup>lxxxi</sup> and "We are proud to stand, too, with those who are suffering and dying in jails because they had the courage to speak the truth." Bush additionally refers to the Cuban people's persistence and dedication to claiming their freedoms, saying, "Through all their pains and deprivation, the Cuban people's aspirations for freedom are undiminished. We see this today in Havana, where more than 11,000 brave citizens have petitioned their Government for a referendum on basic freedoms" and "Cuba has a proud history of fighting for freedom, and that fight goes on." Indeed, Bush refers to the "oppression" that Cubans face in the stead of freedom in all of his selected speeches and additionally references some shocking examples of said oppression, including Cubans fleeing Cuba by sea, Cubans being susceptible to sex trafficking, and Cubans being financially suffocated by the Cuban government. He even draws attention to basic household items the Cuban people have not been allowed to purchase and links this to larger problems the Cuban people are facing:

Now that the Cuban people can be trusted with mobile phones, they should be trusted to speak freely in public... Now that the Cuban people have open access

to computers, they should also have open access to the Internet. And now that the Cuban people will be allowed to have toasters in 2 years, they should stop needing to worry about whether they will have bread today.<sup>lxxxvi</sup>

In these ways, Bush presents the Cuban people as a group that is struggling to claim their rights within an oppressive environment, referring to them as a “long-suffering people”<sup>lxxxvii</sup>. Bush takes this further in depicting the Cuban people as needing outside support from the United States to help with these issues with statements that describe the United States as bringing the “message of freedom” and/or “truth”, and with statements like “Even as we seek to end tyranny, we will work to make life better for people living under and resisting Castro's rule.”<sup>xc</sup> These descriptions depict the necessity of a “friendship”<sup>xcii</sup> with the United States for the Cuban people. In these ways, the third persona that Bush creates for the Cuban people emphasizes their oppression, their desire to achieve freedom and liberties, and their need for outside assistance, and therein justifies Bush’s role as savior.

### **Cuban Public: Obama**

In contrast, while Obama similarly speaks about the necessity of freedom and human rights in Cuba, he also speaks directly to the Cuban people, presents positive aspects of Cuban life, and places emphasis on the Cuban people’s abilities to change the situation in Cuba. Therefore, Obama recognizes the Cuban people rather than objectifying or dehumanizing them, meaning that Obama does not create a third persona for them as did Bush.

Where Bush depicts the Cuban public as a marginalized third persona unable to resist the tyranny of their government, Obama actually utilizes the second persona and directly addresses the Cuban people as an audience capable of acting. He addresses the necessity of

freedom in Cuba, but intermixes varying positive statements about Cuba with his discussion of changes that need to be made for the betterment of Cubans. Obama presents Cuba as a desirable place to be in the following statement:

My wife, Michelle, and I brought our daughters -- and by the way, they don't always want to go with us; they're teenagers now. They have friends at home and they have things to do -- but they wanted to come to Cuba because they understood, and we wanted to show them, the beauty of Cuba and its people.<sup>xcii</sup>

Obama goes on to highlight the fact that the Cuban people are educated, referring to Cuba's educational programs and medical staffs. He says, "Cuba has an extraordinary resource -- a system of education which values every boy and every girl. And in recent years, the Cuban government has begun to open up to the world, and to open up more space for that talent to thrive."<sup>xciii</sup> Obama draws attention to the capability of Cuban doctors, saying, "...Cubans and American medical teams have worked together in Haiti against cholera, and in West Africa against Ebola -- and I want to give a special commendation to Cuban doctors who volunteered and took on some very tough assignments to save lives in West Africa in partnership with us and other nations."<sup>xciv</sup> These more positive emphases present a different description of the Cuban people than Bush's description of the people as oppressed and miserable.

Further, Obama emphasizes the Cuban people's need to decide the future of Cuba for themselves, rather than the United States needing to come in and enact its own form of change. We can see this through statements Obama makes like "...I'm hopeful for the future because I trust that the Cuban people will make the right decisions" and "We will not impose

our political or economic system on you. We recognize that every country, every people, must chart its own course and shape its own model.”<sup>xcv</sup> This emphasis on the Cuban people deciding their future paints the people as more of an educated and capable body than the persona created by the Bush administration, presenting the Cubans not as a group to be saved, but as a group of equals worthy of partnership.

### **Summary and Conclusions**

In analyzing three forms of personae from speeches from George W. Bush and Barack Obama’s respective presidencies, it is clear that the two presidents interpreted the situation in Cuba differently for the American public. These differences in interpretations, along with the cohesiveness between their rhetorical and policy choices, support the idea that presidential rhetoric may be used to alter public opinion and solicit public support for presidential initiatives.

The first persona is how the rhetors present themselves, and Bush depicts himself as being a stern savior, while Obama depicts himself as a bridge-building partner. Indeed, Bush discusses saving the oppressed Cuban people, while Obama discusses partnering with Cuba for mutual benefit. These choices of persona lay the tone for each president’s discussion of Cuba. With president serving as interpreter-in-chief, the first persona they evoke may influence how audience members believe the president should respond to a situation.

Bush and Obama both had the intended audiences of the United States public and the Cuban government, but the second personae that they developed differed. President Bush assigned to the American public the primary values of political freedom and democracy; President Obama assigned priorities of economic freedom, diplomacy, and family. This

rhetorical style change provides insight into changes in how the situation in Cuba was presented to the American people. Rather than policy on Cuba revolving around the fact that an oppressive government is in control, the dialogue changed to the idea of ending an economic stalemate, re-establishing diplomatic relations, and reuniting families.

When Bush discusses the Castro regime, the president assigns a persona of a tyrannical, untrustworthy, evil regime; when Obama discusses the Castro regime, he assigns a persona of a government that is not solely at fault, is capable of reasonable discussion, and is simply mistaken and may change. Rather than the United States taking on a tyrant, the United States was taking on a regime that has ideological imperfections but is making strides. The government framed as mistaken is much easier to have a positive relationship with whilst still retaining public support, and thus this persona ties very closely to Obama's policy and public opinion changes.

Finally, a third persona is ascribed by the rhetor to audiences that are described but unrecognized and unaddressed. Bush creates a third persona for the Cuban people that emphasizes their oppression, their desire to achieve freedom and liberties, and their need for outside assistance. This contrasts the second persona Obama constructs that emphasizes the Cuban people's commitment to education and their capability to shape their own political destiny. While presenting a people as heavily in need and helpless may inspire a public to support policies of intervention, presenting a people as independent and highly capable may convince a public that collaboration serves as the ideal policy.

These tactical changes Obama made in how he constructed first, second, and third personae made for a clear difference in the discussion of the United States' relationship with

Cuba. Overall, through the personae they created for their audiences and themselves, Bush talked about Cuba as if there was need for immediate, firm intervention, and Obama talked about Cuba as though it was a partner in the making. These constructed personae additionally served as interpretations the presidents created for the U.S. public in their roles as “interpreters-in-chief”, shaping how many Americans perceived the situation in Cuba. With Obama’s policies on Cuba being more partnership-oriented and reliant on a positive relationship with Cuba, and Obama’s discussion on the situation in Cuba presenting more positive interpretations of the Cuban government and Cuban people, change in rhetoric and interpretations coincide with the policies the respective presidents had chosen to support.

However, while there are sharp differences between the rhetorical strategies of the Bush and Obama administrations when it comes to Cuba, and public opinion on Cuba improved drastically between the two presidencies, one must note that other factors likely contributed to this change. The most influential of these changing factors is presumably the fact that Fidel Castro stepped down from immediate leadership in Cuba, and his successor Raúl Castro became the head of government. The removal of a leader who had been vilified in the United States for decades likely had a positive impact on U.S. public opinion on Cuba. Further research on this topic may analyze the ways that Bush and Obama talked about Cuba before and after Fidel Castro stepped down.

The significance of presidential rhetoric and the part it plays in the perspectives of the public, as recognized by rhetoric scholars, plays a key role in the changes in U.S. policy toward Cuba. President Obama’s shift in rhetoric toward Cuba enabled a more friendly and partnership-oriented U.S. policy toward Cuba, just as President Bush’s savior-style rhetoric

regarding Cuba enabled a continuation of the trade embargo. A historic example of the powers of rhetoric, Obama was able to take enormous strides in bridging the 50-year-long rift with Cuba. Not only able to ease embargo trade restrictions, he additionally visited Cuba, watched a baseball game with their president, and even topped off his rhetoric triumph by participating in one of America's most significant rounds of "the wave".

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