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## Daniel P. Erikson. *The Cuba Wars: Fidel Castro, the United States, and the Next Revolution*. New York: Bloomsbury Press, 2008.

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**Daniel P. Erikson. *The Cuba Wars: Fidel Castro, the United States, and the Next Revolution*. New York: Bloomsbury Press, 2008.**

Globally, the Cold War ended almost 20 years ago, but between the United States and Cuba, it still very much persists. For most U.S. citizens, however, the island only 90 miles off the Florida coast remains an afterthought. Cuba's role as a threat to American security has greatly diminished since the 1962 Cuban Missile Crisis and the collapse of its powerful backer, the Soviet Union. Today, the more pressing concerns of religious fundamentalism and the war in Iraq and Afghanistan are seen as more important than the development of relations between the Caribbean nation and its powerful northern neighbor. Nonetheless, the U.S. trade embargo persists, and Cuba remains a perennial U.S. federal election issue.

In *The Cuba Wars*, Daniel P. Erikson offers insight into not only the current state of affairs in Cuba-U.S. relations but also into the original development of the Cuba-U.S. conflict and why the conflict is likely to persist into the future. Erikson positions himself against the perseverance of the U.S. imposed embargo and emphasizes the need for new policy approaches to bring about democratic reform in Cuba. Pragmatically, the author explains how "the forces of continuity" currently at work within Cuba-U.S. relations are too strong to permit genuine reform and that reform will only be realized if it is widely embraced by the hard-line Cuban diaspora based in Miami (312). Drawing on a series of interviews with leading American policy makers, Cuban dissidents, and diaspora members, Erikson tells the story of *The Cuba Wars* through the people that lived and continue to live the experience on a daily basis. As a senior associate for U.S. policy at the Inter-American Dialogue think tank in Washington D.C., Erikson is able to provide a thorough, thought provoking analysis through his own professional experiences and perspectives.

Erikson's investigation casts a wide net with each of his twelve chapters exploring different aspects of U.S.-Cuban relations. He begins by detailing the recent events of Fidel Castro stepping down from power; the author explains the significance of this event by reminding the reader that the trade embargo was originally designed to force the economic and, thus, political collapse of the Castro regime. Since Castro has now eliminated himself from the political equation, the continuation of the embargo exposes the fallacy that American policy toward Cuba is still based on a waiting game.

As Erikson explains, during the 1990s, it was assumed that communism would take Castro down with it, and so commenced the tightening of sanctions against Cuba with the 1996 Helms-Burton Act. None of the sanctions, however, had any real effect on Castro's ability to remain in power. Then came the notion that political change would occur once Fidel Castro was no longer in power because his brother, Raúl, would not have the support-base his older brother did (29-30). This did not turn out to be the case either. Erikson demonstrates that no American contingency plan existed to deal with events as they actually transpired. Importantly, claims Erikson, instead of taking policies back to the drawing board when necessary, existing U.S. policies toward were simply and continually "adjusted," the final result being that the U.S. now claims to be waiting to lift the embargo with Cuba until *both* Castro brothers are out of power.

Chapter two examines the post-September 11<sup>th</sup> era, in which relations between the

U.S. and Cuba have become more strained as a result of the tough rhetoric employed by the Bush administration in the wake of the attacks and the allegations that Cuba presented a biological weapons threat (36). The subsequent two chapters respectively discuss the current state of Cuba's dissident movement and U.S. strategies to support democratic principles on the island.

The next series of chapters deal with Cuban exile communities and their relationship to U.S. government. Cuban-Americans make up the largest and most influential body of anti-Castro regime activists in the world and traditionally hold uncompromising hawkish positions that influences American foreign policy towards the Caribbean island country, reinforcing its tough stance. The first generation of Cuban-American dissidents fled Castro's revolution or left when their land and property was seized by the communist government in the 1950s and 60s. Many members within U.S. based Cuban community have made it their life's work to topple the Castro regime and return to their homeland. Erikson successfully demonstrates that it is in fact the U.S.-based Cubans who remain Castro's worst enemy due to their disproportionate political influence and lobbying power. At the heart of the matter is the critical importance of the home state of U.S.-based Cubans: Florida. With the fifth largest number of votes in the Electoral College, Florida is often a "swing state" in U.S. general elections. As such, since 1992, all presidential candidates have supported sanctions against Cuba, as U.S.-based Cubans favor, hoping to attain the U.S.-based Cuban vote, and ultimately, to win the state of Florida itself. (141). Given this cycle, Erikson's impression through his interviews with policy-makers is that most elected American officials agree that an entirely new approach toward Cuba with more open dialogue is needed before any authentic political reform can be realized (160).

Chapter eight deals with the cultural aspect of *The Cuba Wars*, and the author finds that outside of special interest groups, most U.S. Citizens are not concerned about prospective Cuban-American dialogues or exchanges (219). Erikson highlights the ways in which the embargo and its supporters have squandered opportunities for more meaningful cultural and sporting exchanges between the U.S. and Cuba to the detriment of both countries and all individuals. Erikson's greatest strength may in fact be his ability to situate himself within the narrative itself, allowing the reader to better interpret the realities of the U.S.-Cuba relationship. By contextualizing the issues discussed in his work, the reader is better able to engage with the author's analysis in a personal manner.

Erikson is clearly no fan of America's often-hypocritical stance toward Cuba, something he makes clear in chapter seven when discussing spy networks and describing a terrorist who had acted against Castro and communist Cuba finding a "safe haven" in the U.S. (178). This is not to say that Erikson does not also strive to be objective when interpreting U.S.-Cuba relations. He clearly does and usually succeeds, though on some occasions better than others. For example, in the chapter on the role of Venezuela, it is easy to see the subjectivity in his support for free-market reforms and his apparent dislike for the Chávez administration (256, 260-261). In this, he largely echoes mainstream American media analyses of Cuba and Venezuela, analyses which themselves generally reflect Latin America's own sentiments as the region undergoes a generally leftward political swing. Nonetheless, the author attempts to distance himself from the neoconservative critics who would support privatization, reduction of social services and other Washington Consensus-like reforms in Cuba. The last chapter returns to the present

with a discussion of Raúl Castro at Cuba's helm, steering the country into a new post-Fidel era.

Erikson's book is more journalistic than it is academic, though this does not detract from the merit of the book's accomplishments. Nonetheless, readers looking for an academic analysis of U.S.-Cuban relations based on empirical principles will not find such an analysis here. What they will find instead is a general outline of the foreign policy relationship between two countries as told from an American point of view, albeit a consciously objective one. At times, it seems as though Erikson will fall into the trap of perceiving a certain righteousness about the United States' version of liberal democracy and assuming that such a democracy ought to be the model Cuba and other countries strive to achieve. He manages to avoid doing so by giving voice to Cuban economists and academics, who are trying to reform the system from within to move toward a more China-like or Vietnam-like version of open-market communism and, ultimately, with the passing of time, hope for a sort of European-based system of social democracy (306-307). Absent from *The Cuba Wars* are any supporting voices for Castro's Cuba from the island itself. There are such opinions from U.S. activists but none that emanate directly from Cuba. Perhaps they do not exist, though this is highly unlikely. In a closed country like Cuba, public opinion is always difficult to gauge. Of value to Erikson's book would be the inclusion of these voices, if only to add weight to his own arguments.

In all, Erikson has proven himself to be skilled in the art of polemical narration and has produced a highly readable history of the foreign policy relationship between two countries. The most important aspect of this work is his highlighting the need to devise a more effective and proactive U.S. foreign policy toward Cuba, one that does more than simply wait to react to events in the Caribbean and divorces itself from the near Zionist aspirations of Cuban exiles, who have been directing, by all accounts, an ineffective strategy that ultimately wants to reverse the history of the last 50 years.

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