



EDITOR

William Armbruster
33 Washington Street, 13th Floor, Newark, NJ 07102
barmbruster@joc.com
Tel: (973) 848-7152, Fax: (973) 848-7004

MANAGING EDITOR

Chris Brooks, cbrooks@joc.com, (973) 848-7156

PRODUCTION EDITOR

Laurie Collins, lcollins@joc.com, (973) 848-7134

CONTRIBUTING WRITERS

Bruce Barnard	Peter Leach
Chris Barnett	Rosalind McLymont
Joe Bonney	Stephanie Nall
Bill DiBenedetto	Janet Plume
R.G. Edmonson	Ian Putzger
Rick Eyerdam	Rose Horowitz
Alan Field	Peter Tirschwell

Art Director

Larry Treat
(973) 848-7107

Assistant Art Director

Suzanne Boehning
(973) 848-7085

Editorial Operations Chief

Barbara Wyker
(973) 848-7121

Electronic Rights/Syndication

Barbara Ross
(973) 848-7186

VICE PRESIDENT, MAGAZINE GROUP

Peter Tirschwell
ptirschwell@joc.com, (973) 848-7158

ADVERTISING SALES

Group Publisher, Noreen Murray
33 Washington Street, 13th Floor, Newark, NJ 07102
nmurray@joc.com, (973) 848-7082

Associate Publisher, Robert Sadowsky
rsadowsky@joc.com, (973) 848-7032

Gulf/Midwest Sales, Alli McEntyre, (225) 784-8314

Northeast Sales
Albert Guffanti, (973) 848-7029

Walter Magaram, (973) 848-7034

Southeast Sales, Cindy Cronin, (954) 628-0058, ext. 131

West Coast Sales, Anthony Capaldi, (562) 983-5115

Senior Marketing Manager

Garnell C. Shumate, (973) 848-7079

Sales Analyst, Jeanelle Baynes, (973) 848-7077

CONTACT INFORMATION

New Subscriptions/Customer Service
customerservice@cbizmedia.com

(888) 215-6084
Fax: (609) 371-7883

Display Advertising Traffic Coordinator

Noelle LaPorta (973) 848-7067
Fax: (973) 848-7167

Classifieds/Service Listings/Reprints/Copyrights

Craig Wilson (973) 848-7166

Schedules/Office Manager

Paula J. Wheeler, (954) 628-0058, ext. 123
Fax: (954) 628-0085

Lead Schedules Coordinator

Edna Velez, (954) 628-0058, ext. 106

Schedules Coordinators

Esperanza Abelairas, (954) 628-0058, ext. 138

Abilio Barreto, (954) 628-0058, ext. 141

Silvia Saad, (954) 628-0058, ext. 126



**Commonwealth
Business Media**
United Business Media

400 Windsor Corporate Park, 50 Millstone Rd., Suite 200
East Windsor, NJ 08520-1415
(609) 371-7700, (800) 221-5488

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Commerce with Cuba

President Bush has an opportunity to do something that every U.S. president dating back at least as far as Jimmy Carter should have done but failed to do because of domestic political considerations: Lift the U.S. trade embargo against Cuba.

The U.S. imposed the trade ban in 1962 in the hope that it would lead to the collapse of Fidel Castro's Communist regime. Well, here we are 45 years later, and Castro, though seriously ill, remains in power.

To the best of my recollection, no presidential nominee of either major political party has called for the lifting of the embargo. In the early years, it was because they were afraid of being perceived as soft on Communism. All that time, however, we continued to trade with the Soviet Union. Moreover, after President Nixon's historic visit to China in 1972 and especially after President Carter established formal diplomatic relations with Beijing in 1978, it was evident that the U.S. was quite happy to trade with Communist powers.

Cuba, however, was always a different story. The reason for this is the political clout of the anti-Castro Cuban community, especially in Florida, and we all know the impact of that state in presidential elections. Perhaps one or more candidates this time around will have the courage to call for lifting the embargo, or perhaps circumstances will change enough in Cuba to make the issue moot.

Still, the question is: Why wait?

There are no good reasons for doing so, but there are at least 10 good reasons for lifting the embargo. These are listed in a report issued in January by the Center for Democracy in the Americas and a business coalition called USA Engage, which opposes unilateral trade sanctions. From a business perspective, the most serious impact has been the harm to U.S. exporters of goods and services. A report by the International Trade Commission estimated that the embargo costs U.S. exporters more than \$1 billion annually. So who's filling the void? Among others, China. It's not just in consumer goods where U.S. companies are losing out, but also in capital goods such as locomotives. For example, Cuba purchased 100 Chinese locomotives for \$130 million. Chinese equipment is being used to revamp Cuban ports.

The trade ban also hurts cargo carriers such as Crowley Liner Services. Travel restrictions not only infringe on the rights of U.S. citizens, but they mean lost business for airlines and cruise operators.

In addition, the embargo bans oil exploration by U.S. companies. Meanwhile, companies based in Spain, Norway, India and Venezuela have won the right to explore for oil in Cuba's offshore waters.

To sum up: The embargo makes no sense; Bush should lift it.

The report, entitled "In Our National Interest: The Top 10 Reasons for Changing U.S. Policy toward Cuba," is available online at www.usaengage.org.

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