

Scholars Denied: Cuban Ballplayers Wield a Bigger Policy Bat
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COMMENTARY
SCHOLARS DENIED

Cuban ballplayers wield a bigger policy bat

WILLIAM M. LEOGRANDE
wleogrande@american.edu

In January, President Bush personally reversed the Treasury Department's decision to bar the Cuban National Team from competing in the World Baseball Classic next month in Puerto Rico. In so doing, the president made an exception to his Cuba travel policy -- a policy so tight that it denies permission to Cuban artists such as the legendary Ibrahim Ferrer of the Buena Vista Social Club to attend the Grammy Awards and Iraq war hero Sgt. Carlos F. Lazo to visit his sons in Cuba.

The president's decision was a good one. Major League Baseball's World Classic would not be the global tournament that it aspires to be without the powerhouse Cuban team, which won Olympic Gold in 1992, 1996 and 2004 and has won 12 of the last 13 World Cup tournaments. The World Classic without the Cubans would be like the Fall Classic without the New York Yankees.

As it happens, while the World Baseball Classic is under way in Puerto Rico, another group will be meeting just across town. The Latin American Studies Association is the principal international scholarly organization dedicated to the study of Latin America. Cuban academics have been coming to LASA conferences to present scholarly papers and interact with colleagues from around the globe since 1977. This year, 59 Cubans -- a group just a little larger than the Cuban baseball delegation -- applied for visas to participate in LASA. None was approved. The same thing happened at the previous LASA meeting in October 2004, when all 61 Cuban scholars on the program were denied visas.

The rationale for denying visas to Cuban academics is that they are a threat to the national security of the United States because they are officials of the Cuban government. This is just an excuse, of course. The Cuban professors are government officials in the same way that a professor at the University of Florida is a government official -- their paycheck comes from the government because they teach at a state university. Since there are no private universities in Cuba, every Cuban academic is, by this perverse definition, a government official.

So what's the difference between Cuban baseball players and Cuban professors? Why do we welcome the ball players but not the scholars? The president knows the top people in Major League Baseball. He listens when they tell him that barring the Cuban team will hurt the tournament, making the United States look shallow and foolish to the rest of the world. And of course, there's real money at stake. The Classic is aimed at opening global markets to baseball, especially in Asia. Academics, on the other hand, don't have the president's ear, and there's no real money to be made from scholarly dialogue. Politically, denying visas to Cuban professors is unlikely to attract much notice beyond the intellectual classes in Latin America.

That cost, however, ought not be blithely dismissed. The United States is not very popular in Latin America these days. In recent polls, 53 percent of South Americans had a negative opinion of President Bush, as did 87 percent of Latin American opinion-leaders, making him the most unpopular U.S. president ever in the region. Since 2000, negative opinion of the United States in Latin America has more than doubled, rising to 31 percent from 14 percent.

Presidential confidante Karen Hughes, in charge of public diplomacy at the State Department, is spending millions on an "information war" to convince the Arab "street" that the United States is not an arrogant, know-it-all country that throws its weight around, trampling the rights of others. Perhaps if we'd had more interaction with Muslim intellectual leaders over the years, Hughes would be having an easier job of it. Sports and cultural exchanges are a good way for ordinary people in the United States and Cuba to get to know one another. We should have more of them, and the president should be applauded for allowing Cubans to play in the World Baseball Classic. But surely scientific and intellectual exchanges are just as important for building goodwill.

Among the young professors teaching in Cuba today are people who will be the professional and political leaders of tomorrow, regardless of how Cuba evolves. Allowing them to visit the United States to interact with their professional colleagues here improves the chances that U.S.-Cuban relations in the future will be based on a mutual understanding and respect. And if Washington allows the Cubans scholars to attend the LASA meeting in Puerto Rico, after a long day of learned discourse, we can all go to the ballgame and root for our national teams.

William M. LeoGrande is dean of the School of Public Affairs at American University in Washington, D.C., and frequently writes about U.S. relations with Latin America.

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