Glenn Greenwald, the blogger turned Salon contributor, recently asked the following: “Is there any other significant issue in American political life, besides Israel, where (a) citizens split almost evenly in their views, yet (b) the leaders of both parties adopt identical lockstep positions which leave half of the citizenry with no real voice?”

Yes. Cuba.

On the question of whether the United States should develop better relations with Cuba, Gallup polling has shown, since 1999, that more than 50 percent of Americans—and in some years, more than 60 percent—favor “reestablishing US diplomatic relations with Cuba.” Neither the Democratic nor the Republican Party has advocated moving in this direction, however, even though majorities of both Democrats and Republicans polled in the Gallup surveys have called for reestablishing relations.

Why is there such a disconnect between the major parties and majority opinion regarding Cuba? History, tradition, and domestic politics are all at work, but one of the most significant factors in US policy toward Cuba—albeit a factor that conspiracy theorists will never acknowledge—is strategy. Just as a democratic Israel is seen as a strategic asset in the Middle East, so Cuba, as long as it is ruled by Fidel Castro’s Communist Party, will be seen as a strategic menace in the Caribbean. The day another Middle Eastern country is seen as more strategically valuable than Israel—Iraq, for example—is the day that majority opinion on that region will find resonance at the party and government levels. And the day that the Communist Party is dethroned in Havana, the US government will adopt a new perspective toward this small island nation off the coast of Florida.

And yet, almost two decades after the end of the cold war and the demise of the Soviet Union, viewing Cuba as a strategic menace to the United States requires a suspension of disbelief. Wayne Smith, the American official who staffed the US interest section in Havana when it first opened in 1977, has said famously that “Cuba seems to have the same effect on American administrations as the full moon has on werewolves.” Another official, retired Army Colonel Larry Wilkerson (who served as an aide to former Secretary of State Colin Powell), was even more direct: US policy toward Cuba is “the dumbest policy on the face of the earth.”

Its stupidity becomes clear when one compares what is required of a US citizen who wishes to travel to Cuba with what is required of one who wishes to travel to another country ruled by a communist party, the People’s Republic of China. For Americans planning to visit China in 2009, according to the State Department website, the rules are as follows: “A valid passport and visa are required to enter and exit China and must be obtained from Chinese Embassies and Consulates before traveling to China.” With the exception of the visa requirement, it is like a trip to Britain or France.

And for Cuba? “The Cuban Assets Control Regulations . . . require that persons subject to US jurisdiction be licensed in order to engage in any travel-related transactions pursuant to travel to, from, and within Cuba. Transactions related to tourist travel are not licensable. This restriction includes tourist travel to Cuba from or through a third country such as Mexico or Canada. US law enforcement authorities have increased enforcement of these regulations at US airports and pre-clearance facilities in third countries. Travelers who fail to comply with Department of Treasury regulations could face civil penalties and criminal prosecution upon return to the United States.”

It is clear that for the United States, some Leninist states are more equal than others.

“Dumb” may be too kind a word to apply to this insane effort to isolate the United States from...
Cuba, as if the latter were some type of contagion. It is a policy that would bring a smile to the face of Korean strongman Kim Jong-il, who oversees a similar set of regulations ensuring that North Koreans do not travel freely to South Korea.

How to make sense of this organized hypocrisy is at the heart of Daniel Erikson’s *The Cuba Wars*. Erikson, an analysts at the Washington think tank Inter-American Dialogue, diligently and dispassionately crafts a textured portrait of Cuba today in which the country’s drama- and tension-filled relationship with the United States frames nearly every aspect of economic and political life on the island.

This does not mean that Erikson rationalizes the Castro regime’s autocratic tendencies or the country’s vexing underdevelopment, or that he attributes all of Cuba’s ills to the United States. His analysis of Cuba, and of Washington’s approach to Cuba, is far more sophisticated and subtle than that. He writes intelligently and fluently about the personalities, policies, and history of the US-Cuba relationship; in doing so, he displays an ideal combination of the detached journalist’s perspective and the scholar’s intimate knowledge. He has written the most important book on Cuba in a generation.

**Longing and Loathing**

Since the Spanish-American war, when the United States “inherited” Cuba and then tried to mold it into a democratic republic that would sit benignly off the coast of the mainland, a perverse paternalism has characterized the relationship between Washington and Havana. After Americans “freed” Cuba from Spanish tyranny, they “gave” Cuba the opportunity to blossom into a responsible state, yet one that would ultimately be beholden to America. Castro, with his communist revolution and close relationship with the Soviet Union, repudiated this bequest, creating an authoritarian, socialist state while mocking and antagonizing the United States.

As Erikson deftly shows, America’s sense of benevolence scorned, combined with its great-power desire to secure its borders and neutralize the nations surrounding it, has long driven US policy toward Cuba. A certain punitiveness has also been part of the policy, most obviously in Washington’s rejection of formal diplomatic relations (something enjoyed by communist China and the former Soviet Union) and in the US embargo on the island. This embargo, one of the longest lasting in history—it was imposed by John F. Kennedy—is also one of the most restrictive ever put in place. The sanctions imposed on Saddam Hussein allowed Iraq to purchase food and medicine; for US food and medicine to enter Cuba, they must be donated.

The moment has arrived, Erikson argues, to move away from the “longing and loathing” that have marked US policy toward Cuba. As he puts it: “Castro’s Cuba is on the verge of one of the most anticipated and dramatic political transitions of our time.” The ailing Fidel Castro has resigned as leader. His brother, Raúl, has already instituted some liberalization measures, including giving Cubans the right to own cell phones (and microwave ovens). In Miami, meanwhile, the old guard anti-Castro forces have begun to die off or to accept what the younger generation of Cuban-Americans believes—that the embargo is exactly the wrong way to bring down the communist regime.

Barack Obama, during the presidential election campaign, called for easing travel restrictions on family visits to Cuba. But the new administration has before it a chance to show that the United States has entered a new era in foreign policy. It can show this by terminating the counterproductive embargo and beginning the process of extending diplomatic relations to Havana.