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Time to clean up U.S. regime-change programs in Cuba

BY FULTON ARMSTRONG

fultona1@yahoo.com

As USAID subcontractor Alan P. Gross marked his second year in a Cuban prison for carrying out secret “democracy promotion” operations, White House spokesman Jay Carney demanded his immediate release and gloated: “Cuban authorities have failed in their effort to use Gross as a pawn for their own ends.” The message is simple: Gross is our pawn, not the Cubans’.

The administration’s signals throughout the Gross affair have been clear. To Havana, it’s been “no negotiation.” To Gross, “tough luck.” And to Americans who think our 50-year Cuba policy should be reviewed, it is, “Don’t hold your breath.”

When a covert action run by the CIA goes bad and a clandestine officer gets arrested, the U.S. government works up a strategy for negotiating his release. When a covert operator working for USAID gets arrested, Washington turns up the rhetoric, throws more money at the compromised program, and refuses to talk.

For three years, I was the Senate Foreign Relations Committee’s lead investigator into the political operations of the State Department and USAID in Cuba and elsewhere in Latin America. The Cuba programs — designed to identify, organize, train and mobilize Cubans to demand political change — have an especially problematic heritage, including embezzlement, mismanagement, and systemic politicization. Some program successes costing millions of taxpayer dollars, such as the creation of a network of “independent libraries,” were grossly exaggerated or fabricated.

An oversight committee’s mandate is to ensure that funds — about \$20 million a year but surging to \$45 million in 2009 — are used effectively and in a manner consistent with U.S. law. State and USAID fought us at every turn, refusing to divulge even basic information about the programs, citing only a document of vague “program objectives.”

The programs did not involve our Intelligence Community, but the secrecy surrounding them, the clandestine tradecraft (including the use of advanced encryption technologies) and the deliberate concealment of the U.S. hand, had all the markings of an intelligence covert operation. We never requested the names of their on-island operatives, but program managers claimed that “people will die” if we knew the names of even U.S.-based “partner” groups.

The programs were not a secret in Cuba. The Cuban government had them deeply penetrated. We did not know who Alan P. Gross was — indeed, the State Department vehemently denied he was theirs after his arrest, and even some of our diplomats in Havana thought he was working for CIA. But it was clear that the Cubans had been on him. Cuban television has shown video of other contractors in action on the island.

Only Gross can say what he knew about Cuban law as he carried out his \$585,000 contract, including five visits to Cuba. He has said that he was “duped.” We confirmed that State and USAID had no policy in place to brief individuals conducting these secret operations that they are not legal in Cuba, nor that U.S. law does not allow unregistered foreign agents to travel around the country providing satellite gear, wide-area WiFi hotspots, encryption and telephony equipment and other cash-value assistance.

Administration policy is that Cuban recipients not be told the origin and purpose of the assistance — unless they ask directly. Some Cubans can guess, of course, but the implications of non-disclosure, especially as new programs target children as young as 12, are significant in a country that expressly outlaws receiving U.S. funds.

USAID has emerged as a covert warrior to undermine anti-U.S. regimes worldwide — without the burden of accountability imposed on the Intelligence Community. The regime-change focus of the programs is explicit: Rather than fund them under education and cultural authorities, the Bush and Obama administrations have insisted on citing authorities in the Helms-Burton “Libertad Act” prescribing a post-Castro future for Cuba.

Fixes have been repeatedly proposed to increase efficiencies and steer funds to help the Cuban people improve their lives, such as by taking advantage of the incipient economic adjustments that Raúl Castro has begun — to help people help themselves, not just organize and mobilize them for protests. USAID’s firm reaction has been that the programs are not to help Cubans live better lives today but rather help them demand a better future tomorrow. Regime change.

Like the other millions of dollars we have spent to topple the Cuban government, these programs have failed even to provoke the regime, except to arrest Gross and hassle people who have accepted assistance from other on-island operators. Our policy should be based on what’s effective at promoting the U.S. national interest — peaceful, democratic and evolutionary change — not engaging in gratuitous provocations.

Rhetoric and actions that prolong the prison stay of an innocent American apparently duped into being a pawn in the U.S. government’s 50-year effort to achieve regime change in Cuba are counterproductive. It’s time to clean up the regime-change programs and negotiate Alan P. Gross’s release.

Fulton Armstrong has worked on the Cuba issue on the National Security Council during the Clinton administration and later as National Intelligence Officer for Latin America and senior advisor on the Senate Foreign Relations Committee.

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