



International Policy **BRIEF**

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The Gross Case and the Inanity of U.S. Policy

By Wayne S. Smith

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Alan Gross, an American citizen and subcontractor of USAID who has been held in Cuban prisons for over a year, is now being tried for distributing communications equipment to the Jewish community in Cuba. The U.S. government insists he did nothing criminal. But that may well depend on what one means by criminal. Gross had traveled to Cuba several times on tourist visas to do his distributing – in itself a violation of Cuban law. And he did not have any kind of license to distribute anything, let alone sophisticated communications equipment.

But as Arturo Lopez-Levy, now a lecturer at the University of Denver but formerly a member of the Jewish community in Havana and the Secretary of B'nai B'rith there, noted at a CIP conference on January 25, if Alan Gross went to Cuba to distribute communications equipment in the Jewish community, he never sought the permission of the leaders of that community, which would have been standard procedure. And no wonder he did not, for they have made it clear that they do not like and will not cooperate with these programs begun under the Helms-Burton Act whose goal, as stated by the Assistant Secretary of State Roger Noriega under the Bush Administration, was to seed “chaos” and “instability” to provoke regime change in Cuba.

Gross, in other words, was involved in a program which clearly had hostile

Center for International Policy

1717 Massachusetts Avenue NW, Suite 801, Washington, DC 20036

Telephone: (202) 232-3317 • Facsimile: (202) 232-3440 • Email: cip@ciponline.org • Web: www.ciponline.org



intentions toward Cuba. Nothing less than regime change. But it was, at the same time, an utterly ineffective program, almost comic-opera, which in the years it had been in existence had accomplished virtually nothing. And Gross himself gives the impression of having been almost unaware of the kind of operation in which he had involved himself. His efforts at distributing equipment certainly led to nothing. More than anything, we might say, he is the victim of an inane, outdated, U.S. policy.

The Cubans have now brought him to trial on charges of “trying to undermine the Cuban government” and he faces a possible 20-year sentence. It is to be hoped, however (and some reason to believe), that after trying and sentencing him, the Cubans will do the magnanimous thing and free him. He, in effect, did them no harm (whatever his original intentions), and they would gain nothing by holding him for years in prison. Better by far to let him return to his family, especially given that his daughter is now ill with cancer and his mother is dying. And freeing him could perhaps open doors to an improved relationship with the United States. It might even give some added impetus to American authorities to consider freeing the Cuban Five.

Wayne S. Smith is now a senior fellow at the Center for International Policy. He was Third Secretary at the American Embassy in Havana at the time U.S. and Cuba broke diplomatic relations in 1961, and was chief of the U.S. Interests Section in Havana from 1979 until 1982, when he left the Foreign Service because of disagreements with the Reagan administration’s policies. He is the author of “The Closest of Enemies: A Personal and Diplomatic Account of the Castro Years.”