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Putting our country on track for sustained economic growth requires us to engage with and compete in the global economy. We have been hampered in the past by protectionism from the left and the right that stifled innovation and rewarded inefficiency. The way forward for job creation, fighting inflation, generating profits and building bridges between us and the aspirations of the world, especially the growing developing world, lies in expanding our trade relationships aggressively.

That's exactly what you'd expect from a Republican free-trader who pursued the most aggressive trade policy in U.S. history as chief agricultural negotiator for President George W. Bush. While I am proud of negotiating numerous access agreements to get U.S. agricultural commodities and food products into once-closed markets, we also continued the same policies regarding Cuba that have been around for more than a generation. The policy of creating hungrier and poorer Cubans in hopes of bringing down their government has been tragically ineffective.

In 1980, while in college, I traveled around eastern Iowa as a volunteer assistant for former U.S. Rep. Jim Leach. President Jimmy Carter's Russian grain embargo was a hot topic at the time. I remember Leach eloquently describing at various town meetings how withholding food from hungry people made the dictators who rule them stronger and more aggressive. Thirty years later, our Cuba strategy is having the same effect while limiting our access to a growing market for our farmers and ranchers, violating a core principle to never use food as a weapon in our foreign policy. This is hurting America's image in Cuba and Latin America, and feeding the Cuban government's anti-U.S. propaganda machine while underfeeding Cuba's people.

The United States can take three practical steps right away to reform our Cuba policy:

- First, reform the onerous restrictions on agriculture sales to Cuba. For example, under today's rules, Cubans can't use normal commercial credit as other customers do, but instead must pay cash - in advance of shipment and by routing this money through a third-country bank - to buy food from the United States. Also, American producers have to jump over several hurdles in order to visit Cuba to sell their products. These and other measures encourage Cuba to buy food from other countries, and Cuba has spent hundreds of millions of dollars annually doing exactly that.

- Second, expanding travel means expanding trade and promotes engagement with the Cuban people. Congress should eliminate the travel ban on Americans wanting to go to Cuba. The International Trade Commission estimates this would increase legal tourism by 500,000 visits annually and this, combined with eliminating trade barriers, could increase U.S. agricultural exports to the island by over 40 percent - or more than \$1 billion annually. Even more important, this action would increase the one-on-one interactions between Cubans and Americans who exude their love for freedom and are a walking testimony to the benefits that come from living in a liberated economy.

- Third, the president can use his authority to permit the sale of farm equipment and machinery to Cuba. Caterpillar and John Deere ought to be as familiar to Cubans as rice and beans. Cuba's Soviet-era equipment needs updating and we can competitively serve their needs.

Of course, more can be done to boost trade with global partners everywhere. Passing the three pending Free Trade Agreements with Colombia, Panama and Korea equals a big win for the United States, particularly agriculture. Though it won't be easy, concluding a Doha round trade agreement that works for America's farmers and ranchers should remain a top trade priority. Taking these actions and opening the Cuban market will provide tangible benefits to U.S. consumers and producers from expanded trade.

Reasonable people can disagree on how to achieve the objective of seeing Cuba free. These include some of my closest friends and they understandably have strong emotions around this issue. The Castro regime will not last forever and the bonds we build today, by helping to feed and engage the Cuban people, will long endure after they are gone. As a new generation of Cubans comes of age in the streets and in the leadership, we should not miss the chance to put American food in their stomachs and American freedoms in their hearts and minds. We shouldn't trade this opportunity for anything.