

Grammy-Winning Musician Arturo O’Farrill and Ex-Head of US Interests Section in Cuba Vicki Huddleston Back Artists’ Call to Lift Cultural Boycott of Cuba

Democracy Now!
March 6, 2009

<http://www.democracynow.org/2009/3/5/cuba>

Guests:

Arturo O’Farrill, leader of the Afro-Latin Jazz Orchestra and founder of the Afro Latin Jazz Alliance. He won a Grammy Award last month for Best Latin Jazz Album.

Ambassador Vicki Huddleston, served as head of the US Interests Section in Havana from 1999 to 2002. She is now a visiting fellow at the Brookings Institution.

Michael Ratner, president of the Center for Constitutional Rights.

* [Letter from U.S. Artists, Arts Presenters, Arts Educators and Cultural Scholars in support of Cultural Relations with Cuba](#)

* Brookings Institution: [U.S. Policy Toward a Cuba in Transition: Roadmap for Critical and Constructive Engagement \(PDF\)](#)

* [Vicki Huddleston: "Use 'Smart Power' to Help Cubans"](#)

JUAN GONZALEZ: On Capitol Hill, New Jersey Democratic Senator Robert Menendez is holding up the nomination of two of President Obama’s key science nominees in an attempt to pressure his fellow senators to oppose legislation that would loosen restrictions on travel to Cuba.

Last week, the House approved a \$410 billion spending bill that included language to ease some restrictions on trade with Cuba and to allow Cuban Americans to visit relatives on the island more frequently. The Senate is expected to vote on the spending bill this week.

But in an attempt to remove the provisions, Menendez is blocking the confirmation of physicist John Holdren and marine biologist Jane Lubchenco from top science posts. The move has infuriated environmentalists, because they say both nominees are needed to help shape President Obama’s plan to tackle global warming.

AMY GOODMAN: The controversy comes as many in Washington reconsider US policy toward Cuba. Last month, Republican Senator Richard Lugar said the existing US policy has failed. Earlier this week, over a thousand artists, educators, cultural scholars sent President Obama a letter calling for Cuban artists to be permitted entry into the United States and for the elimination of restrictions that prevent Americans from

traveling to Cuba. The letter was sent by the US-Cuba Cultural Exchange. One of the co-signees of the letter was the Grammy Award-winning musician Arturo O’Farrill, the leader of the Afro-Latin Jazz Orchestra. He joins us here in our firehouse studio.

We’re also joined by Ambassador Vicki Huddleston in Washington. She served as head of the US Interests Section in Havana from 1999 to 2002. She is now a visiting fellow at the Brookings Institution. She’s in Washington, D.C.

And Michael Ratner has stayed with us, president of the Center for Constitutional Rights, all here in the firehouse studio.

Arturo O’Farrill, first of all, congratulations on your Grammy.

ARTURO O’FARRILL: Thank you very much. That’s very kind of you. I’m very happy about that.

AMY GOODMAN: With a name like O’Farrill, people might be surprised to know you’re Cuban American.

ARTURO O’FARRILL: Well, it’s an amazing coincidence. There’s lots of Cubans in—I mean, lots of Irish people in Cuba. In fact, there’s an O’Reilly Street and a hotel named the Palacio O’Farrill. So I think we have a history with Cuba.

AMY GOODMAN: Tell us about this letter that you have signed.

ARTURO O’FARRILL: Well, the letter is very important, because it states that we need to have all cultural restrictions and hopefully economic restrictions lifted from our relationship with Cuba. We act like Cuba is some sort of nuclear biological threat, and really, it’s insane. It’s completely insane, because what it is, it’s a place from which we draw sustenance. And the history of our music, the history of our culture, our food, our dance, is richly infused with the flavor of Cuba. And for us to be denied access to this source of cultural sustenance is absolutely insane. And furthermore, you know, to have economic—to install economic hardship on these people who are so poverty-stricken is positively criminal.

It has nothing to do with ideology or politics. Really, it has nothing to do with socialism or communism or capitalism or whatever—ism you would like to believe in. It has to do with the fact that we are holding onto an ancient battle that makes no sense. And we’re preventing ourselves from accessing great artists and from sending our top artists into Cuba. It’s absolutely insane. And so, I was happy to sign the letter, to be a part of this, to be able to come here this morning and speak on behalf of our Cuban friends.

JUAN GONZALEZ: And the impact on families, on Cuban American families in this, because it seems that depending on which administration there is in Washington, there is more or less access by families to travel back and forth to see mothers, grandparents, children, on a more regular basis.

ARTURO O’FARRILL: Well, I mean, all I can think about is my mom, whom I keep in touch with every day. I talk to her every day. I see her once or twice a week, and she’s a major part of my life, warts and all. We all have mothers. I mean, we need them in our lives. We all have sons, daughters, wives, cousins, brothers. And the emotional impact—and I see it on my friends, because I have many, many Cuban expatriate friends, and I see the impact on their lives and the huge gap in their understanding of existence that occurs because they don’t have access to those whom they love. It’s insane. And to limit it to this license or that license or this particular—it just is crazy. The unrestricted—the unrestricted travel by Cuban family members, that is—that’s one-on-one, that we should just have that right away.

AMY GOODMAN: I want to turn for a moment to comments that Senator Obama made, before he was president, about Cuba. It was last May. He was running for president.

SEN. BARACK OBAMA: There are no better ambassadors for the freedom of the Cuban American—of the Cuban people than Cuban Americans. And that’s why I have said that I will immediately allow unlimited family travel and remittances to the island. It’s time to let Cuban Americans see their mothers and their fathers, their sisters and their brothers. It’s time to let Cuban American money make their families less dependent on the Castro regime. That is the commitment that I’m making right here.

I will maintain the embargo. It provides us with leverage to present—so don’t be confused about this, I will maintain the embargo. It provides us with the leverage to present the regime with a clear choice: If you take significant steps towards democracy, beginning with the freeing of all political prisoners, we will take steps to begin normalizing relations. That’s the way to bring about real change in Cuba, through strong, smart, principled diplomacy.

AMY GOODMAN: That was Senator Barack Obama last May. He was speaking before the Cuban American National Foundation. Arturo O’Farrill, your response?

ARTURO O’FARRILL: It’s interesting, because I think the last comment I made had to do with political ideologies and how we’re fighting a battle that is seemingly lost on every continent. We do business with North Vietnam. We do business with China. I mean, it’s insane to hold onto an economic embargo that has absolutely nothing to do with anything substantial.

I respect Obama. I’m very proud of the fact that he’s our president. And he has a lot of issues on his table. They’re huge, they’re demanding, and they represent a threat, I mean, the real safety and sustenance of our economy and the physical well-being of our people. So, yeah, this may not be on the top of his agenda, but I think that the economic embargo is something that needs to eventually be really considered as something that is old, dusty, and needs to be put to pasture.

JUAN GONZALEZ: We’re also joined by Ambassador Vicki Huddleston, who served as head of the US Interests Section in Havana from 1999 to 2002. Your perspective now?

You’ve come out, as well, for a change in US policy. Your perspective on how this battle has continued within the US government and American society over our relationship with Cuba?

VICKI HUDDLESTON: Well, I think President Obama said it very well, that he is going to allow travel of Cuban Americans and remittances from Cuban Americans. At the same time, President Obama could go further, should he wish, because it’s within the executive authority of the President to reinstate the regulations on travel that were in existence during the Clinton administration and, in fact, during the first part of the Bush administration. So he could go back to people-to-people travel for purposes of culture, humanitarian, education. And that would be a great way to begin.

And then I noticed that Amy was talking about Cubans coming up to the United States—Arturo, too. And that’s fairly easy to do, as well. There’s no reason, really, that Cubans—artists, authors, moviemakers—can’t come to the United States. And there shouldn’t also be any barrier to American artists working with Cuban artists, because Berman Amendment allowed this to take place, but then it was interpreted very narrowly, saying that Americans couldn’t create new works with Cubans in Cuba. So, as the Brookings report says, within the President’s executive authority, there is a lot that can be done. Travel to Cuba can be freed up. Travel from Cuba can be freed up. And a lot more interactions can take place between artists, between cultural institutions and between families, of course.

AMY GOODMAN: Ambassador Huddleston, isn’t this a big change for you? I mean, you started under Clinton at the Cuba Interests Section, under George W. Bush, the embargo is strong as ever, and now you’re calling for a loosening of the restrictions.

VICKI HUDDLESTON: Well, I learned a lot while I was in Cuba. First of all, I was sent there by Clinton. And Clinton had begun the new measures, which allowed considerably greater travel, expanded travel, to Cuba. And what I learned from that is that made a real change within Cuba. With so many Americans traveling to Cuba and with more money coming in to the ground, to the grassroots, to Cuban individuals, there was a lot more fluidity and a lot more openness in Cuban society.

Furthermore, the Cuban hierarchy wasn’t clamping down on civil society and human rights activists in the same way it had in the past, because they appreciated the visits of very important people. For example, the famous Project Varela, in which Oswaldo Paya was able to gain 11,000 signatures asking for a referendum on the Cuban Constitution and present it to the National Assembly. I don’t think that could have ever happened had it not been that former President Jimmy Carter was coming to Cuba, and Fidel Castro wanted that visit, the Cuban hierarchy wanted that visit, and they knew very well they couldn’t put down that kind of effort in Cuba. They couldn’t throw these people in jail. They had to allow it to go forward.

So, having a more open relationship, just as in the case of Eastern Europe and the Helsinki Agreements on human contact, make a huge difference, and that certainly

convinced me. And I think it’s convinced the Cuban Americans, as well, because now a majority of Cuban Americans are opposed to the embargo, and significant majorities of Cuban Americans want Cuban American travel and even the travel of all Americans.

JUAN GONZALEZ: But yet, in Congress, there seems to be a continuing reluctance to move in any way toward normalization of relations. Could you give us your sense of why, as Arturo O’Farrill says, we trade with China, we trade with Vietnam, we trade with so many other countries where our systems may be opposed to each other, yet with Cuba, it remains this continuing more-than-forty-year embargo?

VICKI HUDDLESTON: Well, there’s no doubt that this has been a very unsuccessful policy, and so you would think we would change it. But I think there are two reasons, and they’re both valid reasons. The first is domestic politics. Clearly the South Florida delegation is very powerful. Senator Menendez from New Jersey has a strong Cuban American constituency. They’re very powerful. There’s even a Cuban constituency in Senator Reid’s—in Nevada. But other than domestic politics, the other reason is we’re obviously dealing with a country that has political prisoners, over 200, that doesn’t allow freedom of speech, and that is essentially a dictatorship.

So it’s hard for us to argue, “Oh, you should get rid of the embargo,” because it becomes very symbolic. And that’s why, in our report, we’re saying, “OK, keep the embargo,” much as President Obama said, “but take away the parts of the embargo that aren’t working, that don’t—that prevent us from contact with the Cuban people,” because it has been proven that when you have democracy, it has to come from within. We need to take down the communications embargo, as well as the people embargo, because we need to get into Cuba books, magazines, TV, radio, because the more contact the Cuban people have with what is going on in the world, the greater chance they’ll become agents for change in Cuba.

AMY GOODMAN: Michael Ratner, president of Center for Constitutional Rights, your comment on, well, it’s a dictatorship, so the embargo, if loosened, should remain?

MICHAEL RATNER: Well, look at, I mean, I obviously appreciate, in some way, what Ambassador Huddleston is saying. Obviously, I like Arturo’s statement a lot better, because he’s just for end this embargo. Huddleston has moved to some extent on this. But the idea that this embargo was ever about, quote, “promoting democracy in Cuba” is what underlies, unfortunately, Ambassador Huddleston’s statement, as well as Obama’s statement, and it was never about that. I mean, from day one, this embargo was about destroying the Cuban Revolution and destroying the idea that a country in this hemisphere could stand up to the United States, going back to the Monroe Doctrine. And that’s what this is about. Obviously, a fifty-year policy hasn’t done anything from these guys who claim that it was about democracy in Cuba. It hasn’t done anything on that. So we have to ask ourselves, what’s it about? And what it really has been about is essentially destroying the Cuban Revolution. And the idea that we’re still going forward here on this same sort of premise of bringing democracy, you know, just makes no sense to me.

I think one thing that’s important that Ambassador Huddleston has stressed is all of the stuff going on in the Congress right now about, you know, modifying the family stuff and the objections by the Florida senator and the New Jersey senator, what she has pointed out is Obama can actually change this with the stroke of a pen. He doesn’t need that. So what are we doing here?

AMY GOODMAN: He could end the embargo with the stroke of a pen?

MICHAEL RATNER: No, no, he can’t end the embargo. As Ambassador Huddleston said, he can go back to the—because of the Helms-Burton Law, he can only go back to what was in place really at a certain part of the Clinton administration. But he could at least—family travel could be opened up. All kinds of travel could be opened up. Unfortunately, because of legislation in Congress, to actually end it, you’re going to need Congress. But he can, with the stroke of a pen, do what—do roughly what the legislation is doing. The question is, why hasn’t he done it?

AMY GOODMAN: And what would it mean, Arturo O’Farrill? You’ve got 1,100 Americans, including, oh, Carlos Santana, Herbie Hancock, Harry Belafonte, Bonnie Raitt, Danny Glover, Eddie Palmieri, Laura Bickford, of course yourself, signed onto this. What would it mean if Cuban musicians were able to come in now? And would you like to be going down to Cuba now?

ARTURO O’FARRILL: Well, I think it’s inevitable that the great artists of Cuba have much to teach us about the definition of jazz. Jazz has its roots in Cuba. And so much of what happened in New Orleans at the turn of the century has to do with the musical roots of danzon, and you just look at Gottschalk, and you look at the music of Jelly Roll Morton, who said, “Without the Spanish tinge, there is no jazz.” So, right off, the fact, as a musician, I think it’s imperative that we bring—be able to work with Cuban artists on our soil.

JUAN GONZALEZ: I’d like to ask Ambassador Huddleston about US visa policies in Cuba. On a couple of occasions when I’ve had the opportunity to travel to Cuba and to interview former President Fidel Castro, he always maintained that his government was willing to allow any Cubans who wanted to leave the island to leave, but the problem was that the US Interests Section was not granting sufficient numbers of visas for those who wanted to leave and that, in essence, that the prior administrations were creating the boat people by not giving enough visas for those Cubans who wanted to come to the United States. Is there any accuracy to that, or you had experience there at the US Interests Section?

VICKI HUDDLESTON: Well, there are two things there. What Fidel Castro was talking about in that comment, I think, were people who wanted to immigrate to the United States, and he was complaining because he thought that we had an obligation to take 20,000 Cubans a year. And at that time, we were not doing so. Now we do take 20,000 Cuban immigrants a year. So I think we’re pretty much OK on the immigration from

Cuba for people who want to stay in the United States as residents and perhaps become citizens eventually.

The bigger issue is really that we’re not issuing non-resident visas, you know, visas to come up for a cultural conference, to come up to study in the United States, to come up to visit a family. And that’s just pure and simple because we want to limit, to some degree, the number of Cubans coming up to the United States, particularly if they’re Cuban officials. And I think the best thing to do with that is just to treat Cuba and the issuance of visas like we do any other country in the world.

But if I could go back to, for a moment, two things—

AMY GOODMAN: We have twenty seconds.

VICKI HUDDLESTON: I was just going to say, President Obama can’t change all the travel, but he can change many of the other restrictions that are in Helms-Burton, because the Secretary of the Treasury has the authority to do so.

AMY GOODMAN: I want to thank you all for being with us. Ambassador Vicki Huddleston has served as head of the US Interests Section in Havana, now at the Brookings Institution. Also want to thank Arturo O’Farrill for coming in today, just won a Grammy Award for his music, leader of the Afro-Latin Jazz Orchestra. And Michael Ratner, president of the Center for Constitutional Rights.