Of Bushels, Lights, and Cuba

Ronald Reagan once referred to the US as a shining city on a hill. The idea was that the political and economic freedom the US represented should be an example for others to follow. If the US is supposed to be shining city, why does it cover up its light when it comes to engagement with the Cuban people? I’m reminded of the children’s song, “This Little Light of Mine”:

This little light of mine,

I’m gonna let it shine

Let it shine,

Let it shine,

Let it shine,

Hide it under a bshel? No!

I’m gonna let it shine…

The Berlin Wall was a public relations win for democracy and free enterprise. It highlighted the difference between the democratic west and the totalitarian east. The Soviets had to lock their citizens in to keep them from escaping to the west. It didn’t take a genius to figure out which side was going to win the public relations war on that one. What if West Germany had responded with a wall of its own? The people of the world would not have been able to make a clear distinction between the east and the west.

Since the 1960’s, the US has maintained a proverbial wall around Cuba. The US embargo prevents US citizens from showing Cubans the wonders of political and economic freedom. Can US farmers show Cubans how cheaply free farmers can go food? No. Can US tourists freely flow to Cuban resorts? No. Think of all the interpersonal interactions between US citizens and Cubans that we therefore miss out on. Wouldn’t the flow of American money into Cuba get the Cubans to contemplate the wonders of economic and political freedom?

If the US let its citizens travel freely in Cuba, wouldn’t it put pressure on Cuba to allow its citizens to travel freely in the US? We already know what happens to Cuban baseball players when they are exposed to the outside world. They defect, set up citizenship in a foreign country and play major league baseball in the US. Why not shine the light of economic and political freedom on Cuba? Let people make decisions with full information. If the Cuban people want to support a dictatorship, show them that other countries prosper without dictators. The only reason Cuba, or for that matter North Korea, can keep their people oppressed in poverty is that they lack information about the outside world.

Is the US ashamed of its political and economic freedom? If not, it should proudly stand and shine its light precisely on those countries which lack political and economic freedom. The US should adopt a policy of free and open engagement with all people around the world. Unfortunately, in Florida last week major political candidates played the game of who plans to isolate Cuba more. It does make me wonder if the presidential candidates even believe in the values of political and economic freedom that exposed the faults of totalitarian communism. The US needs a “Mr. Castro, tear down this wall” moment, and it can’t have one without tearing its wall down first.