

Invade Cuba? Only in South Florida would that come up in a business ethics discussion



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The panel of three local mayors discussing how the United States should approach doing business with Cuba was going predictably Friday until Miami Beach Mayor Philip Levine, a likely Democratic candidate for Florida governor, brought up a word that, once upon a time in Miami, might have caused a political maelstrom: invasion.

“Why aren’t we discussing the invasion of the island?” Levine asked facetiously during a day-long conference at Barry University that was organized by the Miami-Dade Commission on Ethics and Public Trust. The conference’s theme was the ethical, legal and regulatory implications of doing business with Cuba — a topic well off the beaten path for the commission.

Levine wasn’t actually endorsing the idea of a military incursion. A few moments earlier, he had argued that the best way to help Cubans themselves was to engage in open commerce with the island.

But he had no support for the expanded-business position from his colleagues on the panel, Coral Gables Mayor Jim Cason and Doral Mayor J.C. Bermudez. Cason, a Republican former head of the U.S. diplomatic mission in Havana, had in fact espoused the opposite view, questioning the ethics of any business that would enrich the pockets of the Cuban military, which controls a big chunk of the economy.

So Levine, frustrated with his colleagues’ positions, made his provocative remark, predicting that a U.S.-led military operation “would probably take 24 hours at best.”

A few people in the crowd chuckled. Neither Bermudez nor Cason took him seriously. Levine later told the Miami Herald he’d been trying to highlight — perhaps not very artfully — that opponents of the Obama administration’s Cuba opening, like Cason, couldn’t offer any better solutions.

During the day, lawyers, business executives and academics discussed topics such as human rights considerations in doing business on the island, a wage system that allows the Cuban government to retain a high percentage of the salaries of Cubans who work for foreign firms, whether business ties with the U.S. help the Cuban people, U.S. rules that govern commercial ties with Cuba, and whether it’s ethical to do any business at all there.

But it was Levine's comment that produced a jaw-dropping moment.

The surprising exchange reflected how much the conversation on Cuba has changed in Miami. The suggestion that American troops might land on Cuban shores — a failed strategy under former President John F. Kennedy — is now a laugh line. The question of what to do instead, however, remains difficult for local politicians to answer.

"I want the people in Cuba to have civil rights," said Bermudez, who was born on the island. "I certainly don't want the kleptocracy that exists in Russia. I do not want Vietnam."



I WANT THE PEOPLE IN CUBA TO HAVE CIVIL RIGHTS.

Doral Mayor J.C. Bermudez

There were plenty of differences of opinion.

José Azel, a senior scholar at the University of Miami's Institute for Cuban and Cuban-American Studies, said there's been lots of talk that doing business with Cuba is a way of helping the Cuban people and that engagement will lead to political change.

He called that a fallacy with no demonstrable evidence to back it up. After China and Vietnam adopted free-market reforms, he said, both nations got richer but there wasn't political change or improvement in their human rights records.

Sister Ondina Cortes, an assistant professor at St. Thomas University, agreed that economic change doesn't bring political change, but she said that it does bring cultural change that encourages Cubans to think for themselves.

The Catholic Church in Cuba has invited Americans "to engage in just economic exchange for the benefit of all," she said. "They see this as a way that will improve, even in small ways, the livelihood of Cubans."

While there are many conferences about how to do business with Cuba, "no one has dealt with this ethics issue straight on," said Joe Centorino, the ethics commission's executive director.

Asked why the commission wasn't also examining the ethics of, say, doing business with China, Centorino responded: "China isn't 90 miles away."

Commission Chairman Lawrence Schwartz, a retired judge, said it wasn't the ethics commission's intention to encourage people from doing or not doing business in Cuba — "that decision is an individual one" — but rather to provide guidance on an ethical and sustainable approach.

The Cuba topic is a bit unusual for the commission, which usually explores ethical conduct in local government. "We don't deal with international issues here, but there are local issues that have come up related to Cuba," Centorino said.

Gov. Rick Scott recently threatened to cut off state funding from seaports that did business with Cuba's "dictator." Port Everglades and the Port of Palm Beach both canceled plans to sign agreements with the National Port Administration of Cuba that could have led to joint marketing studies and other cooperation.

There also have been efforts to prevent companies that do business with Cuba from winning government contracts. A 2012 Florida law that prohibited state and local governments from hiring companies with business ties to Cuba for big contracts never went into effect after a federal appeals court ruled it unconstitutional because Florida was trying to set foreign policy, a power of the federal government.

The idea that a Cuban consulate might at some point in the future be located in Miami or another South Florida community has also been hotly debated since the U.S. and Cuba renewed diplomatic relations in 2015, but to date the only missions Cuba has on U.S. soil are its embassy in Washington and its permanent mission at the United Nations in New York.

None of those specific issues came up during the mayors' discussion. Instead, they urged Miamians traveling to Cuba to meet with independent political voices, dissidents, regular Cubans — anyone not just spouting the Cuban government line.

"Cuba is a hot topic," Centorino said. "We touched a chord on this one. This turned out to be the most popular conference we've ever done." Well over 300 people registered for the event.

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