

Testimony of Sgt. Carlos Lazo
Before the Finance Committee of the United States Senate
Hearing on Legislation:
The Promoting American Agricultural and Medical Exports to Cuba Act of 2007
December 11, 2007

Good morning. My name is Carlos Lazo. I am a Cuban-American. I live in Seattle, Washington. I am a proud member of our state's National Guard and serve as a sergeant and combat medic. I also work as an advisor in the Washington Social Services Department.

I speak to you this morning as a private citizen; as someone who sacrificed to come here, who believes fiercely in his obligations as a father, who loves our country, and who believes, strongly, that it is wrong, morally wrong, for the laws of the United States to divide Cuban families. This is an injustice that I believe you must address.

I arrived in the U.S. on a raft in 1991. I came in search of freedom and greater opportunities. In 1988, I served a year in a Cuban prison for attempting to leave the country illegally. When I left Cuba, I also left members of my family – including my two sons. Since then I have maintained a close relationship with them, visiting whenever I could and supporting them economically.

In 2000, I enlisted in the Washington National Guard. This was my way of offering thanks to this country which embraced me and offered me so much. In 2003, my brigade was mobilized as part of Operation Iraqi Freedom. We arrived in Iraq at the beginning of 2004. After spending several months there, during my two weeks of R and R, I returned from the Middle East with plans of visiting my two sons in Cuba, as I was legally allowed to do.

In Iraq, I was risking my life on a daily basis. All I wanted to do was to hug my boys and spend even a few hours with them. In a war, time is precious, life is uncertain, and this visit had profound significance to me.

I flew all the way from Iraq to Miami intending to board a plane to Havana from there. By that time, though, our government had imposed new restrictions limiting travel to the island. These new regulations, among other things, limited family visits by Cuban Americans to once every three years. The new rules also re-defined the concept of a family.

I had a ticket, but I wasn't even allowed to board the charter flight to Cuba. I had to go back to the war without any chance of reuniting with my two sons in Havana. Without the possibility of giving them what could have been my last hug for both of them.

I returned to Iraq to fight for freedom, to fight for my adoptive country and to promote American values and ideals in Iraq. But what about my freedom to visit my children and my other family members in Cuba? That freedom was denied to me.

I served and I survived. After more than a year, and I completed my tour of duty in Iraq, I tried once more to visit my sons and family in Cuba, but I was again denied a license to do so. Not even the fact that one of my sons was gravely ill and in a hospital was good enough reason for our government to allow me to spend a few hours to travel to Cuba.

These Cuba travel restrictions make no exceptions for humanitarian reasons. Since I had last visited my family in Cuba in 2003, I was forced to wait one more year, until 2006, to be eligible for my next visit.

Later, after battling for many months in order to visit my sons in Cuba, I was finally granted the chance to bring them to live with me in the U.S. I am deeply grateful for this. But I am a member of a very fortunate minority. The majority of Cuban-American families *do not* have this privilege, and they find themselves unable to visit their grandma, a father or even a mother if they happen to live in Cuba.

What does this mean, no humanitarian exceptions? For example, if I were to visit my father in Cuba and three months later he were to die, there is no legal or humanitarian mechanism in place which would allow me to go to his funeral. These licenses may be granted but once every three years – and there are no exceptions.

These regulations were supposed to deprive the Cuban government of money and thereby accelerate the so-called Cuban transition to a more democratic society. But after four years, all these rules have done is impose even greater suffering on Cuban Americans here and their families on the island. These laws have created only a greater sense of family separation and suffering with no discernible impact on Cuba's economy or its government.

Wouldn't it be better if the greatest ambassadors of democracy – Cuban Americans – could visit the island and relay our message of freedom and American values? What better way of promoting these basic values intrinsic in our society than through people to people contacts.

When I tell my American friends about the obstacles that stop Cuban-Americans from visiting their family members in Cuba, they automatically assume that they have been imposed by the Castro government. Even after I explain the truth to them, they cannot believe that the travel restrictions were created by our government. The real victims of this cruelty are not the Cuban government or its leadership, but Cuban families and America's highest ideals.

These restrictions are cruel, they are inhumane, they are irrational, and they are unjust. Most of all, rules that prevent families from visiting, and helping, and loving each other, are un-American. But you have the power to undo them. These rules may have no humanitarian exemptions, but I cannot believe there is no humanity here in the United States Senate.

With the greatest respect, I implore you to eliminate these restrictions so you can reunite Cuban families on both sides of the Florida Straits.

I would like to conclude with this quote by Alex Haley. He said, "[In every conceivable manner, the family is link to our past, bridge to our future.](#)" Let me leave you with a question: Will America allow its future to be defined by the cruelty of these regulations or will we instead win over our enemies with the love that a united family provides? Thank you.