



Meet Jeffrey DeLaurentis

***By Malone Gabor,
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Between 1957 and 1959, Earl T. Smith served as the U.S. Ambassador to Cuba. Though the tension between the island and the U.S. mainland had started to grow during his tenure, Smith referred to this ambassadorial position as “the second most important man in Cuba; sometimes even more important than the President.”ⁱ During this period, the United States maintained a very heavy hand in virtually all Cuban diplomatic affairs. Moreover, U.S. President Dwight D. Eisenhower abruptly cut all diplomatic ties with the island in January of 1961, leaving then-Prime Minister Fidel Castro to show his U.S. counterpart that he alone presides over the tiny country.

Fast forward to September 2016 and enter Jeffrey DeLaurentis. He has been nominated by U.S. President Barack Obama as the new U.S. Ambassador to Cuba—the first nominee since Philip Bonsal, who served as ambassador from 1959 until 1960. With this nomination, Obama continues to attempt rapprochement with Cuba. To date, DeLaurentis “has been vital throughout the normalization of relations between the United States and Cuba” as the Chief of Mission in Havana since 2014.ⁱⁱ As the head of the U.S. Embassy in Havana, DeLaurentis familiarized himself with the existing diplomatic channels of communication between the United States and Cuba, as well as the political bureaucracy of the Cuban government.ⁱⁱⁱ Given his position and relationship with the Cuban government, he is one of the most qualified individuals to make this transition a smooth one. He has previously held a series of high ranking, non-ambassadorial positions in Havana, including serving as a consular officer and Political-Economic Section Chief.^{iv} Additionally, he has held other prominent positions at the U.S. Mission to the United Nations in Geneva as well as political counselor at the U.S. Embassy in Bogota, Colombia.^v Furthermore, he has extensive experience serving as the Executive Assistant and Special Assistant to the Under Secretary of State and Assistant Secretary of State focusing on inter-American affairs.^{vi} Although this position is no longer “the second most important,” an ambassador will be able to facilitate an open dialogue, protect U.S. interests, and continue to strengthen the U.S-Cuban relationship.^{vii}

DeLaurentis still needs to be confirmed by the Republican-led U.S. Senate and some key oppositional figures have already promised to try to block his appointment, irrespective of his undisputed qualifications and stature. Cuban-American senators such as Marco Rubio (R-FL), Ted Cruz (R-TX), and Robert Menendez (D-NJ), seem to be leading the charge against DeLaurentis’ nomination. These opponents, and others like

them, claim that nominating an ambassador only serves as a form of approval of the Cuban governments' "harsh rule."^{viii} Both Rubio and Cruz were candidates in the primary campaign for this year's Republican presidential nomination before ending their campaigns in the spring. As such, they are established leaders of the Republican Party who yield significant sway and attract formidable followers. Although this opposition could be a setback, there is also strong bipartisan support in favor of approving the nomination. Senator Jeff Flake (R-AZ) explains that "too many Americans [travel] to Cuba and [do] legal business in Cuba to deny them the opportunity to have a full-fledged diplomatic presence there."^{ix} Regardless, between October 10 and Thanksgiving, the Senate is only in session for five days.^x Low productivity, in addition to intentional blocking of this nomination, threatens Obama's most recent attempt to initiate a positive and sustainable change to the U.S.-Cuban relationship.

In December 2014, Obama began a process of normalizing diplomatic ties with Cuba. Embassies were reopened in Cuba and Washington, D.C. and daily commercial flights are increasing prospects for travel. Although Obama visited Cuba in March 2016, the main lines of communication have been through DeLaurentis. He has already played an active role in facilitating conversation between Washington and Havana regarding human rights and is open to discussing and revising immigration policies that best suit the needs of both nations.^{xi} He also believes that Cubans and Americans have much more in common than one would initially assume.^{xii} So far, the Cuban government has welcomed this move by Obama. The Deputy Director for U.S. Affairs in the Cuban Foreign Ministry has reaffirmed the Cuban government's perception that this new approach to foreign policy plays a positive role in the U.S.-Cuban relationship. However, he believes that more can still be done to advance the relationship and he has requested increased trade between the two countries.^{xiii}

Ultimately, having an ambassador "is a common sense step forward" in the relationship with Cuba, which will only facilitate more open dialogue and ensure the safety of U.S. citizens in Cuba.^{xiv} This action taken by the United States is actually a delayed response to Cuba's appointment of its own ambassador last fall. On September 17, 2015, José Ramón Cabañas Rodríguez became the first Cuban Ambassador to the United States officially received by Obama since diplomatic relations were formally ended.^{xv} The ambassadors will be able to discuss Cuba's concerns about trade and U.S. critiques of human rights. Cuba's approval of the new ambassadorial position, as well as the nominee himself, shows that the relationship is less hostile than it has been in the past, and the Cuban government is welcoming changes of the status quo. Both countries want to be more engaged and involved in developing the relationship. These new ambassadorial positions, although unlikely to be catalysts for change, will still be constructive in building a healthier relationship between the once-isolated Caribbean country and the United States.

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- ⁱ Leogrande, William M., and Peter Kornbluh. "Eisenhower: Patience and Forbearance." In *Back Channel to Cuba: The Hidden History of Negotiations between Washington and Havana*, 6-41. University of North Carolina Press, 2015.
- ⁱⁱ Obama, Barack. "President Obama Announces Another Key Administration Post." The White House. September 27, 2016. Accessed September 30, 2016. <https://www.whitehouse.gov/the-press-office/2016/09/27/president-obama-announces-another-key-administration-post>.
- ⁱⁱⁱ "DeLaurentis: Cuba Y EEUU Hablarán Sobre Derechos Humanos Este Año." Radio Y Televisión Martí. September 21, 2016. Accessed September 30, 2016. <http://www.martinoticias.com/a/delaurentis-cuba-eeuu-hablaran-derechos-humanos-este-ano/130286.html>.
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- ^v Ibid.
- ^{vi} Ibid.
- ^{vii} Leogrande, William M., and Peter Kornbluh. "Eisenhower: Patience and Forbearance." In *Back Channel to Cuba: The Hidden History of Negotiations between Washington and Havana*, 6-41. University of North Carolina Press, 2015.
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- ^{xiii} Marsh, Sarah. "Cuba Welcomes Ambassador Nomination but Says Obama Can Do More." Reuters. September 28, 2016. Accessed October 03, 2016. <http://www.reuters.com/article/us-cuba-usa-idUSKCN11Y2KT>.
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