

CIA “light”: What will happen when USAID and NED are no longer active in Cuba?



The Antonio Guiteras power plant in Matanzas, built in 1988 (AI-scaled) (source: [Cubadebate](#))

A guest contribution by Andreas Hesse.

The new US administration loves to hatch schemes to harass Cuba. Most recently, tourism has been hit again. Airbnb has been [banned from](#) doing business with Cuban private guesthouses, and the booking platform Expedia will no longer list hotels on the island. This makes it all the more surprising that, at the same time, Elon Musk's austerity measures are threatening two monuments of US foreign and Cuba policy: the development aid agency USAID (*U.S. Agency for International Development*) and the NED (*National Endowment for Democracy*).

But Trump's characteristic flip-flopping is not limited to customs policy: Will the NED really be shut down, or not? Or will it be reinstated? Who can make sense of it all? However, it would be wrong to attribute these erratic political twitches solely to the president's mental instability. Rather, two ideological lines are colliding in the actions of the US government: the ultra-liberal and the “post-liberal” direction, as J.D. Vance euphemistically calls it.

Frankfurt Book Fair, October 2024: The fact that the liberal-conservative historian and avowed non-pacifist [Anne Applebaum](#) was awarded the much more prestigious Peace Prize of the German Book Trade in the same year after receiving the (of all things) [Carl von Ossietzky](#) Prize from the city of Oldenburg had a slightly Orwellian ring to it. Surely very few of those present in Frankfurt knew that Anne Applebaum sits on the board of the NED. And even if they had known, they probably wouldn't have thought anything of it and wouldn't have let it spoil their mood. Even the “taz” didn't bother to do any research beyond the next street corner and celebrated the honoree.

The NED was founded in 1983 under Ronald Reagan, initially as a private foundation, then became a semi-governmental arm of foreign policy and, as such, has been financed almost entirely by the US Congress and government from the beginning to the present day. Its non-profit status enabled the state to pass on budget funds to foreign organizations via the NED. "Supporting freedom around the world" is the foundation's motto. Co-founder Allen Weinstein admitted in 1991 that the NED acts more like a foreign intelligence service: "Much of what we do today was done secretly by the CIA 25 years ago." Wikipedia quotes Bill Berkowitz from the Working for Change initiative: "The NED functions as a complete infrastructure service. It provides money, technical support, media know-how, modern equipment, and assists with public relations for selected political groups. Its goal is to destabilize progressive movements, especially those with socialist or democratic-socialist tendencies."

Even Republican Congressman Ron Paul criticized the NED in 2003, saying it had "a history of corruption and financial mismanagement" and was "at best superfluous and often destructive." Through the foundation, US taxpayers were financing the harassment of elected governments, interference in elections, and the corruption of democratic movements: "How would Americans react if the Chinese were to support certain pro-Chinese politicians with millions of dollars?"

In the 1990s, the Cuban-American National Foundation (CANF) received large financial injections from the NED through Jorge Más Canosa. The CANF financed terrorist attacks such as the [explosion at the Hotel Capri in Havana in 1997](#), which claimed the life of an Italian tourist. A few years later, the CANF was also behind the failed assassination attempt on Fidel Castro in Panama. Most recently, the NED and USAID supported opposition groups such as the Movimiento San Isidro on the island.

On February 12, 2025, the NED was shut down. But by March 10, it was back up and running, thanks to intense political pressure in favor of the well-connected foundation. Funding for 41 projects in Cuba worth almost \$6 million (no other country receives as much) appeared to have been saved. This is in stark contrast to a concerned article by NED President Damon Wilson in the Miami Herald on April 29, in which he complains that the government has suspended funding for the NED. Several exile media outlets such as Cubanet, Diario de Cuba, and El Toque launched a fundraising campaign to compensate for the potential loss of subsidies. Reporters Without Borders criticized the reduction in support for Cuban exile and opposition media. The organization is thus returning to its roots, as it is itself a protégé of the NED. Robert Menard, founder of RWB and later right-wing mayor of the city of Béziers, always liked to keep his hand out when it came to US government money.

Subversive development aid

In contrast to the back-and-forth at the NED, USAID was actually downsized and converted into a department of the State Department as part of Elon Musk's ultra-liberal austerity measures. 1,600 employees are to be laid off. The outcry was loud, as meaningful projects in Afghanistan, Sudan, and elsewhere are now seriously endangered.

Now, one can argue about the merits of traditional development work. Haitian filmmaker Raoul Peck showed the devastating consequences of development agencies' activities in his

film “[Deadly Aid](#),” using Haiti as an example. However, USAID differs from almost all other players in the field in that it explicitly pursues political and ideological goals.

A look back at history: From 1962 to 1974, the CIA used a department of USAID, the Office of Public Safety (OPS), for its own purposes (1). The OPS was founded in 1962 by J.F. Kennedy as a counterinsurgency agency and incorporated into USAID, which had been established a year earlier. Over 400 military advisers trained around one million police officers in 47 countries and spread the CIA's torture program under the guise of development aid. The hybrid nature of the department – subordinate to both USAID and, in effect, the CIA – was perfect for this task.

A look at the history of USAID helps to understand its hard-nosed political objectives and why Cuba became the agency's preferred target. While the economic and financial blockade against the island was the main course, the activities of USAID and NED were the side dishes.

Dollar bonanza for the opinion industry

The “Programa Cuba” was launched in the 1990s, and investments increased significantly in the following decade. Opposition groups on the island and in exile benefited from this. [ZunZuneo](#) was launched as a Cuban version of Twitter.

In recent years, 54 organizations have benefited from USAID “aid.” Self-proclaimed human rights groups were literally lining up at the feeding trough. The independence of human rights work became a farce. Blessed were the days when there was only Amnesty International, which never accepted a cent from governments and still doesn't. According to State Department figures for 2022, the Observatorio Cubano de Derechos Humanos and the Foundation for Human Rights in Cuba both received around US\$1 million from USAID that year.

The Cuban exile group Grupo de Apoyo a la Democracia, which has at times been suspected of embezzlement, received a generous cash injection of over US\$4 million, while the Directorio Democrático Cubano had to make do with just under US\$100,000. More recent figures are not available. The organization Cubalex, which is often cited in this country, is also on the subsidy list. Freedom House came away empty-handed in 2022, but had received over US\$5 million two years earlier, as did the Center for Free Cuba, which received just under US\$1.5 million in 2021.

Support for Cuban exile internet media such as Cubanet News (\$300,000) is particularly important. All these figures are linked to an opinion industry and jobs. This systemic status quo is now under threat.

Funding is also at risk in Cuba itself.

As a former activist of UNPACU (Patriotic Union of Cuba) of the dissident José Luis Ferrer told the author, a paltry sum of US\$5 was paid for participating in a demonstration. However, if you managed to get injured, the sum could increase to a three-digit amount. This sliding scale thus had an inherent escalating effect. Unfortunately, exposing such phenomena

always carries the risk of overreaction and, as a result, the dismissal of any criticism as “US-driven.” This is fatal because it curtails the space for urgently needed internal debate and for “healthy divergence” (as Cuban author and filmmaker Eduardo del Llano calls it). The only remedy for this is a more nuanced view.

1) Alfred W. McCoy, *“Torture and the US: A History of the CIA’s Torture and Murder,”* New York, 2005.

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