

Will President Trump act on his threat to take Cuba?

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Heard on Fresh Air, NPR

New Yorker writer Jon Lee Anderson describes conditions in Cuba, why it's vulnerable now — and what regime change would mean — considering the Castro family's entrenchment in the Cuban government.

This is FRESH AIR. I'm Terry Gross. President Trump says he plans on taking Cuba. We're already at war with Iran, and the conflict has spread to over a dozen other countries in the Gulf region. Cuba is at a very vulnerable moment. It had depended on Venezuela for fuel and supplies, but those shipments ended after the U.S. arrested Venezuelan President Nicolás Maduro and then the vice president, Delcy Rodríguez, became president. And she has complied with Trump. Cuba is bankrupt. The power grid is now being slowly repaired after it completely failed. And that wasn't the first time Cuba was recently in the dark. There's hardly any food or fuel, and an estimated 1 in 5 Cubans have left the country in the last few years.

Here to explain how we got to this point is Jon Lee Anderson. He recently returned from a reporting trip to Cuba. He writes about Cuba in the new issue of *The New Yorker*, where he's a staff writer. His piece is titled "Is Cuba Next?: Trump's Campaign To Topple Foreign Adversaries Encounters A Battered But Defiant Regime."

Anderson lived in Havana for several years in the '90s while he was researching his book about Che Guevara, who along with Fidel Castro led the revolution against the U.S.-backed dictator Fulgencio Batista. Anderson is also the author of the 2025 book "To Lose A War: The Fall And Rise Of The Taliban." He's reported from conflict zones around the world. We recorded our interview yesterday. Let's start with what Trump said Monday of last week about what he might do in Cuba.

(SOUNDBITE OF ARCHIVED RECORDING)

PRESIDENT DONALD TRUMP: You know, all my life, I've been hearing about the United States and Cuba. You know, when will the United States do it? I do believe I'll be the honor of - having the honor of taking Cuba. That'd be a good honor. That's a big honor.

UNIDENTIFIED REPORTER: Taking Cuba?

TRUMP: Taking Cuba in some form, yeah. Taking Cuba. I mean, whether I free it, take it, think I can do anything I want with it, you want to know the truth. They're a very weakened nation right now.

GROSS: Jon Lee Anderson, welcome back to FRESH AIR. What was your reaction to this statement that we just heard?

JON LEE ANDERSON: Thanks, Terry. Dismay and shock, just at the tone that the man who is the president of the United States used in referring to another country. And, of course, you know, the dismay is not just at the type of, you know, degraded language used, but also the fact that what he just said was very counterproductive because anybody who knows the Cubans and Cuban history - you know, this island nation just off our shores - knows that it has, to an unusual degree, a profound nationalist sentiment when it comes to its own sovereignty, its independence, and especially vis-a-vis the United States.

And that goes way beyond the history of the, you know, Marxist revolution of the past 60-odd years. It goes back to the 19th century. So this kind of dismissive language is deeply humiliating, hurtful and would get anyone's back up on the island. And, you know, I gather that it has.

GROSS: Why does Trump want to intervene in Cuba and possibly take it over? I mean, they're bankrupt. You know, he often wants resources like fuel or, you know, rare minerals. What does Cuba have to offer that President Trump wants?

ANDERSON: Well, it's a 700-mile-long Caribbean island with unexploited, undeveloped beachfront property. Let's put it that way. It's a real estate tycoon or entrepreneur's, you know, dream of dreams. There is simply no place like it in the hemisphere. Cuba has barely developed its tourism potential, quite apart from the fact that, yes, it's true, it does not have oil and has very little else that's exportable. It has, you know, massive tourist potential. There are some beach resorts. But they're on a scale, you know, minimal compared to what we have or we've seen in the United States, or for that matter, elsewhere in the Caribbean. So for a real estate guy like Trump, you know, Cuba is just a bonanza waiting to happen.

A friend of mine in Cuba sort of said, do you think if we offered him Varadero, talking about the sort - it's an iconic beach resort in Cuba that goes back to the, you know, mid-20th century. He said, do you think he would stop? El Trump Varadero. He said, it has a ring to it (laughter). That's, you know - people both said that cynically, but also genuinely. They actually thought because they've heard so much about his famous transactional-ism and his, you know, pecuniary motivations, apparently, in some of his policy initiatives.

GROSS: It sounds like you believe that, that you believe what he wants is beachfront property.

ANDERSON: Yeah. I mean, in the - I think it was 2013. The Trump organization sent people down, executives down to the island to explore the potentials for golf courses, marinas, et cetera. Nothing came of it, as far as I know, but they had meetings. So that's there.

GROSS: Would you describe the conditions you found in Cuba on your trip in January and February?

ANDERSON: Yeah, look, it was shockingly bad. I was there also last year in May, which was also - and I had not been in a couple of years. And I found that return just, you know, very

revealing, because I had been hearing about the exodus from Cuba since 2021. Up to 20% of the population is believed to have left. And the emptiness of the island is what struck me on that occasion. You know, I'm talking about, you know, nine months ago now. And then when I returned this time, it had worsened significantly.

So there were very few tourists, which, of course, is an important source of foreign revenue for Cuba, back in May. And when I returned at the beginning of this year, there was literally almost none. I mean, I found there was a few Chinese here and some jazz enthusiasts from New York there, and that was kind of it. And almost, you know, the squeeze on gas, you know, had already begun. And so there were many - much fewer vehicles on the road. There's always been very little in Cuba, and now there was almost none, as well as some Chinese three-wheelers.

And if you leave Havana, the city itself, you find a lot of horse carts, much as you might've found in the 1920s or the 1890s. So the lights were often off throughout the city. Back in the 1990s, when the Soviet Union imploded, it was bad as well. But now, you know, the electrical grid really has just fallen apart, and with it, virtually all public transport that existed before. And no economic activity. I mean, people simply aren't doing anything. So it was striking to see Cuba in - really on the ropes like that.

GROSS: You also write about malnutrition, mosquito-borne illnesses, thousands of people with few doctors and people on the verge of starvation in some situations.

ANDERSON: You know, Cuba, whatever else its critics said about it over the years, you know, they conceded that it had this extraordinary medical health care service, which was true. Fidel Castro put a huge amount of effort and resources into creating, really, a kind of world-class health care system that it in turn exported. Cuban doctors are all over the world. And whatever else was going on in Cuba, you could rely on medical specialists or the hospitals, you know, to treat illnesses. And they even had made breakthroughs in certain areas like retinitis pigmentosa or orthopedic and pediatric care, and so on.

But now, many of the doctors, many of the people with any kind of medical or any qualifications really, have left because they just couldn't survive on the government-provided salaries of, you know, the equivalent of a few dollars a month. And so they've, you know, doctors that might be cardiac specialists are now pushing geriatrics around, you know, Dade County. Literally pushing them in their wheelchairs, you know, that kind of thing, or driving Ubers, in order to make some money to send back to their families. That's just what's happened.

And so, I have a number of friends who are older. They are in their 70s and 80s. I'm thinking of two friends who are widows and very good friends of mine, who both of whom I found had chikungunya. They were suffering from this mosquito-borne disease that causes, you know, terrible pain in the - it's like arthritis on speed. You know, it's terrible pain in the extremities. One was living downstairs in her house, where she lives alone, because she literally couldn't go up the stairs.

And the only drug that that could ameliorate the symptoms of this very painful was available on the black market at, you know, huge rates, equivalent of U.S. rates, which are pretty ridiculous,

you know, anywhere in the world. And, yeah, there's been this outbreak of mosquito-borne diseases because people are malnourished. You know, they're more vulnerable to diseases. The mosquitoes have bred because there's a lot of standing water, because the municipal services that would normally get rid of it can't run their trucks because they don't have fuel to do so.

And garbage has piled up as well in neighborhoods, which never used to happen, on street corners, which is another - of course, you know, any open receptacles, these are sources of mosquito - it's a mosquito breeding ground. And that's another one of the shocking sights in Cuba, is this was the cleanest place you could see in the Western Hemisphere. Clean, clean, clean. And now it's dirty. And that's shocking. And this is - so it's, you know, the thigh bone connected to the head bone, like that old song. That's what's happening to Cuba. Everything's breaking down because - primarily because of the lack of fuel.

GROSS: Cuba's deputy foreign minister said that Cuba is preparing for a U.S. invasion. Do you know what they're doing to prepare? And what's their military like?

ANDERSON: So the Cubans, beginning in mid-January, around the time I arrived there on this latest trip, there were directives going out to the reserves around Cuba, around Havana, different neighborhoods for people to sign up for training, retraining, that kind of thing. Now, exactly what those exercises involve are generally, you know, secret. But, you know, I have friends in some Cuban neighborhoods, and they were telling me some of this. I mean, they weren't involved themselves. But, you know, in addition - just like in the United States, you have an active army and then you have reserves.

And so when they call up the reserves, these people are expected to go to a mustering point. And they're given weapons or, you know, new weapons and told what to do. And they have a action plan to defend that area in case of invasion. This is building upon a long-standing system of mobilization. When the Soviet Union collapsed in the early '90s, Fidel Castro called for what he called the zero option, which was expecting to be, the country to go - basically to go back to almost nothing in terms of sustenance and backup. And he had his citizens volunteer corps build tunnels under the city, tank traps on the coast. There was a whole national action mobilization plan.

GROSS: Do they still exist?

ANDERSON: Look, if it does, they're not saying so exactly. They're saying so rhetorically. We're not seeing huge, you know, military mobilizations in the country. But the Revolutionary Armed Forces is perhaps, you know, the powerful entity in Cuba. Everybody has a cousin, son, brother, sister who is a member. And so, wherever you go in Cuba, the armed forces have camps. They have their bivouacs, they have their maneuvers, they are well-armed.

And they have an esprit de corps that goes back decades involving, you know, their fights around the world against, as they would see it, the imperialists. And so it's difficult to quantify their level of readiness or preparedness. But I would think it would be unwise to regard them as a spent force. I think the psychology, you know, of national preparedness, the psychology of the anti-imperialist ethos is well-grounded within the armed forces. And they are preparing to fight.

GROSS: Well, we need to take a short break here so let me reintroduce you. My guest is Jon Lee Anderson. And his new article in The New Yorker is titled "Is Cuba Next?" We'll be right back after a short break. This is FRESH AIR.

(SOUNDBITE OF MOACIR SANTOS' "EXCERPT NO. 1")

GROSS: This is FRESH AIR. Let's get back to the interview I recorded yesterday with Jon Lee Anderson. He has a new article in The New Yorker, where he's a staff writer. It's titled "Is Cuba Next?: Trump's Campaign To Topple Foreign Adversaries Encounters A Battered But Defiant Regime." He recently returned from a reporting trip to Cuba. He lived in Havana for several years in the '90s while researching his book "Che Guevara: A Revolutionary Life."

You have a friend who's a former revolutionary, who I imagine you met while you were writing your book about Che Guevara. And he said, I don't care anymore how it happens, but this situation has to end. Is he saying, and I don't even care if the U.S. takes over and there's regime change, but this has to end?

ANDERSON: Yeah, at that moment. He even said - where's Delta Force? - sort of jokily. But it was black humor, you know? He was expressing a kind of existential despair, really, because this is someone who's spent his life in the service of the ideals that brought about the revolution and sustained it for many years, has been critical over time of, you know, failings of the revolution. Many. It's not one of those things that people can easily reconcile. You know, it is a contradictory existence.

So having given themselves over, that generation - I'm talking about people in their 60s and over, right? - they wanted to own their own country. And then what happened happened - you know, the Cold War, Fidel Castro, Marxism, Leninism - it became a socialist state. And so they have lived with many contradictions, but in their hearts and in their, I guess, you know, *las entrañas* - their entrails, as they say in Cuba - you know, they feel themselves to be proud Cubans. That's what they want to be. That's what they wanted to be when they were 15- or 20-years-old when they joined the revolution. And, of course, they've seen that eroded and eroded ever since, in many different ways.

So to say something like that - where's Delta Force? - which, of course, is the Special Forces unit that went and captured Nicolas Maduro, the president of Venezuela, and precipitated this current mess in Cuba - was, you know, just a bleak acknowledgment of where they are in history and the kind of failure of, well, their own failure, the failure of their leaders, but also the kind of unrelenting or the merciless nature of the current U.S. government.

GROSS: Well, if they remove the president, the way you describe it in your article in The New Yorker, it's really the former president, Raul Castro, who's Fidel's brother, who's the power behind the current president. And there are Castro family members throughout the government.

ANDERSON: That's right. And they appear to be talking with at least one of those members. So you're right. Raul Castro is - he's sort of - in a sense, he's the supreme leader, right? He's 94. He was the country's defense minister for over 50 years, and then he succeeded his brother in power

for 10. Diaz-Canel, the current president, is this sort of, you know, loyal party apparatchik who has served 1 1/2 terms in office as his sort of handpicked successor. He won re-election. And he has two more years to serve. But he still defers to Raul Castro - who is still, by all appearances, quite lucid - as his boss.

And then you have some Castro family relatives within the mix, who are key figures. One of them is his grandson, who people call Raulito, and he is 41. He's a colonel - lieutenant colonel, sorry - in the interior ministry who has been his father's bodyguard since he was in his 20s. He's regarded as the apple of his grandfather's eye. And we have learned through the grapevine that he was in meetings with Rubio and Rubio's entourage over the past month or so in other countries in the region - Saint Kitts being the last one, the Caribbean Island - possibly elsewhere.

Now, another Castro relative is Alejandro Castro Espin, who is Raul Castro's son - only son, who is himself an officer, now a general, in the interior ministry. At one point, he ran the country's counterintelligence services. He's been in a sort of retirement. Nobody really knows much about what he does nowadays in the last few years. But it's key to remember that Alejandro, 12 years ago, when the Obama administration wanted to initiate secret conversations with then-President Raul Castro about opening up relations between the two countries, it was with Alejandro that Ben Rhodes - then Ben Rhodes and Ricardo Zuniga, a senior NSC official - had these conversations and met in various countries - Canada, Trinidad - for over a year secretly before the announcement was made that a breakthrough had been achieved.

GROSS: So who do you think will be the official negotiator, assuming official negotiations start?

ANDERSON: It looks like it will be a combination, frankly. You know, you have the president, Diaz-Canel, who seems a little bit undercut by these other figures around him. He periodically comes out, and, you know, he says things. But he's very much the spokesman of this government, which is something of a family affair. So I would imagine that it could well be someone like Perez-Oliva, who is the grandnephew of Fidel and Raul Castro. He's seen by some as a possible candidate to replace Diaz-Canel. That could be a sticking point with the Miami Cuban lobby, who insists that there be no Castro family member in the new Cuba. But let's see. Those same people - the hard-line Republicans, MAGA people - have gone along with, by all appearances, what's gone down in Venezuela because Trump, you know, has made it so, and it's possible that they would go along with whatever he dictates for Cuba, as well.

GROSS: Well, we need to take another short break here, so let me reintroduce you. If you're just joining us, my guest is Jon Lee Anderson. His new article in The New Yorker is titled "Is Cuba Next? Trump's Campaign To Topple Foreign Adversaries Encounters A Battered But Defiant Regime." We'll be right back after a short break. I'm Terry Gross, and this is FRESH AIR.

(SOUNDBITE OF MUSIC)

GROSS: This is FRESH AIR. I'm Terry Gross. Let's get back to the interview I recorded yesterday with Jon Lee Anderson. He has a new article in The New Yorker titled "Is Cuba Next? Trump's Campaign To Topple Foreign Adversaries Encounters A Battered But Defiant Regime." Anderson recently returned from a reporting trip to Cuba. He lived in Havana for a few years in

the '90s while researching his book "Che Guevara: A Revolutionary Life." Anderson has also written about Fidel Castro, Hugo Chavez and Nicolás Maduro. He's reported from conflict zones in Africa, the Middle East and Latin America and is the author of the 2025 book "To Lose A War: The Fall And Rise Of The Taliban."

Let's talk about Venezuela and their role now in the weakening of Cuba. You know, this year, Trump sent forces into Venezuela, arrested the Venezuelan president, Nicolás Maduro. The vice president, Delcy Rodriguez, became the president, and she's been basically compliant with President Trump. So Venezuela is no longer sending fuel or supplies to Cuba. What role has that played in all of the dire conditions that you were describing earlier?

ANDERSON: Well, a massive role. Venezuela has been the - in a sense, replaced the Soviet Union, which collapsed, which had been the sponsor of Cuba, subsidized Cuba for 35 years. And when it imploded, Cuba went through a precipitous crash of its economy in the early to mid-'90s. And when Chavez - Hugo - the late Hugo Chavez won office and became a kind of acolyte to Fidel Castro, the two in the late '90s signed a, essentially, oil-for-expertise deal - a kind of barter deal whereby Venezuela, this oil-rich country, massively oil-rich, would provide Cuba's oil needs, fuel needs in return for medical brigades, sports instructors. And of course, there was a security contingent as well. That was more secretive, but it was always there. We all knew it, that there was a kind of security agreement, and Cuban intelligence and military people came and helped advise the Venezuelans. And that persisted through the Chavez years.

He died of cancer in 2013. He was succeeded by his vice president, Nicolás Maduro, 2013. And the oil continued. But coinciding with Maduro's arrival in power came the collapse of the world global oil prices, which had been hugely high and became very low, which caused, you know, the implosion of Venezuela's economy. And so we also saw a huge exodus of people from Venezuela that have gone throughout the hemisphere, as much as a third of the population. But one way or another, Maduro managed to keep the oil coming to Cuba.

Now, it ebbed and flowed. And by the time Maduro was abducted by the Americans in January, the amount of fuel that Venezuela regularly sent to Cuba had shrunk to about a - less than a third of what had - they had been sending before. Once upon a time, I think it was 100,000 barrels a day, and now it was around 25-, 27-, 30,000. So Cuba's oil needs are around 100,000 barrels a day. It produces its own - about 40,000 barrels. As things stood at the beginning of this year, it was getting a little bit from Venezuela and a bit more than that from Mexico. And all of that ended with the Maduro capture.

GROSS: I'm wondering where Secretary of State Marco Rubio stands. So far, he's been carrying on the negotiations with Cuba. And I don't think they've been officially announced, but as you say, people know that they're going on. Do you know what his goal is? Now, he's of Cuban descent, and he has been an opponent of the Castro government for a long time. But is he on the same page as Trump in terms of what he wants the intervention to look like and the outcome to be?

ANDERSON: In what he's said with regards to Cuba, he's been surprisingly circumspect. For a Cuban American, you would have expected perhaps a more heated response. And he - but he's

measured his words quite carefully. He's said things like, there has to be a change in Cuba. It doesn't mean that we have to make the change. In other words, what he's saying there is he would like to see a change. It doesn't have to happen all at once, is another thing he's said. So in other words, he's sort of softening things, but he's also saying, look, they have to change. They don't have anywhere to go, and so we're here to help. That's his sort of approach.

Rubio's basically saying, through his meetings that we believe are happening or were happening - the last week seems to be an impasse - that, look, you guys need to fix things because it's not working for you. Yeah, we're withholding your oil. But - you know, we can provide you with oil, but you've got to do - give us something. So give us an economic opening initially. And the problem appears to be this kind of Trumpian overlay of, and we want regime change, you know? And of course, they fear it after what happened in Venezuela and Iran. It's not lost on them that in both cases, the U.S. was supposedly having negotiations and then suddenly attacked militarily.

So they don't trust the Americans. They don't trust this administration, to call it something. And Rubio, I think, is a bit out on a limb. They know what he wants. He wants them to agree to negotiate themselves out of existence. Whether he has a clear-cut path for them to do that, it's not evident to me, and I don't think he does. I think the idea is a kind of package where they're reeled in through their need, their desperate need for fuel. The idea is that the Americans would give it to them, and they would owe the Americans for that oil, which would keep them alive. And they would have to agree to a timeline of further negotiations whereby they, you know, agree to look at their constitution and rewrite it so that it could be a multiparty state. They would have to release political prisoners and so on and so on and so on. That, at the moment, as far as I can see, is the sticking point.

GROSS: That would be a complex negotiation that would take time.

ANDERSON: It sure would. Yeah.

GROSS: And I'm wondering if you think what Rubio is trying to negotiate for - the goals that he's working toward - are similar or different from the goals of the activist Cuban Americans, particularly those in Florida, who would like to return to Cuba or who want to stay in Florida but want the assets that they left in Cuba when they fled to be returned to them.

ANDERSON: So there is a law prohibiting the United States president from lifting the embargo, which has been in place since 1962. It's called the Helms-Burton law. Clinton actually signed it into law in 1996 following the shootdown of a couple of Cessna airplanes that flew into Cuban airspace, which killed four people, including three U.S. citizens. This was a law that the right wing of the day, you know, Helms and Burton, senators had been trying to get through. And he had been staving them off. He didn't - you know, there had always been a kind of liberal current trying to engage Cuba in a kind of detente, and he had been active in that.

When this shootdown happened, he felt he had to sign this Helms-Burton law, which made the blockade permanent and can only be lifted through an act of Congress. It has several components. Successive presidents actually did waivers to suspend its more onerous, restrictive protocols. But Trump has reactivated that, has activated that. And so what that means is that it's

paved the way for lawsuits against the Cuban government for confiscated properties going back to the beginning of the revolution. And this has allowed lawsuits to, you know, enter the court system. And it includes several large lawsuits by U.S. corporations.

There's a group of congressmen out of Miami who are Cuban Americans, very right-wing. And they're consistently calling for much more strenuous policies to be directed against Cuba, such as cutting off all means of remittances from the United States to the island. It's currently estimated about 40% of Cubans on the island live through remittances sent by their relatives in the United States. Most of the food and medicines going into Cuba come from the United States. And, you know, you can still fly to Cuba. They haven't closed down all the flights.

So they would like to see the island strangled, asphyxiated. And that's actually the language used to me some months back by Carlos Gimenez, a Republican Congressman from Miami, who talked about a kind of shock therapy. And when I questioned him on this and called him out on the consequences of this, humanitarian consequences, he described it to me as like cancer. You know, sometimes chemo does a lot of harm to the body, but you get rid of the cancer. And that's how he viewed the need for this kind of approach. Now, that is not the approach that, so far, Rubio is using towards Cuba.

GROSS: Well, let me reintroduce you again. My guess is Jon Lee Anderson. And his new article in The New Yorker is titled "Is Cuba Next" We'll be right back. This is FRESH AIR.

(SOUNDBITE OF MICHELLE LORDI SONG, "WAYWARD WIND")

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Right now, there are a couple of humanitarian missions where tankers are being sent, through volunteers from several countries, to Cuba with supplies from - I think from America and from other countries. Supplies of, like, medicine and food and even fuel. And some people, I think, in Cuba are objecting to that because they fear that all these supplies will be handled through the government. And the government will, one, take credit for it, and two, might take some of it for themselves and not fairly distribute it. And I wonder if you've been following that story.

ANDERSON: Somewhat, yes. I mean, this is just happening in the past week, really. You have, you know, the rainbow coalition of, you know, left-wing activists, Greta Thunberg, others there making the point that they are there out of solidarity or trying to bring - you know, bust the blockade with humanitarian boats and supplies. You have that effort on the one hand.

And you also had recent efforts by the U.S. ambassador there, who brought in food aid boxes and had it distributed to recent hurricane victims, people who were displaced, through the Catholic Church. And he did so pointedly through the Catholic Church. This was apparently in tandem with directives from Rubio so that the government would not be involved in the distribution. The point there was as political as it was anything else. The point was that we're doing it ourselves. We don't trust the government. And by doing it this way, we're undermining their viability.

GROSS: I want to ask you about one more person in the Castro family, who is, I think, like, the anomaly in the family, judging from your article. And it's, I think, Raul's grandson, Sandro. Is it Raul's grandson?

ANDERSON: Oh, no, that's Fidel's grandson.

GROSS: Fidel's grandson. OK. And he is a social media influencer. He's a partier. He's into, like, dancing and drinking. He owns a bar in Havana. So where does he fit into the whole Castro family and the whole Castro government?

ANDERSON: It's a good question. Sandro is sort of the uncomfortable grandson. Look, Fidel Castro and Raul Castro both had, you know, offspring. Fidel famously was very austere. He didn't give his kids any breaks. Let's put it that way. If you talk to people who knew them, who went to school with the kids or knew Fidel, they all talk about how Fidel was just, not mean, but he insisted that his children embody the spirit of the revolution. You know, he himself was very austere.

His brother, Raul, was more flexible. And when he came into office, he made life easier for a lot of Cubans. You know, he lifted the restriction on the internet. They could have smartphones. It was very difficult to leave Cuba before under Fidel, it was less so under Raul, et cetera. So he made life easier for them, although the security state stayed in place, as it has to this day. So the idea that one of Fidel's grandsons has suddenly broken with all of that familial austerity and, you know, face to the flag kind of behavior is interesting.

And of course, it's caught people attention. And a lot - and Cubans are aware of it, too, because they're now on the internet. They weren't 10 years ago, you know? And - but he's like a kid of the present day. He's more like - he - what is he, Gen X? I don't know how you - I can't do the categories. Sorry. But you know what I mean.

GROSS: (Laughter) It's OK.

ANDERSON: He just does what he wants, which is sort of what an American kid would do, right?

GROSS: And he also seems to satirize the government.

ANDERSON: Yeah. Yeah. You know, it's interesting that one of the Castros has produced the first, you know, in-your-face, I-say-what-I-want, I-do-what-I-want person on social media. Isn't that interesting?

GROSS: Doesn't that have, in part, to do with the fact that he's privileged enough to be able to do it?

ANDERSON: Yes.

GROSS: He's privileged enough to party in on a bar, and safe enough, 'cause probably his family isn't going to imprison him.

ANDERSON: That's right. If his grandfather was still alive, I can assure you that Sandro would not be doing what he's doing. He would have had his bottom slapped or whatever they do, and he would have been sent off to some, you know, monastery somewhere. He would...

GROSS: (Laughter).

ANDERSON: He would not be doing what he's doing. We're in a new era. There are those Cubans who, when you ask about Sandro, it raises their hackles, especially the older generation. They're furious that someone like him exists, and they just have to swallow it 'cause they're aware that he's, of course, a Castro. And that's why he's doing what he's doing, 'cause other people can't do that. And then, you know, I suppose, amongst younger Cubans, they like the fact that there's someone doing that. They may feel that it gives them shade, you know? So there we are. We're in the new Cuba.

GROSS: Last year, your latest book was published, called "To Lose A War: The Fall And Rise Of The Taliban." And it was about Afghanistan, which, you know, you've covered. What lessons about regime change did you learn from covering Afghanistan and from writing this book - the Afghanistan book?

ANDERSON: You know, that's such a good question. Nobody has asked me that until now. Well, gosh. There are so many parallels and so many differences. Let me just speak about Hamid Karzai, the man that we hand-picked. You know, he was an exile figure who we brought in after the Taliban, and we supposedly empowered him to assemble this new country out of this place that had been at war for years and years and years. Well, it didn't work out well.

And in my book, and what I found in my reporting was that the main reason it didn't work out well was we gave him - we did not respect him. We did not invest that man with the sovereignty he needed in order to gain the respect of his people, and it really fell apart. It became like a bad public marriage where, you know, you go with your husband or your wife to the cocktail party, and one or the other throws a scene. It was like that. And ultimately, we saw what happened. I mean, it's - the - you can talk about Afghanistan from many different angles. But ultimately, the country is now back in the hands of the Taliban, and that effort at regime change did not work. But the main reason it did not work was an American failing.

We did not, one, invest our - the man we chose to be their president with true power, visible power. And two, we never engaged fully culturally with the country. We were always just hovering above the ground in our bases and our - you know, our Humvees and our airplanes. We never really, you know, entered the country. We didn't empower it in a civic sense, truly. We didn't invest in it in any kind of rooted way. We dug wells. We taught women's rights. We did this. We did that. We had military bases. And then we left, and we left a lot of military gear behind. But we didn't invest in housing. We didn't invest in education. We didn't think about it beyond our own immediate needs of counterinsurgency, and what political solutions we oversaw were band-aid solutions. If you show that much disdain and cultural divorce from the place

you're entering in a bellicose way as a warring party, then, you know, you're not going to win them over. You're always going to be an alien.

That's what we did in Vietnam. It's what we did again in Iraq. It's what we did in Afghanistan. You know? And I - mark my words. It's what we're doing in Iran. And the disdain shown by Trump and his people towards Cuba - however bad, however much the Cuban regime needs changing, the idea that you come with language that sits in ignorance of everything of the past 200 years that has to do with that country - the fact that it does have proud - pride, national pride, nationalism and always views itself in light of this huge country immediately to its north that's always tried to dominate it - you know, it's just repeating the old cycle again and again and again. So read your history. Do your lessons. Show some compassion for other cultures. These are the maxims I took away from American-style regime change - almost always a catastrophic failure.

GROSS: Well, let me reintroduce you again. My guest is Jon Lee Anderson, and his new article in The New Yorker is titled, "Is Cuba Next?" This is FRESH AIR.

(SOUNDBITE OF CHARLES MINGUS' "SELF-PORTRAIT IN THREE COLORS")

GROSS: This is FRESH AIR. Let's get back to the interview I recorded yesterday with Jon Lee Anderson. He has a new article in The New Yorker titled "Is Cuba Next? Trump's Campaign To Topple Foreign Adversaries Encounters A Battered But Defiant Regime." He recently returned from a reporting trip to Cuba. He lived in Havana for a few years in the '90s while researching his book "Che Guevara: A Revolutionary Life."

I want to talk with you a little bit about your biography of Che Guevara 'cause I think the research you did and the way you went about it was pretty fascinating. You managed to befriend Che's widow, and she gave you access to unpublished journals that he kept. She gave you access to the office, his home office, and - which was kept the same as it had been. So you were able to sit in his chair and read the books that remained on his desk and gain a lot of insights into his thinking. You also befriended some of Che's friends and siblings, and some of them ended up being - still remaining - friends and also sources for you. You sympathized with the early Che when he had these very idealistic goals, and he kind of lost you when he became more doctrinaire. You felt that he had a really open mind, but then he closed it when he settled on, you know, socialism or communism as the path forward. Can you talk about that change of heart for you?

ANDERSON: The young Che Guevara was an incredibly open-minded man. He was - young man. He was - he read everything under the sun. You know, Faulkner, the Bagavad Gita, you know, Whitman. He was a humanist. He was - he devoured knowledge. He was looking - eventually looking for a cause. He was very shocked at the socioeconomic conditions of people in the hemisphere as he traveled around Latin America. But once he was in Guatemala, where there was the CIA-backed overthrow of a socialist government, which he witnessed and lived through, he became extremely anti-American and resolved that Marxism-Leninism was the only credo which had the power to fight against what he saw as the ultimate enemy - the Yankees, which he - whom he called the enemies of humanity.

And for a number of years, he became extremely doctrinaire, very severe. And I found my own - I remember sitting at his desk in his house, where he had sat. There was even a - one of his uniforms hanging from a perch nearby, you know, moldy a bit with the humidity in Cuba. And at that point, I remember reading his diary where he resolved that he was going to be now a Marxist-Leninist. And I remember thinking to myself, no. No. Don't. Don't. You know, kind of, don't go there. Don't be so intransigent. Keep your mind open, please. You know? 'Cause I very much felt that he was a kindred spirit, or I felt a great affinity for this young, rebellious, idealistic, intrepid guy who was, you know, seeking out adventure, but also meaning in the world. And to see him become small-minded, doctrinaire, intransigent, disappointed me.

And he remained like that for a while, but when he left Cuba again at the end of his life, at - he was evolving again. He had - in the few years he was a public figure, he - he'd learned enough to be disappointed privately in what he saw the Soviet Union had become and was trying to do in Cuba. It didn't change him from wanting to be a socialist, but he was becoming more realistic again. I often think, what would have - he died at the age of 39. I wonder what would have happened if Che had lived another 10 years? He was quite a unique figure.

GROSS: Well, Jon Lee Anderson, thank you so much for joining us. Be safe.

(LAUGHTER)

GROSS: And...

ANDERSON: Thank you.

GROSS: And be well.

ANDERSON: Thanks so much, Terry.