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# LARRY CRAIG

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NEWS RELEASE

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## **One Dinner Table at a Time** **by Senator Larry Craig**

Ronald Reagan once said, “All great change in America begins at the dinner table.” I think this is probably true of a lot of nations and cultures around the world. Change in a society begins at a very personal level, through face-to-face interactions with people you know.

Governor Otter understands this principle very well, and I suspect it is a motivating factor behind his trade mission to Cuba. By leading a delegation of 35 state officials, business leaders and agricultural producers, Governor Otter seeks to change a number of things in that island nation.

One of those is Idaho’s trade relationship with Cuba. Last year, according to a recent newspaper article, Cuba imported \$340 million in U.S. farm products, including chicken, wheat, corn and a number of other agricultural products. But none of those products came from Idaho, even though our state is a top producer of barley, potatoes, peas, lentils, and a variety of other high-quality foodstuffs.

Establishing trading relationships between Cuba and Idaho producers will open up a new market for Idaho producers. An aide to the governor noted that the goal of the trip is “To try and sell as many groceries as he can,” while there.

Why is this important? For most of the United States’ existence, we have been a net exporter of agricultural goods – meaning we export more food than we import. But, for a variety of reasons, that proud tradition is in trouble. So it is important for Idaho’s business and political leaders to do all we can to open new markets for America’s and Idaho’s farmers and ranchers.

Of course, Idaho is known for more than high-quality ag products, but current U.S. policy limits trade with Cuba to food and medical goods only.

Beyond the dollars and cents, there is another change that is more important. Governor Otter and I have both long believed that fostering trade with Cuba presents unique opportunities in other areas. That’s why Butch and I led a trade mission to the island in 2004: cultural and political engagement.

Fidel Castro and his government will not last forever. When Castro goes, the United States must be in a position to have a positive influence in Cuba, and we will be much more capable if person-to-person relationships are already in place at that time. We cannot be a positive influence from the standpoint of confrontation and isolation.

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By engaging the Cuban people on a basic level, we can give them firsthand experience with American people, our culture, and our system of government. You might say we're working to inspire a grassroots movement for democracy and capitalism in our neighbor.

Will we be successful? I'm optimistic, but I don't know for sure. I certainly believe this approach deserves a good try, because the approach we've taken for the last four decades certainly hasn't worked the way we all had hoped. It's time for something new.

Fidel Castro is a brutal dictator, and under his direction, Cuba has supported and trained terrorists. The United States isn't likely to change Castro's mind any time soon. But the Cuban people may be a different story. Through interaction and by giving them small glimpses of capitalism and a democratic society, we can win the debate from the bottom up, instead of from the top down – in part, by putting Idaho goods on their dinner tables.