Mr. Moderator, Town Meeting Members, — I’m Peter Miller, former Town Meeting member, precincts 8 and 11. I’m pleased to be here and see you all.

In moving the Article by Petition as the main motion, I want to underline three points in this Call for an End to the Embargo against Cuba and Respect for Cuba’s Sovereignty.

I want to point out our area of agreement to end this long-term mistaken major foreign policy - and then comment on two areas at issue.

With regard to the call for an end to the Embargo, we are all in major accord. The joint report cites a recent Gallup poll showing 59% of the American public in favor. Actually, this was from early last year. More recent polls show even higher figures: 73% of all Americans, 59% of Republicans alone. From amongst the Selectmen and the Advisory Committee and the 50-60 I spoke with, figures are even substantially higher. Expressing our support, along with that of other localities, can undoubtedly contribute to its eventual end.

And here we come to the first point at issue: the references to specific federal bills, references whose removal is argued for since such legislation is often long and complex, can contain hidden riders, and Selectmen had no opportunity to review it. Point well taken, we should look. Easy to do at congress.gov — where we find not only the absence of any riders or amendments, but bills of record shortness, according to the Advisory Subcommittee, from 23-82 lines, that is, a quarter to slightly over one page, bills that essentially remove Presidential prohibitions on travel in one case and delete export restrictions from existing laws in the other. These are bills that do precisely what they purport to do and are the direct legislative links between the local resolution and the federal action they point to. There is no reason not to be specific about them, is there?
More serious is the second deletion that calls for a response and objection. The original petition notes the existence of covert “regime change” — “democracy promotion” — operations by the US Agency for International Development, USAID, and calls for their disavowal and the end of support for them, statements of fact and condition as clear as those that support the call to end the Embargo.

For some reason that is still unclear, the Advisory Committee chose to eliminate these sections altogether and did so originally in all of one sentence:

   Members felt that covert operations, whether they exist or not, are necessarily secret and cannot be evaluated or condemned.

This claim is mistaken in each of its four parts, and I came to Town Meeting last Thursday prepared to respond to each of its parts, only to find a supplement that responded to a second discussion. Here the confusion is not so succinct, it is spread over 3-4 paragraphs that reflect a profound misunderstanding of what USAID covert operations are. Here there is no denial such programs exist, but rather since they’ve been so clearly reported on, “it is something of a misnomer to call them ‘covert’ operations.” Furthermore, though many are misguided or unsuccessful, they are “primarily attempts to bring greater democracy to Cuba,” like “assistance that has been sent to families of Cuban political prisoners.” This is just false and confusing.

Let me clarify why this is so confused by offering a brief summary of three recent examples, why we should acknowledge their existence, and call for the end of support and funding for them.

Available at the online domain that is bigstory.ap.org, one was planned in the mountains near Barcelona and involved channeling 1.6 million dollars secreted in offshore accounts to establish ZunZuneo, Cuban slang for a hummingbird’s tweet, an imitation Twitter application, and distribute it to
40,000 Cuban cell-phone users whose numbers were in fact stolen, all set up to inspire them to organize “smart mobs” to trigger a “Cuban spring” uprising against the government.

Another story involved a complementary program led by Alan Gross, who had repeatedly brought in explicitly illegal Internet broadcast equipment, whose arrest was declared by US officials to be that of an innocent humanitarian merely helping distressed communities in Havana develop communications resources, and who, a week after his release, received a $3.2 million settlement that USAID’s press release noted “[avoids the cost, delay and risks of further proceedings, and] does not constitute an admission of liability by either party.”

Less well-known than either of these — but still at bigstory.ap — was the USAID project with Creative Associates International, a Washington, D.C., corporation, run by a Serbian contractor, who used a Panama front company and a bank in Lichtenstein to fund and “secretly infiltrate Cuba’s underground hip-hop movement, recruiting unwitting rappers to spark a youth rebellion against the government.”

Does anyone really want to argue these embarrassing, foolish, questionably legal, and ill-advised operations are not covert or that they’re like aid sent to families of political prisoners? Especially as projects of USAID, it is as if they were undertaken by the Peace Corps. To say we cannot condemn them is perhaps language that is too inflammatory. But to call for “an end to any and all funding of and support for covert USAID ‘regime change’ operations and programs and affirmation thereof” is as sensible and reasonable as the call to End the Embargo itself and to strike them out and ask to remove them is a special cause for their inclusion.

Please join me and do not strike these conditions and this recommendation from the petitioners’ Article. Thank you.