

The Alliance of George W. Bush and Fidel Castro?

Reassessing Perceptions and Consequences of U.S. Policy in Cuba

BY LILLIAN GUERRA

Over the course of the last five years, the originality of many average Cubans' analysis of the Bush administration's efforts to tighten the U.S. embargo and thereby strangle, if not topple, the regime of Fidel Castro, has become especially striking. Particularly eloquent is the assessment of one sixty-year-old woman who lost her job at a privately owned food kiosk near Havana, when the state inexplicably shut it down in July 2005: "The truth is that every day Bush is a greater friend of Fidel. The two of them are destroying us, one in order maintain himself in government, the other to ensure that once the Revolution disappears, all of us will be naked and barefoot, so his people can take us over."¹ Like many Cubans, this woman is convinced that the economic policies of George W. Bush and Fidel Castro serve each other's political needs.

Beginning in March 2003 a wave of ever more sweeping changes to U.S. Treasury Department regulations overseeing U.S. citizens' ability to travel to Cuba have effectively eliminated all legal forms of cultural exchange with Cuba. They have also reduced the opportunities for U.S. students and scholars not already specializing in Cuba to travel, study, or attend professional meetings there. The Bush administration has also severely restricted the rights of U.S.-based Cubans, whether citizens or residents of the United States, to travel to Cuba, limiting such visits to once every four years. This latter move angered more recent Cuban immigrants who, unlike the exile community that left Cuba immediately after the 1959

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Revolution, retain stronger ties to Cuba through annual travel to their native country.²

The results of these changes in U.S. policy are obvious to any long-term observer of Cuba. As in other islands of the Caribbean, the welfare and living standards of many Cubans are directly related to the influx of remittance payments from family members abroad. Even when Cubans do not receive such payments themselves, the additional wealth in the economy resulting from remittances provides many Cubans with opportunities and incentives to craft, sell, or buy goods that they would otherwise not have. Unlike the situation on other islands, the U.S. embargo makes Cubans' challenges doubly difficult, since visiting family members often provide better quality goods and even medicines that are either not available in Cuba or sold under highly restricted market conditions imposed by the communist state to serve a hard currency-paying foreign clientele.

Indeed, as jobs in the traditional state sector produced too little income for Cubans and key industries, such as sugar mills, began to close, Cubans increasingly turned to the domestic trafficking of illicit items such as hand-made cheeses and even wedding dresses through an ever-expanding internal market. These transactions, most of them small, supplemented income or replaced it altogether for those Cubans who left state jobs and became "self-employed," a status the state legalized for the first time in 1992 to alleviate the mass unemployment resulting from the collapse of the Soviet Union.

Until the new U.S. measures came into effect, the Cuban government arguably tolerated, if not encouraged, the existence of such an informal sector as a way of relieving pressure on itself and mitigating popular demands that it provide economic security and the kind of access to the tourist facilities and beach resorts its leaders touted as the property of the "people" after the Revolution. By staunching the flow of money to Cuba by restricting exile visits and eliminating legal categories of travel for cultural exchange, the Bush administration has prompted the Castro government to take measures that force Cubans back into positions of economic dependence on the state. Over the last year, the Castro government has clamped down on small businesses to monopolize the internal flow of hard currency, increasing the power and control of Castro and other hardliners and leaving Cuban citizens struggling to survive.

The most important long-term impact of such a policy for Cuba has not been so much economic as political. U.S. policy and Castro's responses have not only reduced the black market traffic of goods and services on which most

Cubans have come to rely, but have also in effect shut down the black market of alternative ideas, analysis, and sources of news that exchanges with residents, organizations, and U.S. citizens had previously opened up—often to the horror of the Castro government and to the delight of those seeking change. By strengthening the credibility of Cuba’s own hardliners through open hostility and policies that have intensified the island’s isolation, the Bush administration and its supporters among the organized exile elite based in Miami have helped stifle internal debate and ideological dynamism in Cuba. The Castro regime increasingly sees any form of citizen autonomy from the state, whether at the level of one’s personal finances or intellectual beliefs, as a sign of subversion and “imperialist-engineered” dissent.³ Ironically, as the sixty-year-old woman who had worked in the kiosk noted, the apparent confluence of interests between the United States and Castro has led some Cubans to believe that the Bush administration and Castro regime have forged an informal alliance of sorts, each for their own self-interested, anti-democratic ends.

This perception of the effects and possible intentions of recent U.S. policy toward Cuba reflects the radical change in Cuban lifestyle, political climate, and perspective caused by the demise of the Soviet-led trading bloc. It also demands a re-consideration of “democracy” as Bush’s key policymakers define it. Bush’s efforts to “democratize” Cuba have helped eliminate a once expanding national commercial sector of services, industry, and small businesses that first emerged in the 1990s. By severely restricting capital flow between islanders and their relatives abroad and thereby shrinking internal markets generated by other U.S.-based travelers, these policies ensure that few, if any, island entrepreneurs will be able to compete with U.S., foreign, and exile capital once Castro is out of power. Cuba already experienced precisely such a process at the beginning of the twentieth century, when U.S. military intervention at a time of massive economic devastation paved the way for economic domination by U.S. capital, dependence, and external political control. The Cuban Revolution reversed this situation in 1959, asserting and achieving the nation’s sovereignty for the first time. Bush’s efforts to obstruct alternative venues for Cuba’s national development that are independent of both Castro and the United States, and aged revolutionary leaders’ attempts to retain their authority point toward a repetition of the same historical cycle.

Surviving the End of Communism as We Know It

Between 1989 and 1993, the demise of the Soviet-led socialist trading bloc left Cuba unsubsidized and exposed to the worst effects of the U.S. embargo for the first time in decades. Suddenly, after years of trumpeting its consider-

able achievements in health care and education, as well as the creation of a relatively egalitarian, if politically stagnant, society, the Cuban government could barely feed its people, let alone fulfill its promises to improve living standards. In 1992, Carlos Lage, an economist and member of the Cuba's Council of State, reported that imports had dropped by 73 percent.⁴ Virtually overnight, Cuba lost 85 percent of its foreign trade. The fourteen million tons of fuel it had imported annually plummeted to zero in less than three years.⁵

On a day-to-day level, soap, deodorant, aspirin, and other basic items disappeared from store shelves. Cubans resorted to bathing in a homemade mixture of cucumber juice, vinegar, and salt. Long accustomed to the scarcity of consumer items such as blue jeans and kitchen appliances, Cubans suddenly found themselves lacking the basic comforts and security provided by the government since 1959. Water came and went, entering the pipes of residential homes only once every two to five days. In response, Cubans crafted complex systems of reserve water tanks, still a prominent feature of most people's homes, to supply their needs in the off-days. Everywhere, state shops, movie houses, and bookstores closed. Unemployment and underemployment, which had been virtually eliminated under socialism, skyrocketed. In Havana, tens of thousands of stray cats disappeared as Cubans struggled to vary an entirely ration-based diet of stale rice and unseasoned beans that the state acquired as cheaply as possible. In the mid-1990s, the beans were often so old that they required four to six hours of pressurized cooking to soften.

Unavoidably, the economic crisis sparked an ideological catharsis as young Cubans, raised to believe that they should "be like el Che," began documenting the surreal conditions in which they lived, condemning the Cuban government's self-serving attempt to survive by turning to state-controlled capitalism, foreign investment, and international tourism. The same state that had consistently branded any form of capitalism as a betrayal of the Revolution and regularly repudiated its citizens for retaining ties to exiled relatives, was suddenly desperate to embrace foreign capitalists and tourists of any kind in the 1990s, even if they came from Miami.

But their leaders' hypocrisy did not just shock and anger Cubans; it also freed them to find their own way in the economy and the external world of information, politics, and culture. Artists, filmmakers, intellectuals, and average citizens found that new self-employment laws opened up spaces for individual economic autonomy, self-expression, and dissent that had not existed before. Musicians such as Carlos Varela took full advantage of

the opportunity to condemn the Cuban government's hypocrisy and political hubris through the lyrics of their songs, giving an unprecedented voice to general discontent.⁷ Illegal internet connections, sold to private citizens by state employees overseeing institutional servers such as University of Havana's, suddenly gave Cuba's extremely well-educated populace unprecedented access to foreign news sources that often covered events in their own society about which they had known nothing thanks to the state-controlled media. In the last five years, hip-hop singers, rappers, and rock groups such as Buena Fe have expanded their critiques to encompass police harassment of black Cubans and the effects of unchecked state exploitation of the environment.⁷

Emblematic of the harder line taken in response to the new U.S. policies, Cuban officials now openly compare the danger posed by Cuban musicians' criticism with that of journalists who were jailed for counter-revolutionary dissidence, a thinly veiled—and potentially ominous—threat.⁸ That the Cuban government is concerned about forms of cultural expression that it once allowed to flourish shows just how radical and powerful Cuba's young critical voices now appear to a state that its people increasingly see as illegitimate.

Judging from the apocalyptic tenor of foreign analysts' views of these changes, nothing short of a miracle could have saved the regime from collapse. As one analyst wrote in 1993:

[After 1992,] Latin American revolution was dead. The economic prospect for Cuba was endless sacrifice, if not famine. Castro's charisma, once buoyed by youth and success, was now tattered by age and failure. Cuba was now a historical curiosity, more pitied than feared. The dream of a Caribbean utopia was dead.⁹

It seemed that no one, except the Cubans themselves, was convinced that Cuba might survive what Castro termed the "Special Period" without U.S. "help" and "*una invasion de los locos de Miami* [an invasion by those crazy people from Miami]."¹⁰ Confronted with an economy in free-fall and no resources to cover the costs of electricity or transportation, let alone an industrial base that was entirely state-owned, the survival of Castro's government in Cuba defied most analysts' expectations.¹¹ Its survival can be attributed to profound reversals in economic policy born of desperation and undeniable realities. Beginning in 1992, the Cuban state successfully created a tightly controlled capitalist system based on the U.S. dollar, which today functions

side-by-side with an increasingly under-funded and neglected national infrastructure of state-run schools, hospitals, research centers, and production facilities. To solve the alarming unemployment problem, the Cuban state suddenly reversed its twenty-six-year-old ban on private property and the ownership of small businesses, allowing Cubans to create the sources of their own livelihood for the first time since 1967 through self-employment. Inefficient state collective farms were broken up and, to great rejoicing among many Cuban peasants, land was returned to farmers in the form of cooperatives. Undoubtedly, the salvation of Cuba can be attributed as much to the Cuban government's efforts to restore its infrastructure and develop tourism as it can to Cubans' passionate entrepreneurialism, ingenuity, and capacity to "*inventar*."

More than ten years later, neither revolution nor the dream of a socialist utopia is officially dead from the perspective of island Cubans, and to the great disappointment of Cuban exiles in the United States, Fidel Castro is very much alive. Exile leaders' expectations for an easy take-over of the island's political scene following Castro's death speak to the continued strength of counter-revolutionary opposition, and to these leaders' arrogant, if naïve, understanding of how Cuban islanders view them, U.S. policy, and Cuba's future. For example, when Castro fainted under a blazing sun while giving a speech on live television in June 2001, Miami public officials, including its mayor and police chief, reacted to the possibility of his imminent death by coordinating local, state, and federal contingency plans. They anticipated everything from a mass exodus of refugees from the island to euphoric street celebrations of tens of thousands of

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Cuban-Americans to the flooding of the Florida straits with boats loaded with exiles eager to return and take command of their home island. The government was prepared for a "Mariel in reverse," as U.S. Representative and anti-Castro activist Ileana Ros-Lehtinen (R-FL) called it, referring to the boatlift that brought approximately 125,000 Cubans to the United States in 1980. The Cuban American National Foundation (CANF), the premier anti-Castro group based in Miami, also planned to deliver twenty-five-pound boxes of food rations to Cubans whom they presumed would be both starving and grateful. The boxes would have included a message of "congratulations" to the Cuban people whose exact wording CANF President José Hernández wanted to leave as a "surprise."¹²

More concrete signs of seventy-eight-year-old Castro's undeniable fragility came when he fell while walking on stage before a live audience in November 2004, reportedly fracturing several bones. By the next day, island Cubans joked that plans must already be underway in Miami to build a monument to the step responsible for the accident, since it had done "what neither Yankee imperialism nor the Miami Cubans could do: achieve the fall of Castro."¹³ Island Cubans' humorous response to Castro's "fall" demonstrates the degree to which U.S. policymakers in Washington and Cuban exile leaders in Miami are confused. Their views of Cuba have arguably derived from three related and self-serving understandings: that Cubans see the United States and Miami exile groups as "democratic;" that Cubans see the United States and Miami exile groups as their saviors from a despotic tyrant; and that Cubans want their country to resemble the United States economically, from Wal-Mart to McDonald's. They are wrong on all counts. If anything, most Cubans see the United States and Miami exiles as just as hypocritical, authoritarian, and ignorant of the struggles that shape their daily lives as their own revolutionary government. In fact, since 1993, when the Cuban government first allowed the licensing of small, locally owned businesses, it has done everything in its power to prevent those businesses from growing.

While the Cuban government argues that heavy regulations on everything from pizza stands to privately owned bed and breakfasts are meant to keep Cuba "classless," most Cubans would disagree. Licensing such businesses involves paying the Cuban government 50-90 percent of revenues just to be allowed to operate, an indirect tax meant to keep private citizens from competing with state enterprises for tourist dollar. As one small businessman on the island noted in March 2005,

The government only says that in order to cover up the fact that there are already major class differences in Cuban society that are the inevitable result of its own policies. The [Cuban] government says "socialism or death" but it exists thanks to its own commitment to capitalism. The reason it taxes us so heavily is that the leadership knows it can't compete with the quality, creativity or intimacy of service that any small-time restaurant owner can offer a foreign or native customer. And the survival of the Cuban state depends on the dollar that such a customer brings to the island; economic power translates into political power and if we, the citizens, become completely autonomous of the state in meeting our daily needs, then we might start

making our own demands and develop our own destiny, outside of the state's control. That's why George Bush is an accomplice, not really an enemy, of Fidel: both want to make us dependent on *them* for our survival. Anything less would not be sufficient.¹⁴

Like Cuban socialism, U.S. imperialism remains an all or nothing game in which Cubans are forced to choose a side. This game began in the early 1960s when Castro's supporters and U.S. government leaders both depicted themselves as the only morally correct, truly democratic guarantors of collective "freedom." Indeed, Cubans know what opening the borders to U.S. businesses and Miami's capital-rich exiles would do to their flourishing trade in smoked ham or hand-made shoes. If government regulation already makes it next to impossible for Cubans to compete with Cuba's state-owned businesses, then "box stores" and Miami's chain restaurants serving Cuban food would make it entirely impossible.

Old Habits Die Hard

Since taking office in 2001, the Bush administration has enhanced policies admittedly designed to overthrow the Castro government and also control the means by which Cuban citizens obtain alternative information and form their own ideas, both about themselves and the United States. Beginning in 2003, revised regulations of the U.S. embargo on Cuba deliberately prohibited autonomous, person-to-person dialogue through cultural and most academic programs. These policies represent a revival and extension of ideological positions and strategies first adopted by the administrations of Ronald Reagan and George H.W. Bush. Before Reagan took office, security concerns over Cuba in the foreign policy and intelligence communities had receded to the point of triviality, prompting such political foes as Henry Kissinger and Jimmy Carter to endorse peaceful co-existence with the Cuban state.¹⁵ In a 1977 interview with Barbara Walters, Castro seconded this view, asserting Cuba's need to "sit down on equal terms" with the United States as the only pre-condition for achieving the resolution of many differences between them.¹⁶ The potential for a normalization of relations ended abruptly in 1981, when Reagan assumed the presidency and U.S.-based exiles formed CANF with his support.¹⁷

With its members donating millions of dollars to congressional and presidential candidates over the years and receiving federal funds for counter-revolutionary programs such as Radio Martí and TV Martí, CANF's power to shape the content and discourse of U.S. policy toward Cuba remains

unrivaled by that of any countervailing organization. In the 1990s, Cuban-Americans' alliance with conservative Republicans not only "made normalization effectively nonratifiable," but also transformed U.S. foreign policy toward Cuba into a largely domestic issue that could make or break electoral victories in presidential elections.¹⁸ Early in the 1990s, then-CANF President Jorge Mas Canosa planned for the fall of Castro, and even appeared to campaign actively for the position of head of state, frequently detailing plans to dismantle Cuba's armed forces and privatize state utilities, services, and properties.¹⁹ These circumstances, coupled with the passage of the 1996 Helms-Burton Law, which allowed exiles to sue in U.S. courts for loss of property in the aftermath of the Revolution, exacerbated fears that a post-Castro future with exile "help" would be worse than the pre-1959 situation. In fact, the Helms-Burton Law destroyed any hope of achieving a peaceful accord between the United States and Cuba by establishing the overthrow of the Castro government as a permanent policy goal and prohibiting any improvement in U.S.-Cuban relations until that occurs.²⁰

That CANF leaders credit themselves with being the ideological authors of U.S. policy is clear. As CANF President Francisco José "Pepe" Hernández stated in 2000, "We are sure that, if it hadn't been for the foundation, the U.S. government would already have negotiated with Castro."²¹ In 1983, Mas Canosa explained his own "nationalist" opposition to normalizing relations with Cuba in terms of U.S. interests. At the top of his "Reasons not to Recognize Castro," he noted that "Castro's Cuba has very little to offer the United States....Despite Castro's prior threats, the American people have sweetened their coffee and smoked their cigars for the last twenty years *sans* the generosity of Castro."²²

Others, such as exile leader José Basulto, take this point even further. A veteran of the failed CIA invasion at the Bay of Pigs, Basulto founded Brothers to the Rescue, an organization that rescues Cuban rafters and regularly invaded Cuban airspace to drop anti-Castro leaflets until the Cuban air force shot down two of its planes in 1996. He sees exile groups as using the U.S. government for their own ends:

In 1961, I, like the other members of Brigade 2506, worked *with*—not *for*—the CIA....[The next year, during the Cuban missile crisis] the Americans negotiated about something that was none of their business: our freedom. The Americans pledged not to militarily intervene in Cuba, and they didn't allow us Cubans to do it on our own. As a result, the Castro system was finally consolidated.²³

Of course, CIA agents and operatives of those years took another view. As former CIA operative Howard Hunt attested regarding early policies of subversion, “[Cuban exile] planning...was a harmless exercise and might prove tangentially useful if they became known to Castro’s agents and served as deception material—disinformation. To paraphrase a homily: this was too important to be left to the [exiles].”²⁴

In short, both U.S. policymakers and the organized exile right have long admitted to using one another to define Cuba’s future. Nonetheless, the parties have often clashed over how to approach sectors critical to future political and economic stability, such as Cuba’s mammoth intelligence network and the vast rank-and-file membership of the Communist Party itself. However much U.S. politicians and policymakers may claim to represent the vision and interests of right-wing exiles, the United States is unlikely to favor positions that exile groups have long held dear, such as the return of millions of expropriated properties now in the hands of impoverished and desperate Cubans: doing so would risk a bloody civil war. In fact, U.S. policymakers, drawing on lessons from recent failures in Iraq, would likely court rather than condemn lower-level revolutionaries and communists, a position that CANF in particular would find reprehensible. For this reason, U.S. policy toward Cuba is as contradictory as it is hypocritical.

Currently, the Bush administration’s more stringent prohibitions on citizen exchange programs between the United States and Cuba reverse the positions of Clinton administration. That administration’s policy of promoting change on both sides of the historic divide through regulated, legal travel and personal interaction allowed as many 55,000 U.S. students to study legally in Cuba in the year 2000 alone.²⁵ By contrast, the Bush administration’s policies reveal suspicion and paranoia over the potential effects of contact between Cuban and U.S. citizens, particularly students, academics, and cultural activists. By drastically limiting the ability of U.S. citizens to travel to Cuba, the Bush approach implies that Cubans should rely on exile-generated propaganda such as CANF-directed Radio Martí for news and limits how island Cubans may analyze the regime, the United States, and the need for change. Quite possibly, the Bush administration assumes that these groups’ political values and criteria for defining democracy might deeply contradict conservative Republican ideology currently governing U.S. foreign and domestic policies. In this sense, the Bush policies ironically mirror the same kind of authoritarian tactics and restrictions on freedom of thought and information which U.S. officials and exile leaders accuse the Cuban government of committing.

Of course, Bush administration officials see their plan, ostensibly for toppling Castro and preparing Cubans for U.S.-style capitalist-democracy, as working in unprecedented ways. As Dan Fisk, deputy assistant secretary of state for Western Hemisphere affairs, stated to the *Miami Herald* in December 2004, “We are challenging the [Castro] regime in a way that it has not been challenged at least in the last 25 years. They’re feeling the pinch.” However, from the perspective of Cuban citizens, the tightening of the embargo against Cuba has affected them more than the stability of the Castro government. For example, the May 2004 measures not only reduced the amount of money Cubans in the United States can send home every quarter to a measly \$75, but they also sanctioned adherence to certain “moral values.” Family allowances can no longer be sent to people who are not members of a legally recognized nuclear family—sons, daughters, wives, or husbands. Before the May 2004 measures, a Cuban woman named Yuceika, survived on the \$100 sent monthly from Miami by the father of her twelve-year-old son. Now, she can no longer receive any money because she did not marry the father of her son and her son is too young to claim it.²⁶

While the latest round of restrictions are remarkable for their limitations on the ability of most Cubans to send money to their first cousins, godchildren, and former neighbors, they are most noteworthy for their reversal of earlier Bush policies on family remittances. In fact, the Bush administration’s initial changes to U.S. laws regulating family remittances in March 2002 did not reduce the amount of money Cubans in the United States could send their relatives during the Clinton years, but raised it—dramatically. Under Clinton, the most a Cuban in the United States could send his or her family was capped at \$300 per quarter. However, until 2004 the Bush administration’s first set of new regulations actually seemed to encourage Cubans who travel legally to Cuba to bring ten times that amount with them, up to \$3,000, to be distributed to more than ten households. Under the heading “Sending or Carrying Money to Cuba,” these now-defunct regulations stated, “No more than a combined total of \$300 of individual-to-household remittances may be sent by a remitter to any one household in any consecutive three-month period, regardless of the persons residing in that household.” However, it stipulated that “[a] licensed traveler may carry up to ten of his or her own \$300 household remittances to Cuba.”²⁷ By contrast, today’s regulations restrict the total amount of remittances that a licensed traveler to Cuba may carry to only \$300, or one-tenth as much.²⁸

Did Bush officials initially allow higher levels of remittances to facilitate the transfer of tens of thousands of dollars to Cuban counterrevolutionaries on the island? Was this the easy way to buy the attention of Castro’s critics

and ensure that they would take some action at a later date or remain loyal? Certainly, the Castro government, which regularly depicts all dissidents as paid dupes of the Bush administration in its state-controlled media, seemed to think it was.

Judging from the ambivalent message sent by small groups of street protesters in Havana in the summer of 2005, some Cubans probably agreed. Angered by weeks of near-constant electrical blackouts imposed by the Cuban government in the midst of summer heat to limit its expenditures, protesters carried humorous signs that read "*Preferimos a Bush Terrorista que a Castro Electricista* [We Prefer Bush the Terrorist over Castro the Electrician]." They also threw rocks at state workers who were renovating Havana's monolithic Hermanos Almejeira Hospital in the heart of the city. After years of serving Cuban citizens for free, the hospital has been closed by the state, which reportedly plans to re-open it as a first-class facility exclusively for foreign patients, or *turistas de la salud* [health tourists] as the state officially calls them, in exchange for a fee. Even if most Cubans did not participate in acts of protest like this, news of the protestors' slogan circulated almost immediately across Havana.

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Only a few days later, a related story "broke" on the streets of the city involving an elderly woman who had been awaiting eye surgery in Marianao's famed ophthalmology hospital, popularly known by its pre-revolutionary name of the *Hospital de la Liga Contra la Ceguera* [League against Blindness Hospital]. Upon discovering that visiting Venezuelans were being given priority and that her surgery had been cancelled, the woman returned home where she reportedly affixed a sign to her door that read "*Se permuta a Venezuela* [Moving to Venezuela]." Her protest quickly garnered the attention of her local neighborhood watch group, the Committee for the Defense of the Revolution (CDR), which accused her of harboring counter-revolutionary sympathies. When she explained the source of her frustration, CDR members apparently turned their sympathies in favor of the woman and forced the hospital to provide her medical services, citing constitutional guarantees that it must do so. Regardless of its veracity, this anecdote illustrates the growing complexity of Cubans' political analysis and how their sense of justice derives from a view of revolution that the state does not and cannot represent anymore.²⁹

Perhaps Bush's first round of changes to U.S. policy regulations did raise legal limits on remittances to facilitate Miami exile groups' "aid to dissidents" programs. However, the increased amounts of legal transfer payments did not result in massive anti-government demonstrations, riots, or even much of a fuss. Thus, the purpose of the initial 2003 regulations may have been more subtle, and arguably more insidious. Early in his presidency, Bush's Cuba policy advisors may have argued that raising the amount of money that travelers to Cuba could take to their relatives would accrue to the island's emergent, self-employed bourgeoisie. Bush's advisors may have guessed that this bourgeoisie would invest that money in their small businesses and thereby become increasingly compliant, dependent on, and grateful to their families in the United States. By May 2004, however, Bush officials seem to have concluded that the opposite was true. In my own view, it is more likely that they came to realize that Cuban entrepreneurs did not feel compliant, dependent, or grateful—but simply entitled, and that this situation did not serve the administration's long-term plan to engineer a "transition" in Cuba characterized by the transfer of economic control over the island into U.S. corporate hands. Administration officials turned to a policy of marginalizing rather than supporting the development of a national bourgeoisie. In other words, they correctly wagered that this emergent bourgeoisie would not only be national, but nationalist, favoring protection of their enterprises from capital-rich foreign competition, much as most middle-class businessmen and peasants did at the beginning of the Revolution in 1959.

Arguably, as dozens of scholars have contended over the years, it was the United States' overt hostility to any economic change in Cuba and offensive strategies to topple the Cuban revolutionary government that turned Castro

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and his nationalist supporters to the Soviet Union. An economy based on communist principles instead of state-regulated capitalism was the inevitable result. The Bush administration's imposition of draconian reductions to family visitation rights and remittance allowances has left many Cubans with the impression that he fears change just as much as Castro. As they see

it, Bush worries that a new generation of young, entrepreneurial Cubans may organize a return to the protectionist goals that originally defined the Revolution. Castro finds this potential for change equally frightening. After all, the foundations of his power initially derived from the elimination of any organized sources for criticism and political inclusion of the middle-classes

in the early 1960s. Castro's power survived not only because Soviet subsidies radically improved the standard of living and aspirations of Cuba's poor, but also because leaders held an uncontested state monopoly on information, wealth, land, and economic resources from the early 1970s forward. To maintain a top-down model of rule that involves little accountability and proscribes autonomous forms of political organization for citizens, Castro's government must maintain control over the economy. Allocation of the right to buy cars, enjoy subsidized vacations at state-owned beach resorts, and other luxuries must remain, as in the heyday of Soviet communism, as much a function of political loyalty as possible.

For the Bush administration to create the conditions for the peaceful installation of a government amenable to U.S. business interests, it must ensure that the vast majority of Cuban citizens will willingly move from dependence on low state wages to dependence on low corporate wages. At the same time, it must ensure that Cuban workers enjoy little opportunity for organization and dissent outside the parameters defined by a returning exile elite, U.S. corporations, and pragmatic former communists looking out for their own interests. Since Castro's government eliminated workers' rights to strike, bargain, and organize independently of management in the early 1960s, the neoliberal vision Bush touts offers little in the way of change for workers' relative freedom.³⁰ Therefore both Fidel Castro and George W. Bush have a stake in keeping most Cubans economically vulnerable and willing to compromise politically for the sake of survival, rather than self-sufficient and outspoken. It is this logic that makes many Cubans think that Castro and Bush are "allied." While they may have different ends in mind, their methods and lack of interest in creating an independent-minded, articulate citizenry that might jeopardize their plans remain the same.

Trading with the Enemy: The Rights of U.S. Corporations

Following the 2004 U.S. presidential elections, Roger Noriega, then the chief of the State Department's Bureau of Western Hemisphere Affairs, stated unequivocally that President Bush was committed to "the liberation of Cuba" during his second term in office. He added that Bush had a blueprint for providing social, economic, and other types of assistance to Cuba in the post-Castro age. In fact, the administration spelled out this blueprint in a May 2005 report released by then-Secretary of State Colin Powell when new measures against Cuba went into effect. Noriega's report, like Powell's, said that such assistance "is conditioned on whether Cuba is on a democratic path and whether such assistance is requested."³¹

Of course, long before 1959, the U.S. government's track record for supporting Cuba "on a democratic path" included unwavering support for corrupt and violent dictators such as Tomás Estrada Palma, Gerardo Machado, and Fulgencio Batista. Thus, it is not clear that such statements carry any credibility with Cubans on the island. More importantly, U.S. officials such as Noriega, Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice, and President Bush seem impervious to the notion that most Cubans on the island, regardless of whether they support Castro, do not believe that the United States has a right to decide whether Cuba is "on a democratic path." Cubans' unwillingness to support repeated U.S. attempts to overthrow the regime en masse strongly suggests that they do not see their political development as the United States' business, regardless of Castro's shortcomings. What is clear is that U.S. sanctions limiting legal travel to Cuba as well as limitations on family remittance payments have steadily eroded the quality of life for a massive number of Cuban citizens.

Will that negative effect "trickle up" to the Castro government as Bush and his advisors seemingly think it should? From the perspective of an increasing number of Cubans on the island, the purpose of U.S. policy toward Cuba is neither to topple the Castro government nor to weaken revolutionary leaders and make them, in Dan Fisk's words, "feel the pinch." On the contrary, the legitimacy of the revolutionary government is already weak and seems to weaken by the day. The goals of U.S. policy are not to shoot a lame horse or topple its rider but to ensure that the horse will come back to pastures controlled by the United States. Thus, it seems that the purpose of U.S. policy is to demoralize the Cuban people to such a degree that they will come to believe that U.S. control over their economic and political destiny is inevitable.

The best evidence for this lies in the possibly surprising fact that even as Bush officials have limited individual U.S. citizens' access to Cuba, it has expanded U.S. corporations' reach into Cuban markets. In the last three years, U.S. companies' ability to trade with Cuba has broadened in unprecedented ways. In 2001, President Bush signed the Trade Sanctions Reform and Export Enhancement Act, supposedly for humanitarian reasons. The law would, in theory, allow U.S. companies to sell soybeans and corn to deprived Cuban citizens. Since 2001, however, U.S. corporations selling everything from chicken and rice to California wines have signed contracts worth \$900 million with the Cuban government. In November 2001 Ramón Castro, Fidel's 80-year-old brother and minister of agriculture since the early 1960s, hosted a trade fair in which American companies participated. Two hundred fifty U.S. business people traveled to Havana under U.S. Treasury Department license and partied with Ramón Castro, Ricardo Alarcón, the head of Cuba's

National Assembly, and other revolutionary icons at the Cuban government's expense. In that week alone, they signed new contracts worth \$150 million. In mid-December 2004, the state of Louisiana sent a large trade delegation to Cuba to sign even more contracts with the Castro government worth hundreds of millions of dollars.³²

The double standards of U.S. Cuba policy has three clear effects: to make the Cuban people poorer by denying them access to their relatives' wealth; to make them more resentful of the Cuban government, their closest "oppressors;" and to convince Cubans that improving their situation will depend on the goodwill and disposition of the U.S. government and not their own initiative or independent political organizing. By allowing California wine-makers to cavort with top revolutionary leadership, the Bush administration is preparing for the post-Castro era by figuring out beforehand which members of the Communist Party are most willing and able to "trade with the enemy." Perhaps U.S. policymakers are attempting to restage events as they took shape in the former Soviet Union. Today, the former head of the KGB is now president of Russia and has a strong relationship with President Bush, despite his human rights record and self-serving approach to his own "war on terror." Similarly, so long as Castro's successors are committed to good relations with the United States, the degree of freedom and economic empowerment that Cuban citizens experience in the present or in the future does not matter.

Although the independent collection of survey data remains illegal in Cuba, my own experience living there leads me to believe that most Cubans think the U.S. government is interested only in dominating Cuba's economy as it did before 1959. The U.S. military intervention in Iraq has only contributed to this view. For the vast majority of Cubans who otherwise resent their government's triumphalism and official policy of denying Cuban society's collapsing infrastructure and general social decay, the United States under George Bush seems more imperialist than ever. As a result, the anti-imperialism of Cubans is arguably stronger than ever. In the eyes of the average Cuban, old habits on both sides die hard.

At least some U.S. citizens were already thinking along the same lines as many Cubans: that the policies of George W. Bush and Fidel Castro have made them not so much enemies as friends. When Senators Jesse Helms (R-NC) and Joseph Lieberman (D-CT) introduced legislation to allocate \$100 million in aid to U.S.-backed opposition groups in Cuba in May 2001, *The Washington Post* ran an op-ed piece titled "Playing into Castro's Hands."³³ Today, one wonders how much Castro plays into Bush's hands by attacking

local entrepreneurs and cutting off internal sources of wealth and debate in order to shore up his own power. Only time will tell which policy will matter more to the Cuban people—who, in the end, may defy the expectations of both the Bush administration and the Castro government to decide the fate of their country for themselves. ▀

NOTES

¹ Personal interview with anonymous informant, Pinar del Río, Cuba, 27 July, 2005. The author has made over twenty-six trips to Cuba since 1996, lasting between two and fourteen months.

² Wayne Smith, "Bush and Cuba: Still the Full Moon," *NACLA Report on the Americas* (September-October 2004), 4-5; Neil King, Jr. "U.S. Squeezes Cuba Travelers," *Wall Street Journal*, 14 April 2004.

³ For a discussion of the roots of this phenomenon and its intensification in recent years, see Lillian Guerra, "Paradoxes of Freedom and Revolution in Cuba, 1959-2005," *A Century of Revolution: Insurgent and Counterinsurgent Violence during Latin America's Long Cold War*, eds. Greg Grandin and Gilbert Joseph (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, forthcoming).

⁴ Carlos Lage, et al, "Únicamente con la Revolución podemos enfrentar problemas de la magnitud que hemos estado enfrentando. Entrevista con Carlos Lage, Secretario del Comité Ejecutivo del Consejo de Estado," in *¿Cuba? Sí, como no. No nos resignamos a vivir sin patria* (Madrid: Partido Comunista Popular de España, 1993), 14. For a deep analysis of the effects of this process and economic reforms in Cuba, see Manuel Monereo, Migual Riera, Juan Valdés, eds., *Cuba: Construyendo futuro. Reestructuración económica y transformaciones sociales* (Madrid: El Viejo Topo/Fundación de Investigaciones Marxistas, 2000).

⁵ Mary Alice Waters, ed. "The Revolutionary Armed Forces are the People in Uniform. Brigadier General José Ramón Fernández," *Making History: Interviews with Four Generals of Cuba's Revolutionary Armed Forces* (New York: Pathfinder Press, 1999), 116.

⁶ See Carlos Varela, *Carlos Varela en Vivo* (ARTex, 1991); *Como los peces* (Bis Music, ARTex, 1999); *Nubes* (Bis Music, ARTex, 2000).

⁷ Buena Fe, *Déjame Entrar* (Egrem, 2001), especially "La Zanja" and "Guantanamo." For a discussion of hip-hop groups and efforts to repress the most critical of their songs on racism in Cuba and state efforts to cover it up, see Eugene Robinson, *Last Dance in Havana: The Final Days of Fidel and the Start of the New Cuban Revolution* (New York: Free Press, 2004), 205-224.

⁸ Erika Kinetz, "Amid Grip of Cuba, a Market for Culture," *New York Times*, 14 December 2004.

⁹ Alfred Padula, "Cuban Socialism: Thirty Years of Controversy," eds. Enrique A. Baloyra and James A. Morris, *Conflict and Change in Cuba* (Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press, 1993), 35-36.

¹⁰ This is a phrase I have heard Cubans on the island voice repeatedly. It easily summarizes the vast ignorance with which most Cubans believe members of the exile community, especially its leaders, see the nature of the problems in Cuba and the arrogance of believing that they, rather than island Cubans, should have the right to fix them.

¹¹ See Michael J. Mazarr, "Prospects for Revolution in Post-Castro Cuba," *Journal of Interamerican Studies and World Affairs* 31: 4 (Winter 1989): 61-90; Andrew Zimbalist, "Teetering on the Brink: Cuba's Current Economic and Political Crisis," *Journal of Latin American Studies* 24:2 (May 1992), 407-418; see also Baloyra and Morris, *Conflict and Change in Cuba*.

¹² Dana Canedy, "On Land and Sea, Florida Plans for Turmoil after Castro's Death," *New York Times*, 2 July 2001; and "Castro Jokes about Fainting Spell," *New York Times*, 23 June 2001.

¹³ Personal email correspondence with several anonymous colleagues and friends, 2004.

¹⁴ Personal interview with an anonymous entrepreneur, Havana, Cuba, November 2004.

¹⁵ William M. LeoGrande, "From Havana to Miami: U.S. Cuba Policy as a Two-Level Game," *Journal of Interamerican Studies and World Affairs* 40:1 (Spring 1998): 70-72.

¹⁶ Barbara Walters and Fidel Castro, "An Interview with Fidel Castro," *Foreign Policy* 28 (Autumn 1977), 26.

¹⁷ William M. LeoGrande, "Cuba," *Confronting Revolution: Security Through Diplomacy in Central America*, eds. Moris J. Blachman, et al. (New York: Pantheon, 1986), 229-255.

¹⁸ LeoGrande, "From Havana to Miami," 75-81; Wayne Smith, "Cuba: The Policy that Time Has Passed By," *Los Angeles Times*, 9 September 2001; Robert Levine, *Secret Missions to Cuba: Fidel Castro, Bernardo Benes and Cuban Miami* (New York: Palgrave Books, 2001), 249-285; and Jorge Domínguez, "U.S. Policy toward Cuba in the 1980s and 1990s," *Annals of the American Academy of Political and Social Science* 533 (May 1994), 165-176.

¹⁹ University of West Florida, "Campaign for Cuba," Public Broadcasting Station: 1993; and for example, Jorge Mas Canosa, "Cena Mensual de Misión Martí" and "Nuestro Programa," *Jorge Mas Canosa: En busca de una Cuba Libre* 3: 1694-1718.

²⁰ William M. LeoGrande, "Enemies Evermore: US Policy towards Cuba after Helms-Burton," *Journal of Latin*

American Studies 29:1 (February 1997), 211-221.

²¹ Hernando Calvo and Katlijn Declercq, *Dissidents or Mercenaries? The Cuban Exile Movement: An Exposé of the Cuban American National Foundation and Anti-Castro Groups* (Melbourne: Ocean Press, 2000), 70.

²² Jorge Mas Canosa, "Razones para No Reconocer a Castro," *Jorge Mas Canosa: En busca de una Cuba Libre. Edición completa de sus discursos, entrevistas y declaraciones, 1962-1997* Vol. I (Miami: North-South Center Press, 2003), 398.

²³ *Ibid.*, 37-38.

²⁴ Howard Hunt, *Give Us This Day* (New Rochelle, NY: Arlington House, 1973), 61-62.

²⁵ This figure is based on the report of U.S. State Department representatives who sponsored a NAFSA Country Culture Workshop hosted by Harvard University's International Office and David Rockefeller Center for Latin American Studies, Cambridge, MA, March 2001.

²⁶ Nancy San Martín, "Bush's Squeeze on Castro Puts Many Cubans in Pain," *Miami Herald*, 5 December 2004.

²⁷ See U.S. Department of the Treasury, Office of Foreign Assets Control, "Cuba: What You Need to Know about the U.S. Embargo: An Overview of the Cuban Assets Control Regulations: Title 31, Part 515, U.S. Code of Federal Regulations," revised 24 March 2003, 4.

²⁸ U.S. Department of the Treasury, Office of Foreign Assets Control, "Comprehensive Guidelines for License Applications to Engage in Travel-Related Transactions Involving Cuba," revised 30 September 2005, 78.

²⁹ The author heard multiple accounts of both of these events while living in Cuba and conducting research over the summer of 2005. Both protests were reported to have occurred in the first week of August, a historically symbolic period since it marks the anniversary of a series of street protests and the government's armed repression of protestors in 1994, the first incident of its kind since the triumph of the revolution in 1959.

³⁰ For an excellent discussion of the decline of the Cuban labor movement after 1959, see Marifeli Pérez-Stable, *The Cuban Revolution: Origins, Course, and Legacy* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1993), 61-118.

³¹ Associated Press, "Top Official Says U.S. Seeks Cuba's 'Liberation,'" *Kansas City Star*, 4 December 2004.

³² Lourdes García Navarro, "Trade with Cuba Flourishes Despite Embargo," *All Things Considered*, National Public Radio, aired 4 November 2004.

³³ Andrew Reding, "Playing into Castro's Hands," *Washington Post*, 23 May 2001.

The bush-castro alliance? making our own demands and develop our own destiny, outside of the state's control. That's why George Bush is an accomplice, not really an enemy, of Fidel: both want to make us dependent on them for our survival. Anything less would not be sufficient.¹⁴ Like Cuban socialism, U.S. imperialism remains an all or nothing game in which Cubans are forced to choose a side.