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Fidel's Final Victory

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Summary: The smooth transfer of power from Fidel Castro to his successors is exposing the willful ignorance and wishful thinking of U.S. policy toward Cuba. The post-Fidel transition is already well under way, and change in Cuba will come only gradually from here on out. With or without Fidel, renewed U.S. efforts to topple the revolutionary regime in Havana can do no good -- and have the potential to do considerable harm.

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CUBA AFTER CASTRO?

Ever since Fidel Castro gained power in 1959, Washington and the Cuban exile community have been eagerly awaiting the moment when he would lose it -- at which point, the thinking went, they would have carte blanche to remake Cuba in their own image. Without Fidel's iron fist to keep Cubans in their place, the island would erupt into a collective demand for rapid change. The long-oppressed population would overthrow Fidel's revolutionary cronies and clamor for capital, expertise, and leadership from the north to transform Cuba into a market democracy with strong ties to the United States.

But that moment has come and gone -- and none of what

Washington and the exiles anticipated has come to pass. Even as Cuba-watchers speculate about how much longer the ailing Fidel will survive, the post-Fidel transition is already well under way. Power has been successfully transferred to a new set of leaders, whose priority is to preserve the system while permitting only very gradual reform. Cubans have not revolted, and their national identity remains tied to the defense of the homeland against U.S. attacks on its sovereignty. As the post-Fidel regime responds to pent-up demands for more democratic participation and economic opportunity, Cuba will undoubtedly change -- but the pace and nature of that change will be mostly imperceptible to the naked American eye.

Fidel's almost five decades in power came to a close last summer not with the expected bang, or even really a whimper, but in slow motion, with Fidel himself orchestrating the transition. The transfer of authority from Fidel to his younger brother, Raul, and half a dozen loyalists -- who have been running the country under Fidel's watch for decades -- has been notably smooth and stable. Not one violent episode in Cuban streets. No massive exodus of refugees. And despite an initial wave of euphoria in Miami, not one boat leaving a Florida port for the 90-mile trip. Within Cuba, whether Fidel himself survives for weeks, months, or years is now in many ways beside the point.

In Washington, however, Cuba policy -- aimed essentially at regime change -- has long been dominated by wishful thinking ever more disconnected from the reality on the island. Thanks to the votes and campaign contributions of the 1.5 million Cuban Americans who live in Florida and New Jersey, domestic politics has driven policymaking. That tendency has been indulged by a U.S. intelligence community hamstrung by a breathtaking and largely self-imposed isolation from Cuba and reinforced by a political environment that rewards feeding the White House whatever it wants to hear. Why alter the status quo when it is so familiar, so well funded, and so rhetorically pleasing to politicians in both parties?

But if consigning Cuba to domestic politics has been the path of least resistance so far, it will begin to have real costs as the post-Fidel transition continues -- for Cuba and the United States alike. Fidel's death, especially if it comes in the run-up to a presidential election, could bring instability precisely because of the perception in the United States that Cuba will be

vulnerable to meddling from abroad. Some exiles may try to draw the United States into direct conflict with Havana, whether by egging on potential Cuban refugees to take to the Florida Straits or by appealing to Congress, the White House, and the Pentagon to attempt to strangle the post-Fidel government.

Washington must finally wake up to the reality of how and why the Castro regime has proved so durable -- and recognize that, as a result of its willful ignorance, it has few tools with which to effectively influence Cuba after Fidel is gone. With U.S. credibility in Latin America and the rest of the world at an all-time low, it is time to put to rest a policy that Fidel's handover of power has already so clearly exposed as a complete failure.

CHANGE IN THE WEATHER

On July 31, 2006, Fidel Castro's staff secretary made an announcement: Fidel, just days away from his 80th birthday, had undergone major surgery and turned over "provisional power" to his 75-year-old brother, Raul, and six senior officials. The gravity of Fidel's illness (rumored to be either terminal intestinal cancer or severe diverticulitis with complications) was immediately clear, both from photographs of the clearly weakened figure and from Fidel's own dire-sounding statements beseeching Cubans to prepare for his demise. Across the island, an air of resignation and anticipation took hold.

The dead of August, with its intense heat and humidity, is a nerve-racking time in Cuba, but as rumors sped from home to home, there was a stunning display of orderliness and seriousness in the streets. Life continued: people went to work and took vacations, watched telenovelas and bootlegged dvds and programs from the Discovery and History channels, waited in lines for buses and weekly rations, made their daily black-market purchases -- repeating the rituals that have etched a deep mark in the Cuban psyche. Only in Miami were some Cubans partying, hoping that Fidel's illness would soon turn to death, not only of a man but also of a half century of divided families and mutual hatred.

Raul quickly assumed Fidel's duties as first secretary of the Communist Party, head of the Politburo, and president of the Council of State (and retained control of the armed forces and intelligence services). The

other deputies -- two of whom had worked closely with the Castro brothers since the revolution and four of whom had emerged as major players in the 1990s -- took over the other key departments. Ranging in age from their mid-40s through their 70s, they had been preparing for this transition to collective leadership for years.

Jose Ramon Balaguer, a doctor who fought as a guerrilla in the Sierra Maestra during the revolution, assumed authority over public health. Jose Ramon Machado Ventura, another doctor who fought in the Sierra, and Esteban Lazo Hernandez now share power over education. Carlos Lage Davila -- a key architect of the economic reforms of the 1990s, including efforts to bring in foreign investment -- took charge of the energy sector. Francisco Sobern Valdes, president of the Central Bank of Cuba, and Felipe Perez Roque, minister of foreign affairs, took over finances in those areas.

At first, U.S. officials simply admitted that they had almost no information about Fidel's illness or plans for succession. President George W. Bush said little beyond soberly (and surprisingly) pointing out that the next leader of Cuba would come from Cuba -- a much-needed warning to the small yet influential group of hard-line exiles (Republican Florida Congressman Lincoln Diaz-Balart, a nephew of Fidel's, prominent among them) with aspirations to post-Fidel presidential politics.

A few weeks into the Fidel deathwatch, Raul gave an interview clearly meant for U.S. consumption. Cuba, he said, "has always been ready to normalize relations on the basis of equality. But we will not accept the arrogant and interventionist policies of this administration," nor will the United States win concessions on Cuba's domestic political model. A few days later, U.S. Assistant Secretary of State for Western Hemisphere Affairs Thomas Shannon responded in kind. Washington, he said, would consider lifting its embargo -- but only if Cuba established a route to multiparty democracy, released all political prisoners, and allowed independent civil-society organizations. With or without Fidel, the two governments were stuck where they have been for years: Havana ready to talk about everything except the one condition on which Washington will not budge, Washington offering something Havana does not unconditionally want in exchange for something it is not willing to give.

From Washington's perspective, this paralysis may seem only temporary. Shannon compared post-Fidel Cuba to a

helicopter with a broken rotor -- the implication being that a crash is imminent. But that view, pervasive among U.S. policymakers, ignores the uncomfortable truth about Cuba under the Castro regime. Despite Fidel's overwhelming personal authority and Raul's critical institution-building abilities, the government rests on far more than just the charisma, authority, and legend of these two figures.

POLITICALLY INCORRECT

Cuba is far from a multiparty democracy, but it is a functioning country with highly opinionated citizens where locally elected officials (albeit all from one party) worry about issues such as garbage collection, public transportation, employment, education, health care, and safety. Although plagued by worsening corruption, Cuban institutions are staffed by an educated civil service, battle-tested military officers, a capable diplomatic corps, and a skilled work force. Cuban citizens are highly literate, cosmopolitan, endlessly entrepreneurial, and by global standards quite healthy.

Critics of the Castro regime cringe at such depictions and have worked hard to focus Washington and the world's attention on human rights abuses, political prisoners, and economic and political deprivations. Although those concerns are legitimate, they do not make up for an unwillingness to understand the sources of Fidel's legitimacy -- or the features of the status quo that will sustain Raul and the collective leadership now in place. On a trip to Cuba in November, I spoke with a host of senior officials, foreign diplomats, intellectuals, and regime critics to get a sense of how those on the ground see the island's future. (I have traveled to Cuba nearly 30 times since 1984 and met with everyone from Fidel himself to human rights activists and political prisoners.) People at all levels of the Cuban government and the Communist Party were enormously confident of the regime's ability to survive Fidel's passing. In and out of government circles, critics and supporters alike -- including in the state-run press -- readily acknowledge major problems with productivity and the delivery of goods and services. But the regime's still-viable entitlement programs and a widespread sense that Raul is the right man to confront corruption and bring accountable governance give the current leadership more legitimacy than it could possibly derive from repression alone (the usual explanation foreigners give

for the regime's staying power).

The regime's continued defiance of the United States also helps. In Cuba's national narrative, outside powers -- whether Spain in the nineteenth century or the United States in the twentieth -- have preyed on Cuba's internal division to dominate Cuban politics. Revolutionary ideology emphasizes this history of thwarted independence and imperialist meddling, from the Spanish-American War to the Bay of Pigs, to sustain a national consensus. Unity at home, the message goes, is the best defense against the only external power Cuba still regards as a threat -- the United States.

To give Cubans a stake in this tradeoff between an open society and sovereign nationhood, the revolution built social, educational, and health programs that remain the envy of the developing world. Public education became accessible to the entire population, allowing older generations of illiterate peasants to watch their children and grandchildren become doctors and scientists; by 1979, Cuba's literacy rates had risen above 90 percent. Life expectancy went from under 60 years at the time of the revolution to almost 80 today (virtually identical to life expectancy in the United States). Although infectious disease levels have been historically lower in Cuba than in many parts of Latin America, the revolutionary government's public vaccination programs completely eliminated polio, diphtheria, tetanus, meningitis, and measles. In these ways, the Cuban state truly has served the poor underclass rather than catering to the domestic elite and its American allies.

Foreign policy, meanwhile, put the island on the map geopolitically. The Cubans used the Soviets (who regarded the brash young revolutionaries as reckless) for money, weapons, and insulation from their implacable enemy to the north. Although the government's repression of dissent and tight control over the economy drove many out of the country and turned many others against the Castro regime, most Cubans came to expect the state to guarantee their welfare, deliver the international standing they regard as their cultural and historical destiny, and keep the United States at a healthy distance.

The end of the Cold War seriously threatened this status quo. The Soviet Union withdrew its \$4 billion annual subsidy, and the economy contracted by 35 percent

overnight. Cuba's political elite recognized that without Soviet support, the survival of the revolutionary regime was in peril -- and, with Fidel's reluctant acquiescence, fashioned a pragmatic response to save it. Cuban officials traveling abroad started using once-anathema terms, such as "civil society." Proposals were circulated to include multiple candidates (although all from the Communist Party) in National Assembly elections and to permit small private businesses. The government legalized self-employment in some 200 service trades, converted state farms to collectively owned cooperatives, and allowed the opening of small farmers' markets. At Raul's instigation, state enterprises adopted capitalist accounting and business practices; some managers were sent to European business schools. As the notion of a "socialist enterprise" became increasingly unsustainable, words like "market," "efficiency," "ownership," "property," and "competition" began to crop up with ever more frequency in the state-controlled press and in public-policy debates. Foreign investment from Europe, Latin America, Canada, China, and Israel gave a boost to agriculture and the tourism, mining, telecommunications, pharmaceutical, biotechnology, and oil industries.

These changes rendered Cuba almost unrecognizable compared with the Cuba of the Soviet era, but they also allowed Fidel's government to regain its footing. The economy began to recover, and health and educational programs started to deliver again. By the end of the 1990s, Cuba's infant mortality rate (approximately six deaths per 100,000 births) had dropped below that of the United States, and close to 100 percent of children were enrolled in school full time through ninth grade. Housing, although deteriorating and in desperate need of modernization, remained virtually free. And a cosmopolitan society -- albeit one controlled in many ways by the state -- grew increasingly connected to the world through cultural exchanges, sporting events, scientific cooperation, health programs, technology, trade, and diplomacy. Moreover, by 2002, total remittance inflows reached \$1 billion, and nearly half of the Cuban population had access to dollars from family abroad.

In 2004, a process of "recentralization" began: the state replaced the dollar with a convertible currency, stepped up tax collection from the self-employed sector, and imposed stricter controls on revenue expenditures by state enterprises. But even with these controls over

economic activity, the black market is everywhere. Official salaries are never enough to make ends meet, and the economy has become a hybrid of control, chaos, and free-for-all. The rules of the game are established and broken at every turn, and most Cubans have to violate some law to get by. The administrators of state enterprises steal and then sell the inputs they get from the government, forcing workers to purchase themselves the supplies they need to do their jobs -- rubber for the shoemaker, drinking glasses for the bartender, cooking oil for the chef -- in order to fill production quotas.

At the same time, the revolution's investment in human capital has made Cuba uniquely well positioned to take advantage of the global economy. In fact, the island faces an overcapacity of professional and scientific talent, since it lacks the industrial base and foreign investment necessary to create a large number of productive skilled jobs. With 10,000 students in its science and technology university and already successful joint pharmaceutical ventures with China and Malaysia, Cuba is poised to compete with the upper ranks of developing nations.

STRAITS JACKET

The last potential turning point in U.S.-Cuban relations came with the end of the Cold War. Cubans greeted the fall of the Berlin Wall with a collective sigh of relief; it was, they thought, an opportunity to explore the kind of society Cuba might become once it could no longer depend on the Soviet Union. But over the next decade and a half, U.S. policymakers -- hobbled by domestic politics and a fundamental misunderstanding of the reality on the island -- missed opportunity after opportunity to bring decades of enmity to a close.

Instead of allowing debates about reform to take their natural course in Cuba, Washington jumped on the chance to, as Bill Clinton put it in the 1992 presidential campaign, "bring the hammer down" on Fidel. Congress passed and Clinton signed the Cuban Democracy Act, which, among other things, barred foreign subsidiaries of U.S. companies from trading with Cuba and ships traveling from Cuban ports from docking in the United States. Havana reacted with predictable outrage, condemning U.S. imperial designs in dramatic public protests. More important, some reform proposals were put on hold -- lest the slightest crack in Cuba's armor open

the way to U.S.-backed counterrevolution. National security trumped everything else.

The next decade saw a series of half steps forward followed by large steps back. Hoping to learn more about the island while driving a wedge between its people and its government, the Clinton administration began to allow licensed travel to Cuba for academic purposes and for the sake of lending "support to the Cuban people." It also embraced a policy of "calibrated response": as Cuba changed, U.S. policy would as well. Without ever relating them to U.S. gestures, Cuba did undertake some important (and largely unreciprocated) reforms, loosening restrictions on family and some professional travel, relaxing residency requirements for writers and artists, and continuing the economic openings. And when 40,000 rafters left for U.S. shores in 1994, after a summer of brutal heat and electricity and food shortages in Havana, U.S. and Cuban officials began secret negotiations in Canada. The result was unprecedented cooperation on migration issues -- Washington would provide 20,000 visas to Cubans a year, and the U.S. Coast Guard would send Cubans picked up at sea to the U.S. naval base at Guantánamo Bay -- and a degree of official and people-to-people contact unknown since a brief opening under Jimmy Carter.

But these tentative steps, bitterly resisted by exiles who feared a slippery slope toward full-blown U.S.-Cuban relations, were soon thwarted. In February 1996, the Cuban air force shot down two planes being flown in the area by an exile group called Brothers to the Rescue. Led by a Bay of Pigs veteran, the group would make surveillance flights over the Florida Straits (to inform the U.S. Coast Guard of rafters) and occasionally drop anti-Castro pamphlets over Havana from Cessnas bought at Pentagon tag sales. Sometimes, U.S. officials would join the flights. Havana had repeatedly warned Washington that the flights would not be tolerated, but the shutdown nonetheless resulted in swift congressional retaliation -- in the form of the Cuban Liberty and Democratic Solidary Act, better known as Helms-Burton.

Helms-Burton took the U.S. embargo to new extremes. It attempted to halt all foreign investment in Cuba by allowing investors to be sued in U.S. courts. It mandated that future presidents could lift the embargo only if Cuba complied with a number of conditions, including holding multiparty elections, recognizing private property, and releasing all political prisoners.

And it stipulated that any future change in U.S. policy would depend on Fidel and Raul Castro -- along, implicitly, with other senior officials in the military and the Communist Party -- leaving politics altogether.

The Cuban regime responded with its own hard line. Raul, although a leading advocate of economic reform domestically, was an absolutist when it came to confronting the United States. Even as some liberalization continued, and a new Cuban constitution opened the way for a religious revival by allowing Communist Party members to practice openly, there was a government-wide purge of academics and intellectuals -- many of them party loyalists -- thought to be associated with the United States or U.S.-backed reforms. The message was chillingly clear: given a choice between national security and a more open society, the revolution would pick security every time.

In the wake of Helms-Burton, the Clinton administration worked to revive a series of goodwill initiatives. When Pope John Paul II visited Havana's jam-packed Revolution Square in 1999, he asked "the world to open to Cuba and Cuba to open to the world." His entreaty gave both Washington and Havana political cover to revive some momentum on improving relations. The countries' coast guards worked together on antidrug operations, and retired U.S. military commanders met with Fidel and Raul. The Baltimore Orioles and the Cuban national baseball team played each other -- once in Baltimore, once in Havana -- and after the musicologist Ry Cooder released an album of traditional Cuban ballads, there was a "Buena Vista Social Club effect," with American artists, musicians, clergy, academics, students, businesspeople, and politicians flocking to Cuba in record numbers. Cuban Americans who had not returned to the island since leaving as small children visited for the first time, and then returned over and over, reconnecting with long-lost family members. A number of prominent Republicans, including former Secretaries of State Henry Kissinger and George Shultz, called for a bipartisan commission to undertake a full-scale review of U.S. policy toward Cuba.

But the day after Thanksgiving in 2000, progress was undermined once again -- this time by the arrival in southern Florida of a six-year-old boy named Elian Gonzalez. Elian had left Cuba with his mother, but she had died on the trip to the United States. At first, the Clinton administration was slow to take Elian from the

custody of his relatives in Florida and return him to his father in Cuba -- inflaming Cuban nationalism and inciting mass anti-U.S. protests in Havana. Then, when Attorney General Janet Reno ordered federal agents to seize Elian in a predawn raid and return him to his father, the exile community erupted. The incident not only ended the prospect of a further thawing in U.S.-Cuban relations; it also (at least absent a recount) helped tip the presidential election to George W. Bush, who defeated Al Gore in Florida by a few hundred votes.

Like most aspiring presidents casting around for votes, candidate Bush had promised to end the Castro regime. But it was not until the September 11 attacks, and the administration's newfound attention to democracy promotion and rogue regimes, that U.S. Cuba policy took a decidedly more aggressive turn. Bush's first-term Latin America team (many of whose members had either helped write or lobbied for Helms-Burton) rejected any business or security cooperation with Havana and encouraged speculation that Cuba was developing bioweapons for export to rogue regimes or use against the United States. (Those allegations, not surprisingly, withered under closer scrutiny.) By the end of its first term, the Bush administration had upended virtually all initiatives, official and unofficial, for improving relations. It ended the bilateral talks on migration. It stopped approving most medical sales, made legal travel to Cuba difficult for all but faith-based groups and some academics, and cut off visas for Cuban academics and artists. And it almost entirely barred Cuban Americans, who lean strongly Republican, from visiting or sending money to Cuba. Only sales of U.S. agricultural products, because they were explicitly allowed by Congress, escaped the crackdown.

INFIDELITY

Although the George H. W. Bush administration ended covert efforts to topple Fidel, the United States today spends about \$35 million a year on initiatives described by some as "democracy promotion" and by others as "destabilization." Radio Marti and tv Marti broadcast from Florida to Cuba; other U.S. government programs are intended to support dissidents, the families of political prisoners, human rights activists, and independent journalists. Although some Cubans do listen to Radio Marti, the Cuban government blocks the tv Marti signal, and without open ties between the countries, only a fraction of the support actually reaches Cubans

living on the island; the lion's share is distributed through no-bid contracts to the anti-Castro cottage industry that has sprung up in Miami, Madrid, and a few Latin American and eastern European capitals. The recipients of such federal largess -- along with the Cuban intelligence agents that routinely penetrate the groups they form -- have become the primary stakeholders in Washington's well-funded, if obviously ineffective, policy toward Cuba.

On the ground in Cuba, moreover, these efforts are generally counterproductive. U.S. economic sanctions have given Cuba's leaders justification for controlling the pace of the island's insertion into the world economy. The perception, pervasive in Cuba, that the United States and the Cuban diaspora are plotting regime change further strengthens domestic hard-liners who argue that only a closed political model with minimal market openings can insulate the island from domination by a foreign power allied with old-money elites. Dissidents who openly associate with U.S. policy and its advocates in Miami or the U.S. Congress mark themselves as stooges of the United States, even if they are not. Moreover, the Cuban government has successfully undermined both the domestic and the international legitimacy of dissidents by "outing" some as sources, assets, or agents of the United States (or of Cuba's own intelligence services). The 2003 arrest and incarceration of 75 dissidents was intended to demonstrate that Cuba could and would preempt outside efforts at regime change regardless of the consequent international outcry and U.S. congressional rebuke.

There are some genuine dissidents in Cuba untainted by either government and not weakened by infighting. One, Oswaldo Payá, is a devout Catholic who heads the Varela Project, which collected more than 11,000 signatures in 2002 for a petition calling on the Cuban government to hold a referendum on open elections, free speech, free enterprise, and the release of political prisoners. Yet it is only by resisting the embrace of the international community, and of the United States in particular, that Payá has maintained his credibility and autonomy. Meanwhile, below the radar screen (and throughout officially sanctioned Cuban institutions), there are scores of thoughtful nationalists, communists, socialists, social democrats, and progressives who may not yet have the political space to air their views publicly but who express dissent in terms that U.S. policymakers either do not recognize or do not support.

The upshot of a half century of hostility -- especially now with ties severed almost entirely -- is that Washington has virtually no leverage over events in Cuba. With no other way to make good on its campaign commitments to Cuban Americans short of a full-scale invasion, the Bush administration established the Commission for Assistance to a Free Cuba in 2003 and appointed a "Cuba transition coordinator" in 2004. To date, the commission, the membership and deliberations of which have been kept secret, has issued two reports, totaling over 600 pages, on what kind of assistance the U.S. government could, "if requested," provide to a transitional government in Cuba.

The basic assumption behind the commission's planning is that with outside assistance, Cuba's transition will be a hybrid of those in eastern Europe, South Africa, and Chile. Those analogies and the policy prescriptions derived from them do not hold up. Unlike Eastern Europeans in the 1980s, Cubans, though enthusiasts of American culture and dynamism, regard Washington not as a beacon of freedom against tyranny but as an imperialist oppressor that has helped justify domestic repression. (Moreover, the United States had actively promoted travel, commerce, and cultural ties with the Soviet bloc before the transitions there began.) In the case of South Africa, the sanctions that helped topple the apartheid regime were successful because they were, in contrast to the unilateral U.S. embargo on Cuba, international in scope. And in Chile, the U.S. government was able to ease Augusto Pinochet out of power only because it had staunchly supported him for so long.

The second feature of Washington's vision for post-Fidel Cuba is more dangerous than a bad analogy. The Bush administration has made clear that its top priority is to interrupt the Castro regime's succession plans. The Commission for Assistance to a Free Cuba report released just before Fidel underwent intestinal surgery in July states, "The only acceptable result of Fidel Castro's incapacitation, death, or ouster is a genuine democratic transition. ... In order to undermine the regime's succession strategy, it is critical that the U.S. government maintain economic pressure on the regime."

Since the 2003 war in Iraq, Cubans have closely observed the effects of de-Baathification there. Like membership in Iraq's Baath Party under Saddam Hussein, membership

in the Cuban Communist Party is a ticket to professional advancement for devout believers and agnostic opportunists alike. Party members include sophisticated intellectuals, reform-minded economists, clergy, brash up-and-coming youth leaders, scientists, professors, military officers, bureaucrats, police officers, and businesspeople in the "revenue-earning sectors" of the economy. In short, it is impossible to know who among the roughly million party members (and 500,000 members of the Union of Communist Youth) is a real fidelista or raulista. Purging party members would leave the country without the skilled individuals it will need after Fidel, whatever the pace of change. And should the United States, or a government that Washington deems adequately transitional, ever be in a position to orchestrate such a purge, it would then face an insurgency of highly trained militias galvanized by anti-American nationalism.

One encouraging development is that the Cuban American community is no longer of one mind with respect to Cuba's future and its role in it. For decades, a vocal minority of hard-line exiles -- some of whom have directly or indirectly advocated violence or terrorism to overthrow Fidel -- have had a lock on Washington's Cuba policy. But Cuban Americans who came to the United States as young children are less passionate and single-minded as voters than their parents and grandparents, and the almost 300,000 migrants who have arrived since 1994 are generally most concerned with paying bills and supporting their families on the island. Now, the majority of Cuban Americans, although still anti-Castro, recognize that the embargo has failed and want to sustain family and humanitarian ties without completely eliminating sanctions. Overall, many want reconciliation rather than revenge.

The State Department is starting to recognize these changes, and many members of Congress must now answer to constituents from other Latin American countries who resent the outsized influence of Cuban Americans. But the hard-liners and their allies in Washington will continue to fight any proposed policy overhaul. They worry that if Washington adopts a more realistic approach to the island, the policy train will bypass Miami and head straight for Havana -- and they will have lost their influence at the moment when it matters most.

WASHINGTON'S MOVE

Even with the economy growing and new public-sector investment in transportation, energy, education, health care, and housing, Cubans today are deeply frustrated by the rigors of just making ends meet. They are eager for more democratic participation and economic opportunity. But they also recognize that Cuba's social, economic, and political models will change only gradually, and that such reform will be orchestrated by those whom Fidel has long been grooming to replace him. Washington, too, must accept that there is no alternative to those already running post-Fidel Cuba.

From the perspective of Fidel's chosen successors, the transition comes in a particularly favorable international context. Despite Washington's assiduous efforts, Cuba is far from isolated: it has diplomatic relations with more than 160 countries, students from nearly 100 studying in its schools, and its doctors stationed in 69. The resurgence of Latin America's left, along with the recent rise in anti-American sentiment around the globe, makes Cuba's defiance of the United States even more compelling and less anomalous than it was just after the Cold War. The Cuban-Venezuelan relationship, based on a shared critique of U.S. power, imperialism, and "savage capitalism," has particular symbolic power. Although this alliance is hardly permanent, and American observers often make too much of Venezuela's influence as a power broker, it does deliver Cuba some \$2 billion in subsidized oil a year and provide an export market for Cuba's surfeit of doctors and technical advisers. (By providing the backbone for Venezuelan President Hugo Chavez's social programs and assistance in building functional organizations, Havana exercises more influence in Venezuela than Caracas does in Cuba.) Havana, without ceding any authority to Chavez, will optimize this relationship as long as it remains beneficial.

Nor is Venezuela the only country that will resist U.S. efforts to dominate post-Fidel Cuba and purge the country of Fidel's revolutionary legacy. Latin Americans, still deeply nationalistic, have long viewed Fidel as a force for social justice and a necessary check on U.S. influence. As attendance at his funeral will demonstrate, he remains an icon. Latin Americans of diverse ideological stripes, most of them deeply committed to democracy in their own countries, want to see a soft landing in Cuba -- not the violence and chaos that they believe U.S. policy will bring. Given their own failures in the 1990s to translate engagement with

Cuba into democratization, and the United States' current credibility problems on this score, it is unlikely that U.S. allies in Latin America or Europe will help Washington use some sort of international initiative to advance its desires for radical change in Cuba.

When Fidel dies, various actors in the United States and the international community will rush to issue and, if they get their way, enforce a series of demands: hold a referendum and multiparty elections, immediately release all political prisoners, return nationalized property and compensate former owners, rewrite the constitution, allow a free press, privatize state companies -- in short, become a country Cuba has never been, even before the revolution. Many of those goals would be desirable if you were inventing a country from scratch. Few of them are now realistic.

After Fidel's funeral, a "transition" government of the sort Washington is hoping for will not occupy the presidential palace in Havana. This means that the White House cannot responsibly wait for the happy day when the outlines of its commission reports can be put to the test. Instead, the current administration should immediately start talking to the senior Cuban leadership. Recognizing that Cuba and the United States share an interest in stability on both sides of the Florida Straits, the first priority is to coordinate efforts to prevent a refugee crisis or unforeseen provocations by U.S.-based exile groups eager to exploit a moment of change on the island. Beyond crisis management, Washington and Havana can cooperate on a host of other concerns in the Caribbean Basin, including drug trafficking, migration, customs and port security, terrorism, and the environmental consequences of offshore drilling in the Gulf of Mexico. The two countries have successfully worked on some of these issues in the past: each has bureaucracies staffed by professionals who know the issues, and even know one another. An end to Washington's travel ban, a move already backed by bipartisan majorities in the House of Representatives, would further open the way to a new dynamic between the United States and Cuba. Just as the first Bush White House formally ended covert operations on the island, this Bush administration or its successor should also affirmatively take regime change, long the centerpiece of Washington's policy toward Cuba, off the table.

By continuing the current course and making threats about what kind of change is and is not acceptable after Fidel, Washington will only slow the pace of liberalization and political reform in Cuba and guarantee many more years of hostility between the two countries. By proposing bilateral crisis management and confidence-building measures, ending economic sanctions, stepping out of the way of Cuban Americans and other Americans who wish to travel freely to Cuba, and giving Cuba the space to chart its own course after Fidel, Washington would help end the siege mentality that has long pervaded the Cuban body politic and, with the applause of U.S. allies, perhaps help accelerate reform. Cubans on and off the island have always battled over its fate -- and attempted to draw American might into their conflicts, directly or indirectly. Lest the next 50 years bring more of the same, the wisest course for Washington is to get out of the way, removing itself from Cuba's domestic politics altogether.

Fidel's successors are already at work. Behind Raul are a number of other figures with the capacity and the authority to take the reins and continue the transition, even after Raul is gone. Fortunately for them, Fidel has taught them well: they are working to consolidate the new government, deliver on bread-and-butter issues, devise a model of reform with Cuban characteristics, sustain Cuba's position in Latin America and internationally, and manage the predictable policies of the United States. That these achievements will endure past Fidel's death is one final victory for the ultimate Latin American survivor.

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