

Washington v. Cuba After Castro

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On February 18, at 5:30PM in Havana an era ended when Fidel Castro's written statement announced it. It was read on early Tuesday morning radio and television and reprinted in the Cuban newspaper Granma as follows:

"....I will neither aspire to nor accept, I repeat, I will neither aspire to nor accept the positions of President of the State Council and Commander in Chief....it would be a betrayal to my conscience to accept a responsibility requiring more mobility and dedication than I am physically able to offer....Fortunately, our Revolution can still count on cadres from the old guard and others....who learned together with us the basics of the complex and almost unattainable art of organizing and leading a revolution.

The path will always be difficult....We should always be prepared for the worst....The adversary to be defeated is extremely strong; however, we have been able to keep it at bay for half a century....

I was able to recover the full command of my mind (and am able to do) much reading and meditation. I had enough physical strength to write for many hours....My wishes have always been to discharge my duties to my last breath. That's all I can offer.

This is not my farewell to you. My only wish is to fight as a soldier in the battle of ideas. I shall continue to write under the heading of 'Reflections by comrade Fidel.' It will be just another weapon you can count on....

Thanks.

Fidel Castro Ruz"

The world press reacted, and here's a sampling:

The New York Times cautioned that "Castro May Not Be Exiting the Stage Completely....but whether the surprise announcement represented a historic change or a symbolic political maneuver remained unclear....It was not clear what role, if any, Fidel Castro would play in a new government (because) he signaled that he was not yet ready to completely exit the stage....There was little evidence in the streets of the capital and in other cities to suggest that a monumental change was taking place in the Cuban hierarchy."

The Washington Post.com was almost passive in stating: "Fidel Castro retires....he said on Tuesday that he will not return to lead the communist country....Cuba's National Assembly, a rubber-stamp legislature, is expected to nominate....Raul Castro as president (who's) been running the country since emergency intestinal surgery forced his brother to delegate power on July 31, 2006." The Bush administration earlier announced it would not negotiate with

any Cuban government headed by either Castro brother. More on that below.

The Wall Street Journal was vintage Murdoch on its editorial page. It called Castro's legacy "ruthless....but less widely appreciated is that he was also an economic incompetent....the island is a malnourished backwater....staples are rationed, severe shortages exist in the medical system and electricity is a luxury....Cuba begs at the feet of Venezuela....young Cubans routinely take their chances with the security police and shark-infested waters rather than face life under the Castro brothers."

The shame is that readers believe this because the Journal and the rest of the major media suppress the truth about Cuba, Venezuela and other regimes that successfully challenge Washington. In Cuba's case, it defeated a US invasion, a 49 year economic embargo, over 600 attempts to kill Castro, repeated US state terrorism to destabilize the country, and relentless efforts to isolate the island politically and economically.

In spite of it, Castro survived. He's now 81, an icon and living legend throughout Latin America, and most world nations have normal diplomatic and trade relations with him. In addition, Cuba is a member of the Latin American Economic System (SELA), the Organization of American States - OAS (but excluded from active participation since 1962), the Association of Caribbean States (ACS), the International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA), and in September 2006, it assumed leadership of the 118 member nation Non-Aligned Movement (NAM) that states it's united to ensure "the national independence, sovereignty, territorial integrity and security (of its members) in their "struggle against imperialism, colonialism, neocolonialism, racism, Zionism, and all forms of foreign aggression, occupation, domination, interference or hegemony...."

Latin American expert James Petras explains Cuba's "great virtue" - that "it survived (and maintains) many of its positive social achievements (while other) reformist or revolutionary regimes were defeated or overthrown or collapsed" - Iran under Mossadegh, Guatemala under Arbenz, Chile under Allende, the Congo under Lumumba, Indonesia under Sukarno, Nicaragua under the Sandinistas, Haiti under Aristide twice and many others.

Still, 49 years of US hammering took its toll. Cubans, indeed, endure hardships that wouldn't exist or would be less severe under more ideal conditions. Incomes are low, housing shortages chronic, embargoed products scarce or unavailable and many services, like public transport, inadequate. Yet, Cuban advances under Castro have been impressive, and his support remains strong after five decades in power.

The country is a biotech industry leader and does state-of-the-art research at the Cuban Genetic Engineering and Biotechnology Center. The government also encourages small retail and light manufacturing enterprises, fosters joint ventures in tobacco, citrus and other homegrown products, invested in advanced computer science schools, and developed a thriving tourism industry after it changed its constitution in 1995 to encourage it through offshore private investment.

Then consider Cuba's social services, especially its education and health care ones. These alone, institutionalized the revolution in the hearts and minds of the people who never before had a government that provided them and much more.

Take health care for example. It's world-class, and Article 50 of the 1976 Constitution mandates it for all Cubans. They get free medical, hospital and dental care including

prophylactic services with emphasis on public health, preventive care, health education, programs for periodic medical examinations, immunizations and other preventive measures. The Constitution also guarantees worker health and safety, help for the elderly and pregnant working women, and paid leave before and after childbirth. In addition, Cuba's Public Health Law obligates the state to assure, improve and protect the health of all citizens, including providing rehabilitation services for physical and mental disabilities.

Compare this to World Health Organization's (WHO) rankings for America - 37th in the world in "overall health performance," 54th in health care fairness, worst of all western countries overall, and only developed nation besides South Africa with no single-payer national health insurance system. Except for seniors under Medicare, the indigent under Medicaid, veterans through the Veterans Administration (VA), no national program exists and benefits under existing ones are dramatically eroding.

The US spends more than twice as much on health care on average as other industrialized states. Yet, it's performance is poor by comparison - on life expectancy, infant mortality, immunization rates and more. In addition, over 47 million Americans are uninsured and over 80 million are without coverage during some portion of every year.

Then consider education. In Cuba, it's first-rate because the Constitution's Article 51 assures it free for everyone to the highest level. It's Latin America's best, and it outdoes most parts of America's public school system. It stresses math, reading, the sciences, arts, humanities, social responsibility, civics, and participatory citizenship. It virtually eliminated illiteracy and compare it to America where US Department of Education figures show a 20% functional illiteracy rate that, in fact, is much higher based on inner-city math and english achievement test scores.

Consider Cuba's other achievements as well. Major US media won't report them, but James Petras does - low rents and utility costs, worker pensions at retirement, food subsidies for the needy combined with rationing that's never desirable but needed to assure adequate distribution to all, and an emphasis on "cultural, sports and recreational activities (in spite of) sharp cutbacks in funding." Impressively, "despite general scarcities and social deprivation, crimes rates (are) far below Latin American and US levels."

Petras observes that: "Even more noteworthy" is Cuba's transition to a mixed economy that aids its growth and provides jobs for its people. Unlike Eastern Europe, including Russia, however, "Cuba did not suffer the massive outward transfer of profits, rents and illegal earnings from large-scale networks of prostitution, narcotics and arms sales." Nor have there been crime syndicates that corrupted the economies of Bulgaria, Poland, Romania, Albania, NATO-occupied Kosovo, and other emergent "capitalist democracies." And most impressively, Cuba is growing its economy, if modestly, while remaining a vibrant social state that delivers essential services and remains committed to its revolutionary principles. That won't change under a new cadre of leaders after Castro.

So far, Petras explains that Cuba's survival, economic gains and "formidable national defense" are largely the result of "popular perseverance, loyalty to revolutionary leaders (and their dedication to) common values of egalitarianism, solidarity, national dignity and independence." Some dictatorship, but at the same time Cuba's no paradise. Its problems are huge, and as Petras puts it, it faces new "challenges and contradictions:"

— less skilled tourism-related jobs pay better than ones for doctors, scientists

and many others in the country;

— new tourist enterprises created inequality and an unrevolutionary “nouveau riche bourgeoisie;”

— “hustlers,” prostitutes, drugs trafficking and other enterprise-related fallout; and

— tourist infrastructure investments divert funds from essentials like agriculture; output thus declined, and Cuba now depends on imports.

On the plus side is the hard currency Cuba needs for everything it imports outside its ALBA-related trade. Cuba and Venezuela founded the system in 2004, Bolivia and Nicaragua joined it, and it stands for the Bolivarian Alternative for the Americas. It’s an integrative, cooperative system of goods and services exchanges outside the exploitive WTO-international banking one. So it lets Cuba get Venezuelan oil, for example, by providing doctor services and literacy programs to teach Venezuelans to read and write.

Looking Ahead

In spite of five decades of achievements, Cuba’s problems are huge, and its new leaders must address them. They include growing inequality, corruption and public theft, a flourishing black market, productivity-sapping inefficiencies, an imbalance between an educated population and enough skilled jobs, its agriculture in decline, and more.

In addition, Cuba is no democracy, but it’s no dictatorship either the way Washington and Murdoch describe it. Castro came to power as Prime Minister in February 1959. He kept the title of premier until 1976, and then became President of the Council of State and Council of Ministers as Head of State and its ruling Communist Party of Cuba (PCC).

The PCC has governed Cuba since it was formed in 1965 and is the country’s only legally recognized party. Others exist as well as opposition groups, but their activities are minimal and the state calls them illegal. Cuba is a socialist state. It recognizes no other economic or political system.

Its Constitution allows free speech, but Article 62 states: “None of the freedoms which are recognized for citizens can be exercised contrary to....the existence and objectives of the socialist state, or contrary to the decision of the Cuban people to build socialism and communism. Violations of this principle can be punished by law.”

Cuba now begins a new era, its challenges are huge, and consider the biggest of all – Washington’s relentless pressure the way Deputy Secretary of State (and veteran state terrorist) John Negroponte put it: Castro stepping down means nothing, US policy won’t change, “I can’t imagine that happening any time soon.”

George Bush was even more hostile by calling for international efforts to isolate Cuba and force it to accept democracy US-style. And he added: “The United States will help the people of Cuba realize the blessings of liberty.” Of course, Cubans fought a revolution against that type “liberty” and won’t tolerate returning to it. Remaining free, however, will be daunting, and the section below explains why.

US Commission for Assistance to a Free Cuba

Washington-style freedom is Orwell's kind from his classic novel "1984." In it, he described a totalitarian state where "war is peace, freedom is slavery, and ignorance is strength." Iraqis know it. So do Afghans. It's rooted in America, and the Bush administration wants to export it everywhere, including to Cuba under and after Castro.

So it set up the Commission for Assistance to a Free Cuba to plot how. In July 2006, it delivered its 93 page report to the president that calls for regime change. Not surprisingly, Bush embraced it, it got an initial \$80 million budget, and an open-ended one for as much more as needed.

The report is public but has a classified attachment with a secret plan to topple Cuba's government or co-opt its new leaders post-Castro. It also targets Venezuela and mentions the country nine times with comments like: "Cuba can only meet its budget needs with the considerable support of foreign donors, primarily Venezuela." It uses Chavez "money....to reactivate its networks in the hemisphere to subvert democratic governments," meaning, of course, any that opt out of Washington's orbit.

The report's aim is clear. Cuba and Venezuela threaten US interests so "friendlier" regimes must replace them and soon. How is left out, but what's said is ugly, and here's a sample. It calls for "Hastening the End of the Castro Dictatorship: Transition not Succession." America "stand(s) with the Cuban people against (Castro's) tyranny (and will) identify (any) means by which the United States can help the Cuban people" free themselves.

Regional "friends of Cuba" are also targeted and will be dealt with by unspecified political, economic, legal and military means. The message, however, is clear, and America's record leaves no doubt what it is.

It recommends new "more proactive, integrated, and disciplined (policies) to undermine (Castro's) survival strategies" and outlines a six part strategy to do it:

— "Empower Cuban Civil Society:" It calls it "weak...divided (and) impeded by pervasive and continuous repression." But that's changing, "public opinion has turned, Cubans are....losing their fear (so by) supporting the democratic opposition....the US can help the Cuban people....effect positive political and social change....;"

— "Break the Cuban Dictatorship's Information Blockade:" It claims Castro "controls all formal means of mass media and communication....through the regime's pervasive apparatus of repression." It also "impede(s) pro-democracy groups and the larger civil society....to effectively communicate their message to the Cuban people." So, Washington will step up efforts to export propaganda to Cuba and suppress whatever information Cubans now get;

— "Deny Resources to the Cuban Dictatorship:" The report claims Castro ignores his peoples' needs to keep his grip on power. It sounds like Murdoch as it denounces Castro for "exploit(ing) humanitarian aspects of US policy (and) siphon(ing) off hundreds of millions of dollars for (himself)." This refers to funds and other donations Cubans outside the country send relatives back home. The report says Castro steals them to help "keep the regime afloat;"

— "Illuminate the Reality of Castro's Cuba:" Stated here is that Cuba depends on "project(ing)....a benign international image" and hides its true nature as a "sponsor of terrorism (under the) erratic behavior of its leadership;"

— "Encourage International Diplomatic Efforts to Support Cuban Civil Society

and Challenge the Castro Regime:" Claimed here is a "growing international consensus" that "fundamental political and economic change on the island" is needed. Thus, "multilateral diplomatic efforts" must be encouraged to support "pro-democracy groups in Cuba....to hasten an end to the Castro regime;" and

— "Undermine the Regime's 'Succession Strategy:" - It refers to Raul Castro replacing his brother as an "unelected and undemocratic" leader, calls the "ruling elite....an impediment to a democratic and free Cuba," and recommends unspecified pressures to remove it.

It then lists "Selected Recommendations" with the main ones kept classified. It mentions budgets, enlisting third-country allies, "democracy-building" efforts, training and funding opposition, beaming in propaganda, and various other measures to make Cuba scream and topple the regime. These efforts and others have failed for 49 years. Nineteen months after this report was issued, they've still failed, but remain in place nonetheless and may be toughened under Cuba's new leadership.

America's three leading presidential candidates provide hints of it from their February 19 comments. John McCain said now is a "great opportunity for Cuba to make a transition to a democracy, to empty their political prisons, to invite human rights organizations into their country and begin the transition to a free and open society....anything short of that....might....prop up a new regime...." He also hoped Castro would die and have "the opportunity to meet Karl Marx very soon," and added that Raul will be a worse leader.

Hillary Clinton said Cuba's "new leadership....will face a stark choice - continue with the failed policies of the past....or take a historic step to bring Cuba into the community of democratic nations. The people of Cuba want to seize this opportunity for real change and so must we....The United States must pursue an active policy that does everything possible to advance the cause of freedom, democracy and opportunity in Cuba."

Barack Obama's statement was equally unfriendly: "Today should mark the end of a dark era in Cuba's history. Fidel Castro's stepping down is an essential first step, but it is sadly insufficient in bringing freedom to Cuba."

We know the type "freedom" he means. So do Cubans who want none of it. So does Raul Castro in his late 2007 comments when he said: "The challenges we have ahead are enormous, but may no one doubt our people's firm conviction that only through socialism can we overcome the difficulties and preserve the social gains of half a century of revolution."

Fidel also commented in response to presidential candidates demanding change on the island: "One by one....they....proclaim(ed) their immediate demands to Cuba so as not to alienate a single voter....Half a century of economic embargo seemed like not much to these favorites. Change, change, change! they shouted in unison. I agree. Change! But in the United States. The end of one era is not the same as the beginning of an unsustainable system. Cuba changed a while ago and will continue on its dialectical course."

Castro aimed at George Bush as well and stated: "Annexation, annexation, annexation! the adversary responds. That's what he thinks, deep inside, when he talks about change."

Cuban and American Elections

Cuban and US elections have marked similarities and differences. Cuba is a one party state. So is America the way Gore Vidal describes it: the Property or Monied Party with two wings. There's not a dime's worth of difference between them that matters so Americans have no choice. That's not how things are in Cuba, and here's the difference.

Cubans overwhelmingly support their government. They remember or learned what went on before Castro and won't tolerate going back to how people once were treated so the rich could profit. Under Fulgencio Bastista, conditions were nightmarish as a de facto US colony - a combination police state and casino/brothel linked to US crime syndicates. There was systemic corruption, indifference to social needs, disdain for the common good, brutal exploitation, subservience to corporate interests, and a regime keeping power through brute force. When Cubans vote, they remember, and how it works would puzzle Americans. On the local/municipal level:

- it's through municipal electoral commissions;
- only ordinary citizen loyalists may nominate candidates;
- the Communist Party has no role in the process;
- the commissions select nominees for municipal elections and for half the provincial legislative seats;
- a secret ballot process then elects 12,000 municipal representatives and half the members of provincial legislatures; Cuba has 169 municipalities and about 15,000 electoral constituencies within them;

The system works because participation is high, and ordinary Cubans alone choose their candidates - not politicians, corporations, the privileged or other monied or influential interests.

The rest of the process works this way to elect members of the National Assembly and remaining provincial seats:

- it's also through municipal and provincial electoral commissions; Cuba has 14 provinces;
- only ordinary citizen members again may nominate candidates, but included for this process are all sectors of society - labor, students, youths, women, farmers, scientists, artists, community organizers, educators, health workers and so on as well as members of the Committees for the Defense of the Revolution.
- the final candidate list exactly equals the number of seats to be filled; it's drawn up by the National Candidature Commission (comprised of student and grassroots organizations) that chooses candidates based on their patriotism, overall merit, and support for the revolution;
- even with no opposition, those selected must get over 50% of the vote to win;
- voting isn't mandatory but participation is high; voters, nonetheless, have choices - to vote, not vote or destroy their ballots.

On January 20, Cubans elected National Assembly and half of the provincial legislative members. Turnout was high at around 95% because Cubans support the revolution and want officials who represent it. Look at the results and compare them to American elections discussed below.

Cuba's National Electoral Commission released the data:

- only 36.78% of newly elected National Assembly members (224 seats) previously served in Cuba's parliament;
- 63.22% of the winners (391 seats) are first time representatives;
- racially, 118 parliamentarians are black and another 101 are of mixed race (35.67% in total);
- women comprise 42.16% (265 seats) of the legislature;
- educationally, 78.34% (481 seats) are university graduates and 20.68% (127 seats) completed high school or technical education training; and
- skill areas represented include engineers, economists, doctors, nurses, lawyers, sociologists, the military, scientists, physical culture teachers, meteorologists, historians and theologians. Note that most new parliamentary members aren't politicians.

The rest of the electoral process works this way:

- the Communist Party of Cuba (PCC) has governed the nation since its formation in 1965 and is the country's only legally recognized party;
- all legislative power is vested in the country's 614 member National Assembly of People's Power;
- a 31 member Council of State (that includes ministers) sits at the executive level;
- 45 days after being elected, National Assembly members elect a President, Vice-President and National Assembly Secretary;
- they also elect the 31 member Council of State that includes the President, first Vice-President, five Vice-Presidents, a Secretary and 23 other members; this process took place on February 24 on the same day National Assembly members took office and, as expected, elected Raul Castro as Cuba's new President; others elected included:
 - Ricardo Alarcon de Quesada (reelected) President of the National Assembly;
 - Jose Ramon Machado Ventura first Vice-President of the councils of State and Ministers;
 - Juan Almeida Bosque, Abelardo Colome Ibarra, Carlos Lage Davila, Esteban Lazo Hernandez and Julio Casas Regueiro Vice-Presidents;
 - Jose Millar Barruecos Secretary of the Council of State plus 23 other Council of State members;
- the President of the Council of State is Head of State and government and its ruling PCC.

Overall, Cuba has what Hugo Chavez calls a “revolutionary democracy.” It’s not perfect, but compare it to America.

Voting in Cuba is participatory. People do it out of choice, not coercion. In America, in contrast, half or more of the electorate abstains. In national elections since 1970, turnout ranged from 36.4% in 1986 and 1998 to 55.3% in 2004 when angry voters failed to oust George Bush, but not for lack of trying.

US elections have never been free, open and fair. Democracy is an illusion, and more people know it and opt out. Others eligible aren’t allowed to vote because of how the process works. Overall, monied interests control things, those with most of it have the most say, Americans get the best democracy money can buy, and things really got ugly in 2000 when the candidate who lost became president.

It led to the 2002 Help America Vote Act (HAVA) with federal funding for these stated goals:

- replace punch card voting systems;
- create the Election Assistance Commission to help administer federal elections; and
- establish minimum election administration standards.

That’s what it said. Here’s what it did. It created a stampede to electronic voting that privatized the process and gave corporate giants unregulated control of it.

In the 2004 election, more than 80% of votes were cast and counted on machines that are owned, programmed and operated by three large corporations with close ties to the administration. The process is secretive, most machines have no verifiable receipts, so recounts are impossible because they’ll only tally the same count.

And that’s just part of the problem. In 2000 and 2004, the whole process was tainted. Millions of votes cast weren’t counted. They included “spoiled ballots,” rejected absentee ones and others lost or deliberately ignored in tabulating. In addition, there was massive voter roll purging and other restraints to prevent voters from making “bad choices” like ones less receptive to monied interests or Democrats over Republicans in key states or districts.

In Cuba, every citizen age 16 or over can vote and nearly all of them do. In America, all sorts of restraints and exclusions exist, starting off with a flawed Constitution. It established no universal rules, doesn’t explicitly ensure the right to vote, and left most voter eligibility qualifications to the states. So unfair laws are in force, and citizens are denied their most fundamental democratic right – to vote for candidates of their choice in free, open and fair elections. Democracy in America is a sham. In Cuba, the process is flawed, but there’s more of it there than here. In addition, Cubans know what they’re getting and vote for it. Americans, on the other hand, know the futility of elections so half or more of them opt out of the process.

It shows in polling data with the latest record-setting February 18-published American Research Group numbers for George Bush:

— he scored an all-time low for a US president at 19%; that compares to other presidential lows as follows: Clinton - 36%; GHW Bush - 29%; Reagan - 35%; Carter - 28%; Nixon - 23% during Watergate; and Harry Truman - 22% during the depths of the Korean War. On the economy, 79% disapprove how Bush handles it.

If Castro's poll numbers were available, they'd tell an opposite story. Most Cubans support him, many love him, but now his era is passing. He's still first PCC secretary, but he'll assume a new role as Cuba's elder statesman, to write, comment and always make his presence felt. So let Fidel have the last word from his commentary called "The Moment Has Come" and a few memorable quotes.

It's (time) to "nominate and elect" new leaders, he says. "For many years (he's) occupied the honorable position of President." But his "critical health position (forced his) provisional resignation on July 31, 2006." His brother and "other comrades....were unwilling to consider (him) out of public life" in spite of it. "It was an uncomfortable situation for (him) vis-a-vis an adversary which had done everything possible to get rid of (him), and (he) felt reluctant to comply."

Now, he's "recover(ed) the full command of (his) mind (and) enough physical strength" to go on.

This is not (a) farewell." His voice will continue to be heard, and here's a sampling:

"A revolution is a struggle to the death between the future and the past."

"I find capitalism repugnant. It is filthy. It is gross, it is alienating....because it causes war, hypocrisy and competition."

"North Americans don't understand....that our country is not just Cuba; our country is also humanity."

"The revenues of Cuban-run companies are used exclusively for the benefit of the people, to whom they belong."

"The revolution is a dictatorship of the exploited against the exploiters."

"They talk about the failure of socialism but where is the success of capitalism in Africa, Asia and Latin America?"

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