



# AFTER FIDEL: What Future for U.S.-Cuban Relations?

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*Latin America always seems on the verge of something historic, always teetering between possibility and failure.<sup>1</sup>*

**D**ESPITE THE END of the cold war over two decades ago and intractable post-9/11 security challenges, when it comes to Cuba, U.S. policymakers remain mired in the past. Once again, it seems that Fidel Castro's Cuba is different. Cuba is not only the hemisphere's oldest dictatorship, but also a long-standing U.S. foreign policy failure. Radical change has engulfed the region since the end of 2005. Presidential elections across Latin America have swept in popular, radical, left-leaning, and often anti-American leaders and governments. In Chile, a woman became the first elected president of a South American country, and in Bolivia, an indigenous leader attained the presidency for the first time in the region's modern history—but the relations between Cuba and the United States have remained frozen in time.<sup>2</sup>

Throughout it all, Castro and his regime have survived.<sup>3</sup> Despite the dictator's old age and poor health and the economic and political failures of the Cuban Revolution, unrelenting efforts by the United States and its allies in the region and abroad to render Castro and his socialist model irrelevant have backfired.<sup>4</sup> In fact, the revolutionary spirit is alive and well in Latin America, thanks in part to the U.S.'s anti-Castro policy. The world is a different place today: the global and hemispheric climates are more critical of U.S. leadership and its economic and political models and more supportive of Castro and Cuban socialism. For a significant percentage of Latin America's population, Castro and the Cuban Revolution remain powerful symbols of success and resistance to the "Empire."

In spite of the U.S. economic blockade and the reactionary Helms-Burton legislation, Cuba has become a leader in education and medical care, providing free medical training to aspiring Third World doctors (and even some First World ones). Cuba's economy has defied predictions that it would collapse within months of the fall of the Soviet Union; instead, Cuba has developed a successful tourism sector and growing sports and biotechnology industries and attracted direct investments from around the world. Diplomatic and economic relations have expanded regionally and globally. In 2007, 30 of 32 Latin American governments maintained normalized ties with Cuba, and a number of governments, particularly Venezuela, Canada, Spain, and China, expanded trade agreements and commercial ventures with the island.<sup>5</sup> Additionally, since 1999, Hugo Chávez's Venezuela has provided a valuable political and economic lifeline to Castro and the Cuban Revolution.

## CULTIVO UNA ROSA BLANCA

*Cultivo una rosa blanca,  
en junio como en enero,  
para el amigo sincero  
que me da su mano franca.*

*Y para el cruel que me arranca  
el corazón con que vivo,  
cardo ni ortiga cultivo:  
cultivo la rosa blanca.*

—José Martí

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PHOTO: Cuban General Raúl Castro waves to the people during the annual May Day parade, 1 May 2007. Behind him is a bust of José Martí, the national hero of Cuba. (AIN Foto, Marcelino Vazquez Hernandez)

But how permanent are these achievements? Can they and the Cuban Revolution survive Fidel's death? Or is Castro the indispensable glue that holds the system together? Since Castro became seriously ill in July 2006, critics and supporters of his regime have speculated over the future of Cuba without Fidel. The official successor and temporary head of government during Castro's recuperation, Fidel's brother Raúl, is also aging, having celebrated his 76th birthday in June 2007. What will Cuba's future be like when both Castros have left the stage?

More questions spring up. What should the U.S. response be to a Fidel-less Cuba? Will the immediate change in leadership further normalization of relations and an end to the embargo? Will the U.S. continue its long-standing policy of indirect subversion and sabotage? Or will Fidel's death and the transition to another leader provide the opportune climate for direct U.S. military intervention? Will the Cuban dissidents on and off the island be able to rally the Cuban people to overthrow a successor government? Should the United States have a role, either direct or indirect, in regime change in Cuba? Would an active U.S. role promote democracy in Cuba and the region? And what would be the immediate and long-term impact of U.S.-sponsored regime change on hemispheric cooperation and security?

How U.S. policymakers respond to these difficult questions will be critical to Cuba's political and economic development and to a renewal of U.S. credibility in Latin America. But before we begin to consider what the appropriate U.S. security framework for a new Cuba policy should be, we must first put the current U.S. foreign policy towards Latin America into context.

## Global and Hemispheric Context since 9/11

In this era of global terrorism and insecurity, U.S. unilateralism is not a viable long-term option. Power relations and capabilities are in constant flux, and even a superpower's resources are constrained and limited. Most global problems are a complex mix of economic, political, religious, ethnic, and cultural tensions and rivalries and involve non-state as well as state actors. Most of these problems are not amenable to military solutions. Even when they are, the



Cuban daily life is reflected on an image of Cuban leader Fidel Castro in a store window in Havana, 30 April 2007.

AP Photo, Gregory Bull

U.S. must employ its military resources judiciously and sparingly. More than ever, rational and realistic foreign and national security policies that appreciate the new global context are essential to success.

Since 9/11 and the Iraq war, the global political and security environment has become more threatening to all nations and particularly to the United States. Indeed, the popular global mind-set of "hating America" expresses not just a rejection of the Bush administration's foreign policy, but a wider repudiation of U.S. hegemony.<sup>6</sup> In the current climate of fear and hyper-security, military responses to global and regional problems have increased, but the use of force has not necessarily delivered greater security. The U.S. War on Terrorism in Afghanistan and Iraq is a case in point. In a 2006 opinion poll of over 100 top foreign-policy experts, most agreed that the world is more dangerous for the United States and American citizens today. They did not agree that the United States was winning the War on Terrorism or that the war in Iraq has had a positive impact on the War on Terrorism.<sup>7</sup>

Such negative views of U.S. foreign policy and the U.S. role in the world resonate in the international community, especially in Latin America, where they have contributed to tense hemispheric relations. As our closest neighbor, traditional security zone, and “soft underbelly,” Latin America is more important to the United States today than ever. During the major security crises and global wars of the 20th century, Latin American support and hemispheric solidarity were the norm and were often taken for granted. Currently, the Iraq war and the War on Terrorism are widely unpopular in Latin America (as in many countries around the world), making it more difficult for democratic governments to support U.S. strategic goals and easier for unfriendly governments, or radical and populist ones, to confront and even undermine U.S. policies.<sup>8</sup> Once again, as during darker periods of U.S.-Latin American relations, most of the region’s governments and peoples are defining nationalism in terms of anti-Americanism. Standing up to the North American superpower has won recent elections for a half-dozen new, “left-leaning” Latin American presidents.

The aggressive U.S. focus on nation-building and democratic enlargement in the Third World and in the Middle East, where it has been problematic and largely unsuccessful, has increased skepticism over the U.S.’s “real” foreign policy intentions and fostered cynicism about the effectiveness of democracy itself.<sup>9</sup> Despite being a popular and desirable concept in theory, in practice democracy does not guarantee favorable or convenient outcomes for either voters or imperial powers. The propagation of democracy by foreign armies—whether by a humanitarian intervention sanctioned by multinational forces or by a unilateral imperialist invasion—has proven to be an illusory goal. “Powerful states,” Eric J. Hobsbawm argues, “are trying to spread a system that even they find inadequate to meet today’s challenges.”<sup>10</sup> The conditions for effective democratic governance are rare and demand legitimacy, consensus, and conflict mediation, and in impoverished countries, socioeconomic opportunity and justice are necessary as well. Hobsbawm is not alone in concluding that efforts to “spread democracy” have “aggravated ethnic conflict and produced the disintegration” of multinational and multi-communal states.<sup>11</sup>

The U.S. policy to democratize Latin America’s governments is under suspicion and assault. There are critics outside the region and even in the U.S. Government itself. Compared to earlier decades when dictatorships and one-party rule were the norm, since the 1980s most countries in the region have adopted democratic elections and governing structures. However, only a few are truly stable, and most are “borderline” (with Colombia ranked as “critical”) on an index of “failed states.”<sup>12</sup> In many cases, democracy has opened up political systems to historically disadvantaged and exploited groups and facilitated the rise of populist and leftist leaders across the region, but it has had negative consequences, too.

The problem is that an imbalance exists. Former Peruvian President Alejandro Toledo recently noted, “Political democracy will take root in Latin America only when it is accompanied by economic and social democracy.”<sup>13</sup> Latin America’s populist and indigenous resurgence is the result of this imbalance. Radical popular movements have targeted chronic poverty and socioeconomic inequality, which have not only persisted, but also worsened in many countries in spite of democracy. Indigenous and labor groups have benefited from the democratic opening, successfully organizing and electing populist governments more representative of their ethnicity and class interests and supportive of their reformist/revolutionary goals. However, popular civil movements have also mobilized outside the formal political system and used “direct democracy” or confrontational “street” democracy to push their agendas. Contests among competing groups that represent “the people,” the “elites,” and the government of the day have become the norm in many countries. In this sense, democracy has increased political and social instability in the hemisphere and complicated U.S. foreign policymaking.

There are two key reasons for this. First, the United States has been inconsistent and cynical in its relations, preferring “friendly” governments whether democratic or not, and challenging “unfriendly” ones even when they are democratic. Second, U.S. policymakers have married democracy to free-market capitalism and unfettered globalization and rejected the dominant role of the state in economic growth and development in Latin America as an insidious form of socialism.<sup>14</sup> The region’s elites are pro-market, but

the capitalist economic model has never persuaded the majority of the popular classes. Many repudiate it as an instrument of U.S. economic imperialism and a major reason for their chronic poverty and their country's socioeconomic underdevelopment. Indeed, in the last decade, as the region has experienced a major economic crisis, even the elites have turned against the U.S. economic formula. The pro-globalization, capitalist, free-market model of economic growth and development, the "Washington Consensus" that U.S. foreign policy has promoted internationally and in Latin America, is under full attack. Notwithstanding political or ideological orientation, most Latin governments reject economic "neoliberalism" and have reasserted a more state-centric trade and development model.

In short, the United States is on the wrong side of the major changes, movements, and trends in Latin America, and Fidel Castro, who has denounced U.S. policy as imperialist and directly challenged the American political and economic system for nearly half a century, is once again "in," just as he seemed on the way "out." Rather than fading into irrelevance since the end of the cold war, the Cuban Revolution's socialist principles have been redeemed by the rise of a new "21st-century socialism." The failure of U.S. foreign policy—its disconnect from the challenges of a post-9/11 world; the altered global context since the 2003 invasion of Iraq; U.S. neglect of Latin America; and the uncoordinated U.S. response to the region's leftward shift since 2000—is partly to blame for this change. The United States has lost moral authority in relation to Cuba and other repressive regimes around the world. Criticisms of Cuba and other governments for the infringement of democratic and human rights, extralegal detentions, and torture ring hollow after Abu Ghraib and the detentions in Guantánamo Bay. How can the United States condemn Cuba and brand governments that harbor terrorists as terrorist states when the U.S. judicial system protects an anti-Castro Cuban rebel who perpetrated terrorist acts against the Castro regime?

## The United States and Revolutionary Cuba

The history of the U.S.-Cuban relationship is an ambivalent one. After 34 years of struggle, Cuba, one of the last colonies of Spain, finally gained its independence through U.S. military intervention in the Spanish-American War of 1898.<sup>15</sup> On 20 May 1902, after four years of U.S. military occupation, the Cuban flag flew over Morro Castle at the entrance to Havana harbor, and the Cuban Republic was born.<sup>16</sup> From the *independentistas'* perspective, the U.S. intervention preempted and thwarted their independence movement. Nevertheless, despite the 1902 Platt Amendment, which placed conditions on Cuban independence and thwarted Cuban nationalism, the U.S. occupation contributed to the island's immediate political and economic stability and development. It also safeguarded "order, property, and privilege" as well as U.S. political and economic interests.<sup>17</sup>

Stability, however, was short-lived because in the long term, Cuba's "mediated sovereignty" and the elitist U.S.-dominated economic reconstruction undermined it and provoked several interventions by the U.S. Marines over the next two decades.<sup>18</sup> Relations improved somewhat in 1934, when U.S. President Franklin D. Roosevelt's Good Neighbor policy revoked the Platt Amendment and renounced the U.S. policy of military intervention, but this only occurred after a defiant nationalist Cuban Government had unilaterally revoked the amendment and prompted Sergeant Fulgencio Batista's September 1933 revolt, which led to a consolidation of power favorable to U.S. interests.<sup>19</sup> Over much of the next 26 years, and mostly with the blessing of the United States, the Cuban army and Batista (either as the power behind the throne or as president or dictator) maintained control.

On 26 July 1953, Fidel Castro and 165 Cuban youths rebelled against Batista, who had assumed full dictatorial power after a second coup, in March 1952. The insurrection failed dismally and Batista killed, tortured, and imprisoned many rebels, with

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Fidel Castro among the imprisoned. Attempting to legitimize his rule, Batista called elections in 1954 and ran unopposed. In another bid for legitimacy, in May 1955, the Batista government extended a general amnesty to all political prisoners, among them Fidel Castro, who soon went into exile and launched the revolutionary July 26th Movement.<sup>20</sup> For the next five years, the world watched, stunned by Fidel's guerrilla victories, and journalists turned the ragtag army and its leader into folk heroes.

On the eve of Castro's 1959 Cuban Revolution and for a year afterward, U.S. policymakers, as they had been during other U.S.-Cuban relations crises, were ambivalent and divided over U.S.-Cuba strategy. Despite favorable overtures from the United States to Castro and from Castro to the United States—again foreshadowing the wide pendulum swings of future relations—miscommunication and mistrust caused the two governments to become embroiled in a protracted contest after 1960. In January 1961, President Dwight Eisenhower severed diplomatic relations with Cuba and on 17 April 1961, President John F. Kennedy launched the Bay of Pigs invasion.<sup>21</sup>

From the outset, many U.S. policymakers misunderstood the Cuban Revolution's character and underestimated its radical goals. Although Marxist, socialist, and authoritarian, the revolution was primarily a populist *social revolution*. In March 1960, Castro emphasized the populist character of the July 26th Movement as "the revolution of the *humildes* [humble], for the *humildes*, and by the *humildes*."<sup>22</sup> The revolution was fundamentally committed to eradicating the social injustices endemic in Cuban society, and thus polarized that society between the haves and the have-nots, between the once powerful economic classes and the impoverished, emerging popular classes.<sup>23</sup>

The Cuban mix of nationalism and communism confounded U.S. policymakers, and the cold war's ideological blinders obscured the potential for accommodation with Castro and the revolution. As Marifeli Pérez-Stable has noted, although communists had controlled the unions in the 1940s and allied themselves at times with Batista, this had not created the crisis that it did in 1959. "More profoundly," she writes, "the controversy over



Fidel Castro, Cuban Prime Minister, answers a question from a panel on the NBC television program "Meet the Press," in Washington, 19 April 1959. He said at one point that Cuba would be committed to the West in the event of any struggle between Democracy and Communism. At left is Ned Brooks, the moderator.

AP Photo

communism masked the repudiation of radical change. A humanist ideology against capitalism and communism so eloquently espoused in the spring-summer of 1959 was a casualty of domestic and foreign confrontation. Had Cuba not been ninety miles from the United States, the revolution might have found those elusive middle grounds. That nearness and the historic intimacy it had imposed between the two countries had, indeed, contoured the radical nationalism that was now rendering the revolution so intransigent."<sup>24</sup>

The Cuban Revolution's radical rhetoric and ideological challenge to the United States—which had occupied the island, intervened militarily, dominated commerce and economic development, and exploited labor and natural resources—addressed the psychological need for national respect, dignity, and honor. From the outset, Castroism emphasized the power of ideas and ideals over money.<sup>25</sup> It rejected the crass materialism of U.S. capitalism and its imperialist role in Cuban history. This emphasis on ideals in the face of foreign economic interests, a David versus Goliath stand, established the Cuban Revolution as a model of struggle against great power domination and a beacon for the rights of small states. Castro's revolutionary idealism earned him the adulation of many Latin American and Third World peoples and remains the basis of his influence in the hemisphere.

Cuba has had a special relationship with the United States. For most of the 20th century, the United States and Cuba have shared common interests and challenges. Some scholars have described this interdependence as a "love-hate" relationship. After

the Cuban Revolution, the two countries became irrationally obsessed with each other. Perhaps, as some critics of U.S. policy suggest, U.S. leaders see a mirror image in Fidel Castro that reflects their own revolutionary heritage, megalomania, and messianism. Castro has no real military and economic power, but he has challenged the United States ideologically for political and moral leadership in the hemisphere. Castroism has become a powerful idea and may well survive Castro, the man.

Venezuela's Hugo Chávez, who can command oil wealth and economic power, has assumed Castroism's ideological mantle and historic challenge and undoubtedly will further revel in this role once Castro has left the stage. In many respects, Venezuela is "the new Cuba," and Chávez is the new leader of a "counter-hegemonic bloc."<sup>26</sup> Therefore, how the United States responds to the transition in Cuba may have a lasting and significant strategic impact in Latin America. The U.S. response has the potential to shift the hemisphere's "correlation of forces" for or against the United States and for or against radical populist leaders.<sup>27</sup> In short, how the U.S. manages a post-Castro transition will have far-reaching implications for the success of progressive change, reform, and democratization in the region. For most of the 20th century, the fundamental source of conflict between the United States and the governments and peoples of the region has been U.S. ambivalence and often outright hostility to social revolution and radical, progressive change.

U.S. policymakers have insisted on imposing their own interests, agendas, models, and formulas on Latin America—often against the wishes of most of the peoples in the region. At the same time that U.S. leaders insist on internal democratization, they maintain an undemocratic, hegemonic control over the region and demand that it do things "our" way. Democracy's essence is the people's right to choose, and—ironically—that includes the right to reject a particular version of democracy or to determine the appropriateness of democracy under special circumstances. Democracy also implies respect for sovereignty and greater equality in intra-regional affairs among nations in the hemisphere—a genuine reassertion of the Good Neighbor policy. The tragic history of U.S.-Cuban relations in the 20th century is testimony to the dilemmas and contradictions inherent in U.S. hemispheric policy. As in the case

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of Cuba, controversy over ideology, especially communism during the cold war, has always "masked the repudiation of radical change" in "our backyard."

### **Realpolitik and a "New" Cuba**

The central question policymakers must consider, if the U.S. is to develop a realistic, pragmatic approach to a post-Castro Cuba, is how much the "new" Cuba will be like the "old" Cuba. After nearly 50 years of Castroism, what has permanently changed in Cuban society? Perhaps not even the island's citizens will fully know until the transition actually occurs. However, we can identify some tendencies. One hallmark of the idealistic early days of the revolution, which the regime has reaffirmed repeatedly since, was rejection of Western capitalism and consumerism. Nevertheless, limited market economic measures that have spilled over from the prosperous tourist sector and/or been tolerated by the regime to meet critical needs have eroded the revolution's anti-capitalist orthodoxy. As the Cuban economy has opened up to small-scale private enterprise, more foreign investment, joint venture companies, and remittances from exiled relatives in Miami, the regime has lost a degree of control over the economy.

Despite constant sloganeering that socialism is "stronger than ever," over 75 percent of Cuba's population was born after the revolution, and this post-revolutionary generation is clearly drawn to market-society materialism. At the Fifth Congress of the Cuban Communist Party, in 1997, Castro emphasized the importance of reestablishing Marxist-Leninist principles, and in 2001, he launched the "Battle of Ideas" to shore up the socialist values of the revolution. Since 2003, the Cuban regime has also cracked down on dissent and internal opposition leaders. One Cuban expert felt that the more the regime made "structural or economic concessions to capitalism and globalization," the more it increased its ideological vigilance and intolerance of dissent.<sup>28</sup> The

dual economy has also introduced troublesome and demoralizing income inequalities. A service worker in the tourism sector or workers in foreign joint venture companies can earn more in a day than some professionals may earn in a week or a month. For some Cubans, the disparity between the Cuban Revolution's principle of socioeconomic equality and daily reality has undermined confidence in socialism.

While the U.S. economic embargo of the island and other forms of political and economic retaliation continue to limit and deflect popular discontent, Cuban socialism has delivered important educational and health benefits and reduced the corruption and class, race, and gender discrimination of pre-revolutionary times. Given the option, the island's citizens would probably not jettison socialism completely but opt for a mixed economic model that ensures state management of the economy and social welfare. In addition, economic control heavily resides with the Cuban military, which profits from the tourist and foreign investment sector, and this is unlikely to change in the short term. Copying the concessionary model of the Chinese Red Army, the generals control 60 percent of the economy and head lucrative companies. In addition, as Minister of Defense, Raúl Castro has maintained his close rapport with and firm support of the armed forces. Both want to protect their stake in the island's current political economy and, reflecting a popular attitude within Cuban society, both have a healthy skepticism of capitalism and the free market.<sup>29</sup>

Notwithstanding the Communist Party and the generals' skepticism, with the sugar days over, tourism and trade will remain central to a post-Castro Cuba, and Cuba's human capital in teachers and doctors will supplement the hard currency sector of the economy. Chinese investments in nickel mining and offshore natural gas and oil resources offer long-term prospects. In the short term, Venezuela subsidizes Cuba's energy needs by providing over 100,000 barrels of oil per day. Instead of collapsing, the Cuban economy has averaged a healthy 5 percent growth rate in the last several years despite the embargo.

Although the Cuban people have suffered political repression under Castro's authoritarian rule, it is unclear if the desire for a more Western-style, participatory governing structure is widespread. Full-blown democracy is highly unlikely in a post-Castro Cuba in the short term for three reasons. First,

repression is not applied equally. As Castro is fond of saying, "in the revolution, everything, outside of the revolution, nothing." The average Cuban who is apolitical or supports the revolution has little to fear. Anti-revolutionary organizers, however, are another matter. Second, high profile U.S. and European Union support of and engagement with political dissidents may continue to backfire, as it has under Castro, inviting more aggressive regime repression as transitional and successor governments feel more threatened by external subversion or outright invasion. Third, dissident groups lack a unifying figure, such as a Lech Walesa in Poland. Personal politics divide them, and they do not represent a broad sociopolitical movement, as Solidarity did in Poland.

Democratization is unlikely to come from the diffuse Miami exile community. Ideology, politics, and personal ambitions have fragmented it into several hundred different exile organizations. After decades in the United States, a "right of return" to the island is more symbolic than practical for many exiles. Most wealthy Cubans have lost their property and may prefer to do business in a post-Castro Cuba rather than live there. Their mansions and properties have deteriorated, and it might take three generations to rebuild their lives and recapture the privileges some exiles had achieved before the revolution. In a recent interview, one Cuban-American said such "revanchist" aspirations bordered on delirium.

## Policy Considerations

In planning for the post-Castro transition, it is important to take stock of the tortuous history of U.S.-Cuban relations. As the historian Thomas Carothers wrote, "Let us hope that whatever role the United States seeks to play in Cuba's future, it is based on a thorough understanding of that inglorious past."<sup>30</sup> Central to that understanding is an appreciation of Castro's appeal and the sources of Cuban and hemispheric discontent, both then and now. Such an understanding can go a long way toward explaining Hugo Chávez's appeal and the rise and consolidation of radical populist governments across the region.

Second, Washington policymakers need to recognize that Marxism, socialism, and populist radicalism in Latin America have intimate connections to nationalism. No matter how difficult things may become, most Cubans are likely to defend national

sovereignty; they will prefer self-rule to an externally imposed solution. This has been a perennial lesson of U.S. engagement and intervention in Latin America and the Third World.

Third, the American people deserve a foreign policy that puts their interests before the special interests of Cuban-Americans. Whatever policy Washington chooses must turn on what is best for the United States and not what is bad for the Castros or Chavez. In 1996, the distinguished expert on Latin American affairs, Cole Blasier, observed that after Cuba downed the Brothers to the Rescue aircraft, “the main United States national interest in Cuba is a negative: that the United States not be drawn into any violent military conflict in Cuba.” If civil war were instigated or broke out in Cuba during the transition, “the pressures for United States intervention would be greater than in Grenada, Panama, or Haiti,” and the resulting “costs in blood and money” would be great. An occupation of the island “would be a morass.”<sup>31</sup> Blasier’s warning is especially relevant in the wake of the current Iraqi occupation.

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## Policy Options

With these central points in mind, one might speculate on possible scenarios and the viability of various policy options.

**Option 1. Hands-off, or reforming the system away.** Whether an internally directed hands-off reform strategy is a viable U.S. policy option depends on what happens after Castro dies. Will there be continuity or change? Experts are divided. Hardliners believe it would be naïve and fruitless to pursue a hands-off policy that would allow internal conditions and reforms to improve relations gradually over time. More moderate observers think that a post-Castro Cuba governed by his brother Raúl promises greater pragmatism, but limited reforms and regime continuity—in other words, Castroism without (Fidel) Castro. Those of a more optimistic and concilia-

tory bent argue that Castro’s death strongly favors fundamental regime change in the long-term. They claim that Cuba without Castro as the glue that holds the system together would be like the former Soviet Union without Marxism-Leninism after Gorbachev’s reforms (which the Soviets enacted to preserve their system rather than further its demise).

If the latter analogy is right, a more open, flexible Raúl Castro regime would hasten its own downfall. Reforms would serve to reform away the reforming government. Therefore, a more proactive U.S. policy response in the post-Castro transition would be unnecessary and potentially detrimental, especially since a core principle of the Cuban Revolution has been respect for national sovereignty. Even the perception of U.S. engagement with internal and external Cuban dissident movements could undermine an autonomous, popular transition to democracy.

Given the history of U.S. interventions in the region, an activist U.S. response could further weaken U.S. moral authority and influence in the hemisphere. Respect for national sovereignty, traditionally the hallmark of cordial U.S.-Latin American relations since the Good Neighbor policy, is an especially contentious, critical issue in post-9/11 international and regional systems where U.S. power and hegemony have been in progressive decline.

**Option 2. Limited engagement or the “magic of the marketplace.”** The U.S. has tried the limited engagement model in various forms over the last 45 years.<sup>32</sup> Many of its proponents, especially those who oppose the economic embargo, have extolled the “magic of the marketplace” as an effective instrument of reform and, ultimately, regime change. Indeed, over the years a strong bipartisan consensus has emerged favoring commercial exchange and even normal relations with Cuba. For example, despite the embargo and the draconian premise of the Helms-Burton Act, both Presidents Bill Clinton and George W. Bush waived Title III of the act, which would have allowed U.S. citizens to sue the Cuban Government over property the Cuban Revolution nationalized.<sup>33</sup>

Supporters of this option believe that capitalist markets and increased trade and tourism will intensify the contradictions between ideology and practice within Cuba’s socialist economy. One Cuban scholar expressed the potential consequences of increased engagement this way: “As long as all Cubans feel they are marching together toward the



same goal, and receiving relatively equal benefits for their sacrifices, the system can continue and even thrive. On the other hand, when ordinary Cubans see that some of their countrymen—and certainly the tourists who are flocking to Cuban beaches—are living on a different level, they will begin to doubt the sincerity of the revolutionary slogans.”<sup>34</sup>

However, the Bush administration has chosen the opposite course, further restricting scholar exchanges, monetary remittances, and travel, including family visits to the island. This policy has largely played into Castro’s hard-line approach by further justifying it; moreover, it has divided the exile community and imposed tremendous hardships on Cuban families, scholars, artists, and people-to-people contacts while doing little to promote democracy, reform, or regime change. In fact, it has had quite the opposite effect.

**Option 3: Military intervention or a major transition initiative.** Since 2003, the Bush administration has pursued a primarily confrontational approach toward Castro’s Cuba. Partly to appease conservative Cuban-Americans in South Florida who supported the president’s election in 2000 and 2004, the Bush administration condemned Cuba in international forums, increased funding for the island’s domestic dissidents, and energetically engaged the U.S. Interests Section in Havana with internal opposition movements. The administration also established the U.S. Commission for Assistance to a Free Cuba in October 2003 and implemented the strict measures identified in the commission’s May 2004 report to hasten the end of the Castro regime.<sup>35</sup> Strict limits on travel to Cuba by Cuban-Americans, students, academics, and humanitarian and religious groups curtailed most people-to-people contacts.<sup>36</sup> In addition to reactionary measures denying the Cuban Government access to dollars and remittances, the commission’s detailed blueprint for the transition included \$59 million for subversion, anti-government organizing, and third-country support for these measures.<sup>37</sup> The travel and economic restrictions and tougher enforcement were so severe that exiled Cuban-American groups, like the Cuban American Commission for Family Rights and even the ultra-conservative Cuban American National Foundation, criticized them.<sup>38</sup>

Some have argued that this tension with a key domestic constituency indicated that the administration’s renewed antagonism toward Cuba reflected

a post-9/11 reassessment of vital foreign policy and national security considerations rather than efforts to appease the Cuban-American lobby.<sup>39</sup> Others believe the foreign policy shift to unilateralism and threatened or actual use of U.S. military power and preemptive force to enact regime-change and police global order predated 9/11.<sup>40</sup> These interpretations are not mutually exclusive: greater global instability, 9/11, and the subsequent Iraq war have forced a critical reassessment of national security concerns and new threats. Without question, how a post-Castro transition plays out in Cuba will have a direct bearing on U.S. homeland security and national security.

For that reason, Washington should avoid over-reaction, especially the use of military force. Fidel Castro’s death is unlikely to usher in drastic changes. Raúl Castro is his brother’s legitimate successor, and only another Cuban general would be a direct threat to him. Cuban authorities convicted General Jorge Ochoa for drug smuggling and executed him, but none of the current generals has Ochoa’s command and popularity. There are no young lions or strong leaders in the Cuban Communist Party to head a revolt, and the revolutionary commandants are either dead or too old to do so. A military intervention and/or an engineered revolt like the Bay of Pigs would likely fail. Even if an invasion or revolt were to succeed initially, the already overextended U.S. military cannot risk becoming mired in what would very likely be another civil war and protracted occupation. In addition, the American public cares even less about Castro than it did about Saddam Hussein and would not support military intervention in Cuba.

## Short- and Long-Term Objectives

Ironically, as the head of a post-Fidel transition government, Raúl Castro may be the best alternative for both Cuba and the United States. There is simply no other leader or group able to maintain order in Cuba after Fidel Castro departs, and a smooth, stable transition is essential if both countries are to avoid a massive refugee crisis like the Mariel boatlift. This means that the first short-term move for the United States should be to accept Raúl Castro as the head of the transition and initiate a policy of re-engagement with Cuba.

A second move, which has both short- and long-term implications, would be to pursue comprehensive

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measures to improve life on the island. This will serve U.S. national security interests and advance political, economic, and commercial interests on both sides. Cubans will be less likely to flee the island if life there improves, and the seeds of hemispheric instability and radicalism emanating from the island will wither.

A related short-term objective includes the unconditional end of the embargo, without a *quid pro quo*. Congress should also lift the ban on travel and restrictions on trade. Today the blockade and Helms-Burton are not as effective, and even at its peak, the embargo, to paraphrase another Cuba-watcher, served to “bend them but not break them.” Supporters of the embargo argue that it is the only leverage we have. That argument merely reveals the meager influence U.S. policy has over the Cuban regime. It is time to honestly recognize that the embargo has failed to achieve either its central goal, regime change, or its secondary goal, isolating Cuba. And, although it has hurt Castro’s regime, it has also hurt innocent Cuban citizens and American interests. Removing Cuba from the State Department’s List of Terrorist States is another immediate action that can support an orderly, peaceful transition in Cuba—and lend greater credibility to the list.<sup>41</sup>

U.S. policymakers need a flexible, pragmatic approach that avoids all-or-nothing thinking. A policy of “democracy or nothing,” delivers the latter for both the United States and Cuba.<sup>42</sup> In December 2006, acting president Raúl Castro proposed negotiations to normalize relations. In addition, Cuba has begun debating economic reforms. The Bush administration has inflexibly rejected considering these overtures as long as there is no democratic opening. Washington’s Cuba policy under Democrats as well as Republicans has been counterintuitive and irrational: rewarding Castro for bad behavior and punishing him for behavior that is more positive. The primary reason has been domestic politics.

As an important short- and long-term measure, the stranglehold that domestic electoral politics has on U.S.-Cuban relations must be broken. The climate for doing so is more favorable now than ever. As one Cuba-watcher has written, in the post-cold war period, “major U.S. moves to intensify or relax economic sanctions against Havana have occurred in presidential election years, when partisan bidding for Cuban-American votes in Florida takes center stage.”<sup>43</sup> In the next 18 months, as another presidential election cycle approaches and unforeseen changes are in the wind for Cuba, policymakers in Washington must not let partisan pressures or special interests—whether Cuban-Americans, U.S. farmers, or U.S. corporations and business groups—draw them into an ill-conceived response. Moreover, the Cuban-American communities in Miami, South Florida, and New Jersey are not monolithic. Younger Cubans are not engaged on the Castro question, and older exiles are mellowing and becoming less dogmatic. A number of issues, including travel, remittances, and the blockade, divide the Cuban Diaspora, which is not a gigantic voting bloc anyway. The time may be right for a presidential candidate to test these waters and develop an independent Cuba policy.<sup>44</sup>

Finally, a fundamental reassessment of Latin American policy should be a vital long-term project. Since 9/11 and the start of War on Terrorism, Washington has neglected its relations with Latin America and become more conservative and reactive. Current policies are shortsighted and focus on a negative, defensive agenda. The United States, Latin America, and Cuba share a host of common concerns, including immigration, trade, the drug war, anti-terrorism, and the negative effects of corporate-led globalization and environmental devastation. It is in the interest of all the countries in the hemisphere to support democracy and sustainable economic development. A comprehensive program for the region that integrates these diverse and distinct policy concerns with broader objectives and emphasizes responsible leadership and reciprocity over dominance is long overdue.<sup>45</sup>

Whether Washington likes it or not, there will be a transition in Cuba after Fidel Castro’s death, and it may or may not end with Raúl Castro. It is in everyone’s interest—Americans, Cuban-Americans, and Cubans on the island—that the transition occur

peacefully and further the promise of normalized relations. In the final analysis, the Cuban Revolution has always been greater than Castro and the Communist Party. Its roots are in the principles of independence

and sovereignty, political freedom, economic development, social equality, justice, and resistance to foreign domination.<sup>46</sup> This is the real legacy of the Cuban Revolution, and it will outlive Fidel Castro. **MR**

## I GROW A WHITE ROSE (CULTIVO UNA ROSA BLANCA)

*I grow a white rose,  
In June as in January,  
For my true friend  
Who gives me his honest hand.*

*And for the cruel man who tears from me  
The heart with which I live,  
Thistle nor thorn do I grow:  
I grow the white rose.*

—José Martí

## NOTES

1. Teo Ballvé, "Listen to América," *NACLA Report on the Americas* 39, no. 3 (November/December 2005): 3.

2. This list includes the following: Daniel Ortega in Nicaragua; Rafael Correa in Ecuador; Hugo Chávez in Venezuela; Luiz Inacio da Silva in Brazil; Tabaré Vázquez in Uruguay; and Nestor Kirchner in Argentina.

3. For example see Esteban Morales Domínguez, "The Cuba-U.S. Conflict in a New Century," in Max Azicri and Elsie Deal, eds., *Cuban Socialism in a New Century: Adversity, Survival, and Renewal* (Gainesville: University Press of Florida, 2004), 320-338.

4. Castro celebrated his 80th birthday in 2006 and underwent surgery reportedly for a serious intestinal illness that year and in early 2007, which had many predicting his permanent incapacitation and/or imminent death.

5. Luis Suárez Salazar, "Cuba's Foreign Policy and the Promise of ALBA," *NACLA Report on the Americas* 39, no. 4 (January/February 2006): 27-32.

6. Fareed Zakaria makes this argument much more extensively in "Hating America," *Foreign Policy* (September/October 2004): 47-48. He calls "anti-Americanism" an "ideology of discontent" in a time of an ideological vacuum.

7. At the time, the American public was divided but generally more optimistic. See "The Terrorism Index," *Foreign Policy* (July/August 2006): 49-55.

8. For example, in Bolivia some taxis and inexpensive, popular buses have sported posters of Osama bin Laden in rear windows to express opposition to the U.S. War on Terrorism and Iraq war.

9. For example, see Michael Slackman, "Elections Abound, but Often There Is No Real Choice," *New York Times*, 7 June 2007, A4. He writes that democracy is not taking hold: "Elections, it appears, have increasingly become a tool used by authoritarian leaders to claim legitimacy."

10. Eric J. Hobsbawm, "Spreading Democracy," *Foreign Policy* (September/October 2004): 40-41.

11. *Ibid.*, 41.

12. Argentina, Chile Costa Rica, and Panama rank as "stable," and Colombia as "in danger." See "The Failed States Index," *Foreign Policy* (May/June 2006): 50-58.

13. Alejandro Toledo, "Silence=Despotism," *New York Times*, 6 June 2007, A23. Toledo's quote continues: "Likewise, Latin Americans will be able to achieve sustained economic growth and eliminate extreme poverty only when our political systems are free and fair for all." However, this is a complex relationship. Two scholars noted that "democracy" has replaced "development" as the buzzword for the 1990s and beyond and saw in this a paradox. "Yet the paradox of this new wave of democratization is that its 'success' is built upon the failure of 'development' both in the Third World and the former Second World." Not only is this "new democracy" flawed in terms of broader popular political participation, but also it has not solved fundamental social and economic problems. In the cases investigated, which include Argentina and Guatemala for Latin America, powerful domestic and international groups stymied reforms. Both cases developed what the authors termed "elite democracies" and experienced significant U.S. influence in their affairs. See Barry Gills and Joel Rocamora, "Low Intensity Democracy," *Third World Quarterly* 13, no. 3 (1992): 501-523; quote 501.

14. Western scholars, as well as policymakers, also identified democracy and capitalism. Two critics argue that this was "a not very well hidden ideological fiat of certain Western studies of Third World democracy," and the linkage was "specifically tailored to serve the interests of global capital in these countries." Barry Gills and Joel Rocamora, "Low Intensity Democracy," 502.

15. Three unsuccessful independence wars included the Ten Years War, 1868 to 1878; a second war in 1880; and the last war from 1895 to 1898. See Gary Prevost, "Cuba," 337-367 in Harry E. Vanden and Gary Prevost, *Politics of Latin America: The Power Game*, 2d ed. (New York: Oxford, 2006), especially 340-41; Charles H. Blake, *Politics in Latin America* (New York: Houghton Mifflin Company, 2005), 247-287; and Pérez-Stable, 36-37.

16. Pérez-Stable, 37-38.

17. *Ibid.*, 37.

18. *Ibid.*

19. *Ibid.*

20. *Ibid.*, 52-53.

21. *Ibid.*, 77-81.

22. *Ibid.*, 81.

23. Here the terms *clases económicas* and *clases populares* are used by Pérez-Stable, 81.

24. Pérez-Stable, 78.

25. Pérez-Stable provides an enlightening quote by Castro on this point. He states in June 1960: "The revolution shows that ideals are more powerful than gold! If gold were more powerful than ideals, those large foreign interests would have swept up the map . . . Workers, peasants, Cubans of dignity have conquered their revolutionary *conciencia*. . . They will not trade their revolution, their *patria*, for gold." *The Cuban Revolution: Origins, Course, and Legacy*, 81.

26. For elaboration of this argument see, Teo Ballvé, "Is Venezuela the New Cuba?" *NACLA Report on the Americas* 39, no. 1 (July/August 2005): 3.

27. This is a paraphrase of Leonid Brezhnev when he commented that the U.S. defeat in Vietnam resulted in a global shift in the "correlation of forces" in favor of socialism, as quoted by Peter W. Rodman and William Shawcross in "Defeat's Killing Fields," *New York Times*, 7 June 2007, A35.

28. Max Castro, a Cuba expert at the University of Miami, quoted in Laurie Goering, "Cuba's Youth Ignore Revolution," *Orlando Sentinel*, 28 January 2001, A20.

29. One Cuban American quoted a popular saying: "The capitalist will sell you the rope with which to be hung."

30. Thomas Carothers, "Backing the Wrong Tyrant," a review of *Contesting Castro: The United States and the Triumph of the Cuban Revolution*, by Thomas G. Paterson, *New York Times Book Review*, 12 June 1994, 34. Also, see Thomas Carothers, *In the Name of Democracy: U.S. Policy toward Latin America during the Reagan Years*.

31. "U.S. Fixation on Castro May Do Us No Good," Letters to the Editor, *New York Times*, 1 March 1996.

32. For example, see William M. LeoGrande, "The United States and Cuba: Strained Engagement," in *Cuba, the United States, and the Post-Cold War World*, Morris Morley and Chris McGillion, eds., (Gainesville: University Press of Florida, 2005).

33. Philip Brenner and Marguerite Jimenez, "U.S. Policy on Cuba Beyond the Last Gasp," *NACLA Report on the Americas* 39, no. 4 (January/February 2006): 15-22.

34. Paula J. Pettavino, "Cuban Sports Saved by Capitalism?" *NACLA Report on the Americas* 37, no. 5 (March/April 2004): 32.

35. "Fact Sheet: Report of the Commission for Assistance to a Free Cuba," Office of the Press Secretary, The White House, 6 May 2004; Brenner and Jimenez, 16-17.

36. Sheryl L. Lutjens, "Cuba and the Security Frame," *Latin American Perspectives* 33, no. 5 (September 2006): 3-13; quote, 8.

37. Lutjens, "Cuba and the Security Frame," 8.

38. Brenner and Jimenez, 18-19.

39. Brenner and Jimenez, 18-19; Lutjens, "Cuba and the Security Frame." For comparison, see Phillip Brenner, Patrick J. Haney, and Walter Vanderbrush, "The Confluence of Domestic and International Interests: U.S. Policy toward Cuba, 1998-2001," *International Studies Perspectives* 3 (May 2002): 192-208.

40. Lutjens, "Cuba and the Security Frame," 5. Also, see Steven Hurst, "Conservatism Resurgent? The Foreign Policy Agenda of the Bush Administration," in Iwan Morgan and Philip Davies, eds., *Right On? Political Change and Continuity in George W. Bush's America* (London: Institute for the Study of the Americas, 2006), 41-59, who agrees that a major shift in U.S. foreign policy toward a national security strategy of conservative radicalism occurred but was formalized in 2002 and pre-dates 9/11; and Stephen Gill, "National in/security on a universal scale," in Isabella Bakker and Stephen Gill, eds., *Power, Production, and Social Reproduction: Human In/security in the Global Political Economy* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2003), 208-223, who dates to 1989 a more ready use or threatened use of U.S. military power as the United States asserts the role of global policeman.

41. "Cuba After Castro: The Future of U.S.-Cuba Relations," Transcript of Council on Foreign Relations, Speakers: Jo Ann Emerson, U.S. Congress, R-MO; and James McGovern, U.S. Congress, D-MA, and Presider: Julia E. Sweig, 23 January 2007; <[http://www.cfr.org/publications/12493/cuba\\_after\\_castro.html](http://www.cfr.org/publications/12493/cuba_after_castro.html)>.

42. Paolo Spadoni, "All or Nothing on Cuba?" *Orlando Sentinel*, 1 April 2007, A21.

43. *Ibid.*

44. "Cuba After Castro: The Future of U.S.-Cuba Relations," Transcript of Council on Foreign Relations.

45. Laura Carlsen and Tom Barry, "U.S.-Latin American Relations at Crossroads—U.S. Hegemony or Global Good Neighbor Policy?" *International Relations Center, IRC Americas Program Special Report*, February 2006. <<http://ggg.irc-online.org/>>.

46. See "Was Fidel Good for Cuba? A Debate between Carlos Alberto Montaner and Ignacio Ramonet," *Foreign Policy* (January/February 2007): 56-64.