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**POLITICAL UNCERTAINTY IN POST-FIDEL CASTRO CUBA**

by

Lieutenant Colonel Jeffrey W. Dukes  
United States Marine Corps

Dr. Gabriel Marcella  
Project Adviser

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## **ABSTRACT**

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The United States and the nation of Cuba have maintained an adversarial relationship for over four decades. Since seizing power and establishing his revolutionary communist government, Fidel Castro has been an insoluble policy issue for ten U.S. presidents. At the height of the Cold War, Cuba's alliance with the Soviet Union brought the United States and the USSR to the brink of nuclear war during the Cuban Missile Crisis. Migration from Cuba has been a continuous strain on United States-Cuba relations, dramatically impacting the demographics and politics of South Florida, and twice resulting in mass exoduses of Cubans. Throughout Castro's rule, the U.S. policy of diplomatic and economic isolation in order to promote regime change and democracy in Cuba has remained fundamentally unchanged. This paper examines U.S. policy options for a post-Castro Cuba.



## POLITICAL UNCERTAINTY IN POST-FIDEL CASTRO CUBA

The United States and Cuba have maintained an adversarial relationship for nearly five decades. Since seizing power and establishing his revolutionary communist government, Fidel Castro has been an insoluble policy issue for ten U.S. presidents. At the height of the Cold War, Cuba's alliance with the Soviet Union brought the United States and the USSR to the brink of nuclear war during the Cuban Missile Crisis. Migration from Cuba has been a continuous strain on United States-Cuba relations, dramatically impacting on the demographics and politics of South Florida, and twice resulting in mass exoduses of Cubans. Throughout Castro's rule, the U.S. policy of diplomatic and economic isolation in order to promote regime change and democracy has remained fundamentally unchanged and failed. Today, a succession government has effectively begun, with an ailing Fidel Castro ceding power to his brother Raul. Though he may wish to determine Cuba's political destiny, Fidel will not have the ultimate say. This paper examines potential options for a post-Castro Cuba, the factors that will influence those options and the challenges Cuba will face. The paper will then conclude by examining U.S. policy and the barriers to policy change.

### Post-Fidel Castro Scenarios

The United States and Cuba have very different goals regarding the future. Stated U.S. policy is to isolate the current regime and encourage Cuba to transition to a democratic government based on a free market economy.<sup>1</sup> For Fidel, the goal is to continue the revolution and maintain the communist regime under new leadership. The two positions are at definite odds, with the United States seeking a transition and change and Fidel seeking succession and continuity. In fact, Cuba is effectively in a post-Fidel government now. Since July 2006 presidential powers have been "temporarily" transferred to Raul. By early 2007, Fidel was reported to be in grave condition, though officials in the Cuban government denied that to be the case. In the long run, neither side may get what they seek, but several outcomes are plausible. The remainder of this section will examine the potential post-Fidel scenarios.

Status Quo. The scenario considered likely by most Cuba analysts (and already taking place) is a succession to power by Raul Castro, which could take on different forms. In order to make clear the difference between this and other scenarios, the underlying assumption is that Raul assumes and remains in power, and would rule much as Fidel did. Thus, this scenario is essentially a status quo situation under a different Castro brother. The transfer of temporary Presidential authority to Raul brought to fruition what had long been planned by Fidel in the event he died or could no longer rule.<sup>2</sup> This scenario is the "cleanest" one from the Castro

perspective and offers the best opportunity to continue the revolution and the communist regime. What remains to be seen is whether Raul rules as Fidel did.

Critical to Raul's consolidation of power after Fidel will be the support of Cuba's military forces. Complete confidence in the backing of the military will be critical to prevent any rival from rising to challenge Raul, as well as for suppressing any popular uprising demanding political or economic reforms. Of all the possible candidates to succeed Fidel, Raul is the best situated to control the military. As the defense minister, Raul has staffed the senior military leadership with loyal friends and allies.<sup>3</sup> His leadership and record of achievement as the head of the Cuban military have been good. In the 40 plus years of his tenure, there has never been a military coup attempt or serious officer rebellion.<sup>4</sup> It is in the interests of the senior military leaders to support Raul in order to maintain the status quo and thus their privileges in the communist system.<sup>5</sup> However, Raul is 75, so those unhappy with the new leadership won't have to wait long for yet another change. In order to increase the chances of success for a Raul succession, Fidel cracked down on dissent in Cuba. He replaced hundreds of Communist Party officials, reinstated a hard-line communist to the Council of State, and imprisoned leaders of the Varela Project<sup>6</sup> who petitioned the National Assembly for democratic reforms.<sup>7</sup> However, despite the determined preparations to ensure the success of a Raul regime, Cuba under his leadership will face many challenges. Over the many years that Fidel ruled, and especially since he has grown older and become ill, an expectation for change has grown stronger. Both within the Cuban population and the exile community there is a belief that things will be different after Fidel. The pent up anticipation can take different forms. Will it be peaceful demonstrations for democratic and market reforms or open revolts demanding change through violent means? How these expectations manifest themselves, and how the Raul government copes with them, will largely determine the next phase of Cuba's history.

Reform Under Raul. The next scenario is one where Raul assumes the presidency after Fidel's death, but is more open to economic and political reform than his brother. The assumption in this scenario is that Raul maintains power long-term, but institutes significant market, and potentially political, reforms to satisfy demands of the populace. Raul has been the more brutal of the two Castro brothers. Raul earned this reputation during the early days of the revolution when he was responsible for hundreds of political executions.<sup>8</sup> In fact, he once offered a reporter the nickname "Raul the Terrible" to describe his role in the revolution.<sup>9</sup> This image as the enforcer has been useful to Raul as the head of the armed forces and the one responsible for suppressing dissent within the Cuban population. However, in stark contrast to

that image, Raul has been the Castro most willing to accept new ideas to overcome Cuba's economic problems after the loss of financial assistance from the Soviet Union.

The failure of communism in Europe appears to have changed Raul's outlook. With the loss of Soviet subsidies, he adopted a more realistic approach to the Cuban economy, and went as far as to send trusted military officers to study business and management in Europe.<sup>10</sup> Cuba's tourist industry, a significant source of hard currency for the government, is managed by the military, an undertaking led by Raul.<sup>11</sup> He also encouraged Fidel to allow farmers who exceeded their quota to sell their excess in local markets as an incentive to increase productivity.<sup>12</sup> Raul's apparent open-mindedness to market reforms indicates he may seek to create a form of communism modeled after China.<sup>13</sup> China's dramatic economic growth in recent years is a compelling example for a Communist Cuba seeking to drag itself out of economic troubles. It is likely that Raul will slowly permit more entrepreneurship, allowing more farmer's markets and private restaurants, while also easing government restrictions and controls on foreign investment. If successful, this approach could ease popular discontent and marginally improve the Cuban economy.

In addition to market reforms, there is potential that Raul would be open to easing tensions with the United States. As part of economic reform, Raul may seek increased income from tourism, which the United States would contribute to dramatically should its citizens be allowed to travel to Cuba. Implementing market reforms might be the first step toward convincing the United States to ease travel restrictions. Raul might also be open, should the United States be willing to participate, to closer military to military exchanges with the U.S. military. Neither Raul nor his senior generals have recently engaged in anti-American rhetoric, and border meetings with U.S. officers at Guantanamo are generally cordial.<sup>14</sup> A softened stance toward U.S. relations, coupled with market reforms, might set the conditions for Cuba to achieve its long- term goal of lifting the U.S. embargo.

In some respects this scenario is more plausible than the previous. Many attribute the long rule of Fidel to his charisma and unmatched oratory skills. Raul does not benefit from Fidel's cult of personality. He is perceived as the loyal brother, living in the shadow cast by the larger-than-life-Fidel.<sup>15</sup> The only way for Raul to contain popular discontent may be to appease the masses with economic reforms aimed at improving living conditions for the average Cuban. Furthermore, he may simply choose to implement reform on his own initiative. Though he will certainly honor his brother's legacy by not immediately shaking things up, it is possible Raul will want to leave his own stamp on Cuban history. Should he implement market reforms that

dramatically improve the Cuban economy, Raul might not only solidify his hold on power, but change how he is judged by history as well.

Third Actor. The next potential post-Fidel scenario is one often termed the third actor. The basic assumption for this scenario is that someone other than Raul takes over leadership of Cuba, and does so without producing long-term instability or unacceptable violence. Several circumstances could set the conditions for this scenario. First and foremost, Raul is not a young man. At 75, like Fidel, Raul is in the twilight of his life and in potentially poor health. Should he die prior to Fidel, all plans to transfer power to Raul are null. With no genuine planning to prepare another successor, the door is open for a number of potential leaders in the Communist Party to compete for primacy. The third actor scenario is also possible should Raul choose to be a transitional leader for Cuba. He is an old man, and considered by many as not up to the task of leading Cuba, especially in what will likely be turbulent circumstances. Raul could opt for retirement after a short term ruling Cuba, ceding power to a hand-picked successor.<sup>16</sup>

After Fidel's temporary transfer of power to Raul in July 2006, speculation grew about whom, other than a Castro, would emerge as a potential successor. There are many potential candidates, among them Carlos Lage, a Politburo member, Foreign Minister Felipe Perez Roque, and Ramiro Valdes, a member of the Council of State.<sup>17</sup> A detailed study of who among these potential rivals has the best chances of success is beyond the scope of this paper. Regardless of who ultimately wins, the competition is likely to be fierce. Without the Castros, the loyalties of the military, the Communist Party and the state security apparatus are no longer taken for granted. Infighting could result within either the military or the security services which could spill over into violence. Compounding this problem could be popular uprisings at a time when the state is least prepared to deal with them. However, it is also possible that the third man might successfully assume leadership without significant strife. How this scenario might unfold will only be known in time, but it does contain immense potential for volatility and uncertainty. It is true that how Raul might choose, or be able, to govern is open for discussion. Yet, conjecture about Cuba's future under Raul is nonetheless supported by over 40 years of study of the Castro brothers. Should the third man assume power, the lack of a detailed biography and record in office will make accurate predictions and future diplomatic efforts much more difficult for U.S. policy makers.

Transition. The final scenario is one that the United States seeks to bring about in Cuba, that of a transition to a free, democratic state based on a market economy. This scenario is not likely to occur instantaneously after the death of Fidel. Instead, transition can be expected to grow out of one of the other scenarios. Therefore, the assumption is that a successor

government continues to rule Cuba under the current form of communist rule. This is a reasonable assumption, considering that Cuba has been ruled by a communist dictator who has effectively quelled internal dissent for four decades. The desire for reform is there, but will probably take time for mass support to build the strength to compel change. Eventually though, as a result of any number of factors, such as popular demand for democratic rights or growing momentum created by economic reforms, the ruling government bows to pressure for meaningful, permanent political reform. The length of time this scenario takes to come about is uncertain. It will depend largely on how patient the Cuban people are and on how adeptly the successor government can sustain the current political order while simultaneously satisfying demands for improved prosperity. An orderly transition is the most desired scenario because it provides the United States and the international community time to organize and coordinate their efforts. Should the assumption that a successor government lead to a gradual and orderly transition be incorrect, then a potentially volatile situation could occur.

One cannot totally discount the possibility that events in Cuba could spiral rapidly out of control. It is possible that the long anticipated death of Fidel may spark in the Cuban population a sudden and unstoppable movement for more rights and improved living standards. The people's fear of the system and the willingness of the military to be an instrument of continued oppression cannot be taken for granted after Fidel. Miscalculations by the successor government, domestic protesters, or exile groups could produce dramatic instability in Cuba, which might include events such as: 1) violent popular protests for political and economic reform, 2) bloody suppression of protesters by the military and state security, 3) mass migration of Cubans to the United States to flee violence, 4) civil war between factions of the military and/or Communist Party elite for control, 5) subversion by returned exiles attempting to destabilize the new Cuban government, and 6) riots, lawlessness, looting and revenge attacks resulting from military and police refusal to attack the populous. Events such as these would spell the end of the current form of government because legitimacy would be lost and international pressure to intervene would be irresistible. This of course is a direct path to transition, but a path no one wants to take.

### Cuban Institutions

The form a post-Fidel Cuba assumes is by no means predetermined. The world increasingly anticipates the end of the Fidel regime, endlessly speculating on what will happen next. The categorization of post-Fidel scenarios in the previous section is just one of many efforts to predict a genuinely unpredictable outcome. A key determinant in how events

ultimately unfold will be the institutions established to govern the state and control Cuban society. This section will examine the key institutions and their influences on a post-Fidel Cuban state.

The remarkable ability of Fidel to maintain a tightly controlled socialist state, despite the harsh economic setback resulting from the collapse of the Soviet Union, is a testament to both the strength of the communist institutions he created and his ruthlessness. Those institutions are the military or Fuerzas Armadas Revolucionarias (FAR), the Cuban Communist Party (PCC) and the state security services. Their control and impact on Cuban society cannot be overstated. In a post-Fidel Cuba, members and leaders of these organizations will immeasurably affect the future course of events. Of primary importance is the FAR, which will be addressed first.

FAR. The FAR is the oldest of the post-revolutionary communist institutions in Cuba. Its roots go back to the rebel army led by Fidel to overthrow the Batista dictatorship.<sup>18</sup> Once in power, Fidel disbanded the Cuban Army, stood up the FAR, and placed his brother Raul in the post of Minister of Defense. Raul quickly set about the task of turning a ragged group of rebels into a respectable, organized military force. Early purges were required to ensure proper loyalty in the Army, but it quickly took shape as a fighting force. The successful repulsion of the U.S. sponsored Bay of Pigs invasion and defeat of other internal enemies greatly enhanced the prestige of the FAR.<sup>19</sup> Thus the FAR was viewed by Cubans as a defender of the Revolution and national sovereignty. Furthermore, Raul sought to establish close ties between the military and the PCC, by appointing key individuals to important posts in both institutions.<sup>20</sup> Having preceded the PCC, the FAR maintained not only independence from the PCC, but superiority to it as well.<sup>21</sup>

Early in the Revolution, the role of the FAR went beyond that of defending the state to include other aspects of Cuban society, especially the economy. As Cuba nationalized much of its economic assets, members of the FAR were assigned to run these industries, such as sugar.<sup>22</sup> The FAR began a process of professionalization in the 1970s backed by training and equipment from the Soviet Union. It began to collect international combat experience via Cuban support for revolutions in Africa. By the mid 1980s, the FAR was the largest military in Latin America and had proven itself in campaigns against credible enemies in Angola, Namibia and Somalia.<sup>23</sup> This era, though, marked the apex of the FAR as a tool of international involvement for Cuba. Close on its heels came the collapse of the USSR and the loss of billions of dollars in subsidies. The economic crash, termed the “Special Period” by Fidel, signaled further commitment of the FAR to economic activities. The FAR was tasked with producing their own

food, and took on new roles in the economy, such as running hotels, transporting tourists and other activities.<sup>24</sup>

The FAR's role in the Cuban economy has increased in the sixteen years since the beginning of the "Special Period". In many respects the FAR dominates the Cuban economy like no other institution in the government. Numerous retired and serving FAR officers control important sectors of the Cuban economy, especially those that generate hard currency, such as tourism.<sup>25</sup> In addition to significant control of the economy, the FAR has influence throughout the entire government. As of 2001, 12 of 37 ministries were led by senior officers from the FAR.<sup>26</sup>

In addition to power within the government and the overall economy, the FAR enjoys legitimacy and respect from the Cuban populace. In the early days the FAR was seen as a nationalist force and defender of the Revolution. Its success in the Africa campaigns, professionalization, and rise to preeminence in Latin America made the FAR a source of pride for Cubans. Though as a military force the FAR is now a shadow of its former self, its willingness to pitch in to carry the country through the "Special Period" also lends it credibility. And perhaps most importantly, the FAR has never been employed as a tool of repression or abuse, like its predecessor under the Batista regime.<sup>27</sup> Therefore, the combination of importance to the government and legitimacy to the population clearly make the FAR the dominant institution in Cuba today and in a post-Fidel era.

PCC. Next in importance is the Cuban Communist Party (PCC). The PCC is the sole political party allowed in Cuba. But unlike heads of communist parties in Central Europe, the Cuban leader did not rise to power via the party or employ it as his primary source of strength.<sup>28</sup> In the early years, the FAR was the instrument by which Fidel ruled. Fidel reformed the Communist Party in 1965, but continued to make policy decisions himself, assisted by his trusted group of advisors from the revolution. Functionally, the Party served mostly to lend a legitimizing face to the rule of Fidel and his revolutionary elites.<sup>29</sup> In fact, the PCC did not hold its first Congress until 1975, a clear testament to its lack of real power in Cuban political matters.<sup>30</sup> Both Fidel and Raul have controlled sentiment in the Party to support their ideology, on occasion purging the Party of members advocating reform.<sup>31</sup> Consequently, the Party is dominated by hard-liners loyal to the Castros. Fidel, not the Party, has set Cuban foreign and domestic policy since creation of the revolutionary government. Despite its current lack of independent power as an institution, the PCC is the only organized body to conduct the political and governmental business of Cuba. The PCC may well gain influence as its elites vie for leadership in a post-Fidel Cuba. Whether the PCC maintains its dominance of Cuban affairs is

yet to be seen, but for the near term it will be the only political institution with the organization and therefore the means to govern the island.

Security Services. Third in importance of Cuban government institutions is the State Security Service. The Ministry of Interior (MININT) is responsible for state security and intelligence gathering, providing Cuba with a defense against subversion or domestic opposition to the revolution. Groups within MININT that conduct security functions include the Border Guard Troops, the Rapid Reaction Brigades, and the elite Special Troops. Augmented by groups such as the Committees for the Defense of the Revolution (CDR), Cuban security services have effectively prevented emergence of opposition groups in Cuba. Unlike the FAR though, the security services did resort to violence to suppress popular riots in Havana in 1994 and killed 32 Cubans attempting to flee aboard a stolen tugboat.<sup>32</sup> Because of this and their insidious presence in the daily lives of the people, the security services are feared and enjoy less legitimacy in the eyes of the populace than does the FAR. Furthermore, the MININT lost much of its independence in 1998 as a result of a corruption and drug trafficking scandal that led to the arrest and executions of FAR General Arnaldo Ochoa and MININT Colonel Antonio de la Guardia. In the aftermath of this crisis, the FAR was given control of the MININT with FAR officers taking over most leadership billets.<sup>33</sup> Thus, Cuban security services are an important institution for control of the Cuban state, but its subordination to the FAR likely means it will act in concert with the direction of the FAR leadership.

Institutional impacts on post-Fidel Cuba. The three institutions listed above will play decisive roles in the Cuban government which emerges after Fidel. However, because of the subordination of MININT to FAR, their roles will simply be addressed as one. Between the FAR and the PCC, the FAR has a significant advantage in relative capacity to shape the course of events.

FAR. Under either scenario that involves a succession by Raul, he will have strong support from the FAR. Raul has earned the respect of his subordinates and has filled the senior ranks of the FAR with trusted allies. These senior generals have every reason to support Raul, since they, more than most, benefit from the current system. Therefore, it is very likely that they will act in their own self interest to support the status quo. However, tension could arise should Raul implement reforms that undercut the generals' comparative (financial or status) advantage in the Cuban system, unless done as a measure of expediency to quiet popular discontent.

The unity of the FAR to support a Raul succession may not be complete. Prominent Cuba analyst Brian Latell noted four factors that may be weakening command and control of the FAR and producing rifts among the officers. Those factors are: 1) Lingering animosities over the trial

and execution of General Ochoa, 2) Dissatisfaction among junior officers over rigid control by loyalist generals, 3) Tension between traditional troop commanders and officers benefiting from for-profit enterprises, and 4) Corruption and loss of professionalism from involvement in business ventures.<sup>34</sup> Therefore, the stabilizing force of the FAR cannot be taken completely for granted. In a Third Actor scenario, the position of the FAR is completely unpredictable. It may act as a force to prevent violence and promote stability, or it may fracture to support competing successors (one of which very possibly could be a FAR general.) Also, any successor regime that ordered the FAR to use force to suppress popular uprisings may cause a split that could lead to infighting and loss of regime control.

PCC. The PCC will also play a critical role in post-Fidel Cuba. Under Fidel, influence in Cuban political affairs meant lobbying Fidel, who exercised veto authority over all policy decisions. In a Raul regime, Party members can be expected to have genuine participation in decision making. Though respected, Raul does not command the respect and deference that Fidel does. Furthermore, Raul is characterized as a man who is open to discussion, a trait that Fidel does not possess.<sup>35</sup> Thus, in a Raul scenario, Party members will have a more active and participatory role in Cuban affairs.

The larger-than-life Fidel's status as ruler was unchallengeable. Raul and the PCC will not have that advantage. They may well be judged by how effectively they govern and provide for the Cuban nation. Considering the failure of socialism to deliver a way of life on par with the rest of the world, the judgment will not be good. Popular expectations will be a strong force for change. In this environment reform-minded members of the PCC will find a forum to more openly advocate their positions. Party members will most likely present a unified front to reassure the public that control of the state is well in hand. Members will be in harmony on issues such as maintaining national sovereignty and continued promotion of revolutionary successes such as the education and health care systems.<sup>36</sup> However, government legitimacy is at stake if the socioeconomic hardship of the Cuban people is not lessened. Therefore, more entrepreneurial activity may be allowed and representative legislatures reenergized to instill a sense of local popular participation in the government.<sup>37</sup>

In a third actor scenario the same considerations affecting a Raul succession would apply, only more so. Lacking either of the Castro brothers, legitimacy of the government would be wide open to questions from all fronts. Though a prominent elite of the Party may have been tapped by a Castro to lead the government, acquiescence by the rest of the elites cannot be taken for granted. This is an extremely unpredictable scenario that will mark the most serious challenge to the PCC. This scenario could see open debate on economic and political reform

between Party reformers and hardliners. Lacking a clear mandate to govern or a dominant ruler, the outcome may be decided by building consensus within the party and appeals for public support. Therefore, this scenario has the highest potential to lead to real political and economic shifts in the Cuban government, potentially leading to the end of single party rule.

Should transition come about, the end of the PCC is not necessarily inevitable. Based on the history of former communist regimes in Eastern Europe, the communist party was handily defeated in their first free, multiparty election. However, the communists reformed the party along the model of Western European social democracy and reengaged politically. These new communist parties did quite well in subsequent elections all over Eastern Europe.<sup>38</sup> The same remodeling effort is possible for the PCC in a transition scenario, due to four factors: 1) established Party organization, 2) availability of a residual constituent base, 3) discontent over conditions produced by the transition process, and 4) residual socialist values.<sup>39</sup> Therefore, the PCC may initially see its prominence in Cuban politics take an early and dramatic fall, followed by a reemergence under a different guise.

### Challenges in a Post-Fidel Cuba

Cuba lags well behind the rest of the developed world in terms of economic prosperity, individual freedoms, basic human rights and overall standard of living. The glory days of the Revolution have long since passed. The Cuban economy has rebounded somewhat since the start of the “Special Period,” but conditions in Cuba are considered to be worse now than when Fidel took power. Regardless of which post-Fidel scenario comes to pass, the new rulers will have to deal with the legacy of 50 years of Communist dictatorship and socialist inefficiency. This portion of the paper will examine some of the challenges the new leadership will face.

Struggling Economy. Because of Cuba’s closed society, accurate statistics on the state of its economy are not readily available. Figures provided by the Cuban government paint a much rosier picture than those from the U.S. government. By either measurement, though, the situation is not good. According to the U.S. State Department, Cuba’s economy is still recovering from a drop in gross domestic product of 35% between 1989 and 1993.<sup>40</sup> In the wake of the economic crash, market reforms were implemented, including such measures as opening tourism, allowing limited foreign investment, legalizing the dollar and government-licensed self-employment.<sup>41</sup> The economy has yet to fully recover, despite efforts at reform. In fact, Fidel has reinstated restrictions on many of the reforms in order to reestablish tighter state control of the economy.

Cuba functions as a fractured economy. The official currency is the peso, but only the dollar has real purchasing power. The government's primary source of hard currency is tourism, which has surpassed sugar as the island's top industry. A second source of hard currency is remittances from Cubans abroad, which are estimated at \$600 million to \$1 billion annually, mostly from the United States.<sup>42</sup> The Cuban population is essentially divided between those who have access to the dollar and those who do not. Cubans with access to dollars can shop in state-run dollar stores to purchase items not available in regular government shops. Many Cubans have resorted to selling pilfered government goods on the black market and unauthorized services to tourists to earn dollars.<sup>43</sup>

Financing the economy is a difficult proposition. In 1986 Cuba refused to honor the majority of its international debt. As a result it has no access to credit at affordable rates, like that from the World Bank. Instead, it must rely on credit from banks willing to take high risk, often paying 22% interest.<sup>44</sup> Cuba actively courts foreign investment, but efforts are undermined by investors' reluctance to accept the risks of operating in such an unpredictable, rigidly state-controlled environment.

Though the Cuban economy has seen modest growth in the last few years, it is obviously not suitable to compete in the global marketplace. The government employs over 90% of the workforce, characterized by low productivity and lacking any incentives to improve. Any hope to significantly improve the state of the Cuban economy will take drastic efforts to implement free-market conditions, promote and reward an entrepreneurial spirit and end government control of and corruption within key industrial sectors. This would be a daunting task for a mature government. It will be that much harder for any government following Fidel.

Legacy and future of social programs. Under Fidel, the people grew accustomed to housing, health care, education and retirement pensions, all provided by the government. Though substandard when compared against those of more developed nations, these social programs are considered one of the Communist regime's greatest accomplishments. Heavy social spending came at a cost, reaching as high as 46 percent of the government budget in 1988.<sup>45</sup> Since the loss of Soviet subsidies, Cuba has reduced social spending by 40 percent. The effect of those cuts has been to widen the gap between those who have access to the small private sector and those that do not.<sup>46</sup> Fiscal demands on these programs will only worsen in the future, as the population ages. The fastest growing segment of the population is those 65 and older. Thus the workforce is getting older while at the same time demand for social services will increase.<sup>47</sup> This trend will place tremendous fiscal pressure on any post-Fidel government. The present underperformance of the economy will not support significant

increases in social spending, so difficult budget decisions will have to be made. Those decisions will require the new leadership to face sharp reductions in programs that have been a major source of legitimacy for the government, or find additional sources of revenue, such as through dramatic free market liberalization.

Decaying education system. Another challenge to be dealt with by a post-Castro regime will be the state of the education system. Cuba's system of free education for all has frequently been highlighted as one of the great accomplishments of the revolution. The literacy rate is a very respectable 97 percent,<sup>48</sup> and in a recent study of Latin American countries, Cuba's students ranked first in math and language achievement.<sup>49</sup> However, strict state censorship does limit the benefits a high literacy rate can have on advancing new ideas in Cuban society. Furthermore, the system faces challenges in the future. The shifting demographics of the population referred to earlier point to a conflict between spending to invest in the future (education) and social spending for the aging.<sup>50</sup> This fiscal pressure will be applied to a system already challenged to adequately pay teachers, many of whom are driven to the informal economy to survive. This is consistent with a trend among many professionals who have abandoned their low-paying jobs to pursue dollars via legitimate and illicit means.<sup>51</sup> University enrollment is half that of 1990, as many Cubans see more opportunity in hustling dollars from tourists than in further education.<sup>52</sup> Therefore, a future government will be faced with tough choices for education funding and potential public apathy toward the importance of education. This situation will only complicate Cuba's efforts should it eventually open its economy to compete in a globalized world market.

Aging infrastructure. Lacking the capital to invest in upgrades, the industrial and utility infrastructure is in decline. The Cuban ratio of investment of GDP into the economy in 1989 was 24 percent. That rate dropped to 6 percent in 1996 and in 2000 was in the range of 8-14 percent.<sup>53</sup> Such a long period of decline in capital assets means that factories, machinery, and utilities are in dire need of updating. According to one report, Cuba recently resorted to importing thousands of electric generators to augment the unreliable national grid. The backbone of the grid is a system of seven Soviet-made power plants, which are old and unreliable and for which the Cubans lack sufficient spare parts.<sup>54</sup> The government has resorted to higher energy consumption fees and aggressive conservation measures to compensate for the system's inability to meet demand.<sup>55</sup> In order to compete in the global economy, Cuba will require a tremendous inflow of capital to update its infrastructure. Without it, it has no chance of developing a modern manufacturing industry required to make products for export. To attract

such a large amount of capital, a future government will have to make dramatic economic and legal reforms to assure investors of the security of their investment.

To fully discuss the myriad challenges facing a future Cuban government is beyond the scope of this paper. Other issues that will eventually need addressing are: 1) judicial reform to establish legitimate rule of law, 2) transparency in government and accountability to the population, 3) creating a society of ownership with enforceable property rights, and 4) labor reform in order to end guaranteed employment and improve productivity. It is obvious that the cumulative effects of communist rule in Cuba have left the country in worse condition than when the revolution rose to power. Any form of post-Castro government will feel mounting pressure to correct the economic and social failings of the revolution. These ills cannot be remedied by more sacrifice by the masses for the good of the cause. Difficult choices in governance and economic structure are required. These reforms are ones which Raul and many party elites may not be inclined to choose or are ill-prepared to implement. The next portion of the paper will discuss U.S. policy, how current policy affects the United States' ability to deal with post-Castro Cuba.

#### United States-Cuba Policy

U.S. policy traces its roots to the very beginning of Fidel's ascension to power. In 1960 Fidel's new government confiscated major foreign-owned businesses, many from the United States. Cuba then established diplomatic ties with the U.S.S.R., and soon began receiving arms shipments from the Soviets. In response, the United States broke off diplomatic relationships in 1961 and imposed a trade embargo. Also that year, the U.S. sponsored the failed Bay of Pigs invasion to overthrow Fidel. The following year, 1962, brought the Cuban Missile Crisis, which was by far the most tense and potentially dangerous episode in United States-Cuban relations, as well as U.S.-Soviet relations.<sup>56</sup>

Since those early tense years, U.S. policy has been remarkably consistent. The United States has refused to reestablish diplomatic ties with the Castro government and with the exception of some allowances for food and medicine, has steadfastly stood by the trade embargo. The rationale for U.S. policy in 1961 was clear and justifiable. The United States and the Soviet Union were at the height of the Cold War. The loss of Cuba to the Soviet camp was a huge blow to the U.S. sense of security in the Western Hemisphere. Only 90 miles away was a formerly friendly nation now embracing communism, exporting socialist revolution, and in league with our arch enemy threatening the U.S. mainland militarily. Vital U.S. national interests, the defense of the United States, were unquestionably at risk from 1961 through the

remainder of the Cold War. However, the failure of the Bay of Pigs and the aftermath of the Cuban Missile Crisis effectively negated the military instrument of national power to deal with the Cuban problem. Therefore, the choice of diplomatic and economic isolation became the default position made easier by domestic politics.

The unchanging U.S. policy stands in contrast to the reality of the Cuban situation today. The relative importance of Cuba to U.S. national interests today has greatly diminished. Cuba no longer poses any serious threat to U.S. security. Cuba's real military power declined rapidly with the fall of the Soviet Union. In order to survive, Cuba focused its military inward to support the economy and protect the regime. Gone are the days of Africa campaigns and advancing the revolutionary cause in Latin America.<sup>57</sup> Cuba also poses no significant challenge to U.S. leadership in the region. The allure of the revolution is gone. Today Fidel can only find a sympathetic audience among leaders of other "rogue nations" such as President Hugo Chavez of Venezuela. Thus, the direct challenges to vital U.S. interests posed by Cuba throughout the Cold War ended in the early 1990s.

What then, are the national interests U.S. policy seeks to promote? According to the State Department, U.S. policy toward Cuba is "intended to encourage a rapid, peaceful transition to a democratic government characterized by open markets and respect for human rights. The policy seeks to encourage change in Cuba so that it joins the democratic hemisphere, becoming a good neighbor to other nations in the region."<sup>58</sup> U.S. policy wants to advance national values such as promotion of democracy, respect for individual liberties, economic freedom, and prosperity. Therefore, two factors are present which would normally indicate a need for a review of policy. First, U.S. objectives have not been met after applying the same strategic calculus for nearly 50 years. The second factor is a significant shift in national interests in relation to another country. However, in the case of Cuba, no significant review of change in policy has occurred. Instead, U.S. efforts are now primarily focused on how to assist Cuba after change occurs.

Plans to assist a Cuban transition government are detailed in the Commission for Assistance to a Free Cuba report submitted to the President in July 2006. The Commission was chartered by the President as a cabinet-level body to explore ways to hasten and ease Cuban democratic transition,<sup>59</sup> and is co-chaired by the Secretaries of State and Commerce. The report is broken into seven chapters. The first chapter recommends actions with the objective of hastening the end of the Castro regime and achieving a transition government. Recommended actions are essentially continuations of previous economic (embargo), information (Radio and TV Marti), and diplomatic (isolation) efforts already in practice.<sup>60</sup>

The remaining chapters of the report cover in detail the type of support a Cuban transition government would require from the United States. These chapters reflect thorough planning on the part of the interagency team and capture the myriad areas where the United States would need to provide assistance. Chapter two addresses the humanitarian needs of a transition Cuba and reflects the reality that Cuba in transition will be in such disrepair as to be a nearly failed state. Chapters three and four cover free and fair elections and creating a market-based economy respectively. Chapter five addresses the importance of the United States engaging the international community to support Cuba's humanitarian needs, election reform and market-based economy needs.<sup>61</sup>

The report of the Commission for Assistance to a Free Cuba is a comprehensive document that accurately anticipates the magnitude of the effort required to help Cuba eventually recover from Communist rule. It recognizes the lack of adequate housing and poor utility infrastructure, and the need to create an open political process and to build a market economy. As an interagency effort, the Commission effectively engaged all elements of the U.S. government who have a stake in the process of assisting Cuba. Should a transition take place in Cuba, the U.S. government has a concise blueprint to guide its assistance efforts.

An element missing from U.S. policy and planning efforts for Cuba is recognition that preventing a collapse of social order and the accompanying humanitarian crisis and mass migration are important U.S. interests. Current policy does not state this challenge and planning efforts by the Commission are intended to deal with crisis, not prevent it. The United States cannot count on the international community to bear the majority of the financial burden of assisting Cuba. America's status as a world power and the proximity to Cuba naturally mean it will shoulder the economic and military costs to rebuild or stabilize Cuba should it implode. Unfortunately, unwavering adherence to a policy of isolation is at odds with implementing a policy that could address and minimize future crises and thereby minimize costs.

### Analysis

Why has Cuban policy remained virtually unchanged, despite an obvious need for reevaluation? Several reasons are possible. The first is Fidel Castro himself. He stormed into power as the revolutionary leader, boldly challenging the American superpower and questioning the very American way of life. U.S. relations with Cuba thus became personal. The longer Fidel remained in power, the less willing any U.S. administration has been to grant him any victory. For his part, Fidel has been unwilling to concede on any points as well, further exacerbating the standoff. Second is the influence of Cuban-Americans in U.S. politics. Thousands of Cubans

have migrated to the United States since Fidel took power. Leadership within the Cuban-American community has generally supported a hard line anti-Castro stance. Their influence in American politics has grown as their numbers have reached 1.5 million.<sup>62</sup> Cuban-Americans have settled into two heavy concentrations in Florida and New Jersey. Both states represent a large number of Electoral College votes (Florida 27 and New Jersey 15). It is therefore unlikely that politicians of either party will enact policy changes that would jeopardize the Cuban-American vote in key battleground states.

The third reason U.S. policy has remained unchanged is a codification of policy in law. Likely driven by influence from the Cuban-American lobby, U.S. lawmakers created legislation that solidified U.S. policy. The Cuban Democracy Act (or Torricelli Bill) was signed in 1992. It tightened the embargo by preventing foreign-based subsidiaries of U.S. companies from trading with Cuba and imposed travel restrictions.<sup>63</sup> In 1996, after the Brothers to the Rescue shoot down incident, Congress passed the Cuban Liberty and Democratic Solidarity Act (Helms-Burton). This legislation further strengthened sanctions and transformed into law the embargo on trade and financial transactions, which had previously been by presidential proclamation.<sup>64</sup> Thus, at a time when the United States should have been reexamining the relevance of current Cuban policy in light of changing realities, Congress and the President were further cementing the existing approach.

The final reason for the absence of change to U.S. policy is that there is no incentive for U.S. policy makers to do so. U.S. interests in Cuba are now intangible. Lacking a threat to vital interests, there is no call from the public to solve the Cuba problem. The United States would like to see change in Cuba, but until that change comes, the material cost to the United States is infinitesimal. In an American economy of trillions of dollars, foregoing trade with an underdeveloped nation of 11 million inhabitants is insignificant. Conversely, making unilateral concessions, which would be used by Raul as propaganda, could come at a potentially hefty political cost. These considerations encourage an acceptance of the status quo.

The report of the Commission for Assistance to a Free Cuba confirms that the United States is inextricably bound to the status quo on Cuba policy. Too many factors conspire to create an environment where changing the policy is exceedingly difficult. Instead, the United States is content to passively encourage the Cuban populace to seek change in their government. While taking a “wait and see” approach to the future of Cuba, the United States will at the same time prepare for the eventual need to assist a post-Castro transitional government. However, at some point the United States should accept the reality that perpetuating current policy has failed to achieve U.S. objectives. Unilateral isolation of Cuba

has not hastened the end to Castro's regime or the communist/socialist system of government. Fidel's time on this earth is critically short at this point, so policymakers have virtually no chance to affect a change in Cuba prior to a succession government taking power (which has in effect happened since Raul assumed "temporary" presidential powers in July 2006). That window of opportunity has closed. However, U.S. national interests vis-à-vis Cuba are long term and can still be forwarded by fundamental changes in policy.

### Recommendations

"Staying the course" on Cuba policy will cost the United States any chance to influence the political and economic future of Cuba after Fidel's death. Instead, the United States needs to make real changes to its long-standing policy and realign it to promote current U.S. interests. Intangible interests such as promoting democracy and capitalism are important, but are secondary to avoiding humanitarian crises or mass-migration from Cuba to the United States. Yet current policy does more to increase the chance of those events occurring than it does to prevent them.

Tying the Administration's hands with legislation that mandates democratic and economic reform before the United States can engage with Cuba is unrealistic and ensures a reactive instead of a proactive response. Recent experience in Iraq and Afghanistan prove that transition to democracy is a slow, arduous process. Policy and lawmakers must recognize that democracy is difficult to impose and that the U.S. interests are best advanced by diplomatic and economic engagement. The United States currently employs this approach with other regimes that lack democratic and individual freedoms. Cuba should not be a special case. Congress should therefore repeal legislation such as the Helms-Burton act that dictates Cuba policy to the President. Without Helms-Burton, the President, with the support of the National Security Council, would have the flexibility to respond to changing circumstances in Cuba.

The death of Fidel Castro is rapidly approaching and the United States has a unique window of opportunity to reframe Cuba relations. Time is too short to change course prior to Fidel's death. Therefore, in the months following Fidel's death, the administration should drop its policy of diplomatic and economic isolation in favor of one of engagement. This is a policy that should have been implemented long ago, but wasn't for reasons outlined earlier. After Fidel, the administration should declare a new era of United States/Cuba relations, an era in which the United States will work with Cuba to encourage them to reform their government and economy. This will of course mean that the United States will likely have to deal with Raul, but to refuse to do so would consign the United States to waiting for another Castro to die.

Furthermore, even with both Castro's gone, the institutions in Cuba's communist government are stable enough that the system could potentially linger indefinitely. Is the United States willing to wait that long?

Choosing engagement with Cuba is justifiable. First, it is consistent with policy applied to other communist regimes such as China and Vietnam. Second, U.S. intransigence has effectively cost it the moral high ground in United States-Cuban and international relations. In the Cold War, the United States had significant international support in its opposition to the communist regime. However, since Cuba has long been irrelevant as a security threat, continued U.S. economic and diplomatic isolation has been propagandized by Fidel as an unjustified, unilateral action by a superpower nation intent on violating Cuba's sovereignty and punishing it. This tactic has been very effective, proven by a recent United Nations General Assembly resolution condemning the U.S. embargo of Cuba.<sup>65</sup> The vote on the resolution was 183 in favor and 4 opposed, which clearly shows the United States has no allies in its current Cuba policy.

International opposition to the embargo has cast the United States in the role of aggressor and served as a distraction from the real issue, which is Cuba's lack of democratic freedoms, failed socialist economic policies and human rights violations. By ending its unilateral embargo, the United States could turn the tables on this issue. Terminating the embargo could be touted by senior U.S. officials as a new approach to aid the Cuban people transition to representative government. To do so would grant the United States the initiative in Cuban relations and draw significant international and media attention to the state of affairs in Cuba. The United States could capitalize on what would surely be a media frenzy and conduct an aggressive information campaign to spotlight the shortcoming of the communist government.

The world's eye will soon be focused on Cuba for a long time. Fidel's death and the events that follow will surely fixate the world for months to come. Ending the embargo would also garner significant international media attention. Having taken the moral high ground, the United States could capitalize on the media attention and conduct an aggressive information campaign to highlight the shortcomings of the Cuban government, such as human rights violations and poverty caused by the socialist economy. Free of the accusation that it is responsible for Cuba's economic woes, the United States could work with international organizations to pressure Cuba to liberalize its economic and political policies. Having denied the succession government an excuse for poor economic performance and the ability to play victim to U.S. "aggression", the United States could mount a much more effective information

campaign to pressure the regime. World attention would finally be focused on the true causes of Cuba's malaise: communism and socialism.

The end of the embargo would also free America's economic element of national power to foster change in Cuba. The United States is one of the world's strongest proponents of free trade as a means of spreading democratic values. Cuba should be no exception. As many proponents of the embargo state, trade with Cuba will put money in the pocket of a corrupt regime and potentially strengthen their position.<sup>66</sup> But it will also expose their centrally planned socialist policies for the genuine failure they are. The communist government's natural tendency will be to tightly control new trade with the United States. This is fundamentally in conflict with the economic principles of capitalism. Individuals and corporations wishing to do business with Cuba will not do so if the risks or costs of government interference are too high. The end of the embargo will further heighten popular expectation for better economic prosperity. To meet the rising economic expectations of the populace, the regime will have to enact economic reform or forfeit the benefits the end of the embargo will bring.

The end of the embargo would also end travel restrictions on U.S. citizens. Cuban-Americans with family members in Cuba would then be free to visit and remit money to relatives without government restrictions. Ordinary Americans without a connection to Cuba would also travel there in large numbers. Cuba has long had an allure that has fascinated Americans, dating back to the days when it was an exotic gambling and nightclub destination. Like free trade, U.S. travel to Cuba would also be a boost to the struggling economy. It is of course subject to the same criticism that the dollars would serve only to prop up the communist regime. However, despite its best efforts, the regime couldn't possibly capture all the dollars that would flow into the country. Even today, enterprising Cubans operate "underground" businesses that earn dollars from tourists. This form of entrepreneurship will only expand with increased tourism from America.

U.S. trade and travel to Cuba will provide a much needed economic benefit to Cuba. But more importantly, they will be a vehicle to slowly export American ideals and principles to Cuba. As American business and tourist travel increases, there will be a corresponding decrease in the ability of the government to control their access to ordinary Cubans. Americans' personal contact with the populace will erode the government's tight control on information. Cubans will increasingly see what a capitalist, democratic society can provide its citizens. In their current depressed economic state, Cubans are content just to survive. But as their economic fortunes improve, Cubans no longer fixated on survival will shift their expectations to freedom and

political expression. Though a slow impetus for change, it will be a force that the Cuban government will have no choice but to deal with.

In conjunction with ending the embargo, the United States should reestablish normal diplomatic relations with Cuba. A fully functioning embassy and regular contact with Cuban officials will be required to look after the interests of U.S. citizens in Cuba and to negotiate future trade and business matters. A full U.S. embassy presence in Cuba would also facilitate support for aid provided to the island by the United States and NGOs, lessening the chances of the regime to take credit for U.S. assistance. An embassy in Cuba would also best prepare the United States in the event of potential political instability or humanitarian crisis due to a government collapse. U.S. interagency and military efforts in such an event would be greatly facilitated by an existing staff in a U.S. embassy.

### Summary

Fidel Castro has been fanatically wedded to the socialist principles of his revolution. He has effectively begun a successor regime led by his brother Raul that will continue his revolutionary ideal. However, Fidel will not have the final say in the future of Cuban government. The interaction between the demands of the population, long-awaited economic improvement, and Cuban institutions such as the FAR and the Communist Party will largely determine whether Cuba maintains the status quo or transitions to a more open society. Any post-Castro government in Cuba will face tremendous challenges to recover from the economic devastation that socialism has wrought.

Throughout the Cuban saga, the United States has “stayed the course” on Cuba policy despite failure. The strong political influence of Cuban exiles, restrictions on Cuba policy by legislation and the very personal nature of relations with Fidel Castro have prevented adjustments to policy. However, existing policy does nothing to promote current, not historical, U.S. interests. The time is right for bold shift in policy that seeks diplomatic and economic engagement with Cuba. Consistent with the approach applied to other undemocratic regimes, the United States should employ its economic power of trade and the soft power of U.S. ideas and values to slowly foster economic and political reform in post-Castro Cuba. Doing so could prevent unnecessary humanitarian intervention and ultimately lead to a new democracy in the Caribbean.

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