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## US Retaliation Against Cuba Fails

by LADB Staff

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Following the March arrests and trials of US-paid journalists, librarians, and human rights workers (see NotiCen, 2003-04-24), speculation arose that President George W. Bush's administration would apply harsh penalties against Cuba. The much-anticipated announcement of new sanctions or even a military response did not materialize in Bush's May 20 speech leaving hard-liners disappointed and raising questions about the state of Cuba policy.

During an interview with the Argentine newspaper Pagina 12, President Fidel Castro noted that the State Department had warned that airplane hijackings from Cuba would constitute a security threat to the US. That warning and the provocations by US Interests Section chief James Cason were evidence of a "pre-arranged plan" to provoke the hijackings and use them as a justification for aggression against Cuba, Castro said.

However, the hijackings stopped after Cuba executed three men involved in the failed hijacking of a Havana harbor ferry and Cason's unexpected intervention to warn hijackers that they would be prosecuted in the US. If the Bush administration ever had a pre-planned revenge strategy, it was either canceled or withdrawn for further study.

Retaliation so far has taken the form of minor restrictions on Cuban diplomats and the expulsion of 14 Cuban diplomats from New York and Washington. Some call for military intervention. As the crackdown in Cuba unfolded, there were unmistakable although unofficial threats of military retaliation.

In April, US Ambassador in the Dominican Republic Hans Hertell said Iraq set "a very good example for Cuba." Larry Klayman, chairman of the conservative Judicial Watch, said that after Saddam Hussein, Castro "should be next on the US and worldwide hit list of dictators overdue for 'regime change.'" The Cuban American National Foundation (CANF), which has lately taken a turn toward moderation, appeared swept away by the possibility that Castro's destruction was imminent.

Dennis Hays, CANF executive vice president, called for regime change in Cuba. He softened the statement by saying he meant aid to dissidents should be stepped up. However, in the context of the Iraq war, regime change has come to mean a unilateral military operation. Despite the momentary exhilaration on the right, open calls for intervention were largely confined to the extreme elements in the Miami exile community. Official Washington was more cautious.

Secretary of Defense Donald Rumsfeld said Cuba was not a military target. Secretary of State Colin Powell said, somewhat ambiguously, "It would not be appropriate at this time...to use military force for this particular purpose." Powell's major initiatives were to announce that a review of Cuba policy was underway and to ask the Organization of American States (OAS) to condemn Cuba. Powell

said on April 28 that the OAS should "live up to the ideals we share and take a principled stand for freedom, democracy, and human rights in Cuba."

Canada, Chile, and Uruguay stepped in to produce a statement for the OAS Permanent Council. However, the outcome suggested that the recent changes in Latin American leadership have helped to distance the region from US policy. Brazil and Venezuela opposed the action arguing that, since the US got Cuba kicked out of the OAS in 1962, it was unfair to condemn Cuba in absentia. Canada, Chile, and Uruguay then backed away and proposed a watered-down version that only expressed concern about the human rights situation in Cuba. Less than half the council members signed the nonbinding document. The outcome was similar to the vote in the UN Human Rights Commission during the height of the crackdown in April. A US-generated condemnation was rejected in favor of an innocuous resolution that did not mention human rights. That vote passed by only by a slim margin (see NotiCen, 2003-05- 08).

### *Bush tinkers with sanctions*

Possible new sanctions floated by the administration included blocking dollar remittances to Cuba and cancellation of the charter flights to Cuba from Miami and other US cities. But, these steps would anger the same Cuban-exile voters in Florida that Bush counts on without actually doing much to cut dollar flows to Cuba. Instead, the administration opted for direct punishment of Cuban diplomats in the US. While sources in Washington denied the administration had ordered restrictions, such as requiring Cuban diplomats to import their cars or get permission to contract for home repairs, the State Department ordered the expulsion of 14 Cuban diplomats on May 13. The official reason was that the diplomats were engaging in harmful activities.

State Department spokesman Philip Reeker made it clear that by "activities deemed harmful to the United States," the State Department meant spying. "I think you're all familiar with the record of espionage by the Cuban regime against the United States," he said. However, The New York Times reported on May 14 that the expulsions had to do with politics, not espionage. Citing Federal Bureau of Investigation (FBI) sources, the Times said that the bureau had made no recommendation to expel the Cubans and that the order came from the White House and the State Department.

The Cuban Ministry of Foreign Affairs (MINREX) called the expulsions "a new aggressive escalation" of provocations and "an act of vengeance." Bush speech is noncommittal Resisting extremist demands for tougher sanctions and intervention in Cuba, the administration simply reiterated that Cuba policy was under review. This gave the impression that Bush was delaying his announcement of tough actions until his customary May 20 speech. This is the date of the US withdrawal of troops from Cuba in 1902 leaving the island a half-sovereign dependency of the US.

In 2002, Bush delivered his May 20 speech with maximum media exposure, giving it first in the White House Rose Garden then flying to Miami to repeat it before cheering crowds (see NotiCen, 2002-07-11). It was a vigorous diatribe against the Castro regime. However, only a careless reading of it gave much hope to those looking for regime change in Cuba. Bush's call for beefing up Radio and TV Marti is political boilerplate, since these propaganda outlets have only a tiny audience in Cuba. Bush also proposed a scholarship program for Cubans, but never pursued the idea with funding,

perhaps because it was inconsistent with his dislike of the people-to-people and cultural exchanges of his predecessor. Stripped of its purely rhetorical elements, the 2002 speech was hardly tougher than this year's speech, which has been condemned by hard-liners for saying nothing. There was no well-photographed Rose Garden ceremony and no trip to Miami this time.

The 2003 message in its entirety reads, "Today, Cubans around the world celebrate 20 de mayo, Cuban Independence Day. On behalf of the people of the United States, I send greetings to the Cuban community. My hope is for the Cuban people to soon enjoy the same freedoms and rights as we do. Dictatorship has no place in the Americas. May God bless the Cuban people, who are struggling for freedom. Thank you." The response from Cuba was a satirical editorial in the official newspaper Granma entitled "Thank you, Fuhrer."

Rep. Robert Menendez (D-NJ) told Bush, "Shame on you for not living up to your promises; shame on you for your deceptions; and shame on you for playing on the emotions of the Cuban-American community." Both speeches coincided with periods of heightened tensions caused in part by the immigration issue and by the US Interests Section's open promotion of dissent. In both cases, Castro warned he might close the US Interests Section and drop out of the 1994, 1995 migratory accords. In both cases, Cuba's warnings met with US hints about a military or naval response. In both cases, many US commentators interpreted Castro's warnings as the last gasp of communism in Cuba and predicted that Castro would unleash a massive Fourth of July exodus upon Florida to which the US would respond, probably with a naval blockade.

### *Hard-liners disappointed a second time*

When the anti-Castro contingent in Congress, led by Reps. Lincoln Diaz-Balart (R-FL) and Ileana Ros-Lehtinen (R-FL), learned that there would be nothing new in this year's speech, they asked Bush to hold a meeting with several Miami Cubans. Media coverage of the meeting was minimal, and the event did little to mollify disappointed hard-liners. Citing an administration official, The New York Times said new sanctions were still possible since Cuba policy was still under review. "We cannot meet people's expectations on their timetable. We will determine what we do when it's convenient," said an unnamed source. The response seemed dilatory since the administration had nearly two months following the crackdown to decide on a course of action.

The severity of the Cuban crackdown and the widespread condemnation of it would seem to have given Bush broad justification for launching the definitive offensive he has been hinting at since he took office. Judging by events of the past two years, it seems that there is an inverse relationship between the degree of strain in Cuba-US relations and the toughness of Bush's annual speech. The reason may be that the exile vote in South Florida is useful only if there is a revolutionary Cuba.

The disappearance of the Castro regime is not of any long-term value to US political considerations. While it is commonplace to say that the noisy Cuban community in the US wields great power in Washington, it is also true that countervailing interests, especially the Republican farm bloc that favors increased trade with Cuba, force Bush to manipulate the Miami Cuban leadership with token gestures. Thus, in 2002, it was relatively safe for Bush to imply that pressure on Cuba would escalate.

In 2003, with many voices calling for aggression, Bush chose to give a speech mild enough that anti-embargo Republicans in Congress might be encouraged. Relations unchanged Despite the uproar over the Cuban crackdown, bilateral relations have not changed much, and trade delegations from various states continue their visits to Cuba. Trade has expanded since Bush took office. The latest trade figures show that US exports in March reached US\$18.2 million, more than double the figure for the same time last year, according to the US-Cuban Trade and Economic Council.

The organization's president, John Kavulich, said trade was proceeding normally, and there were no indications that noncommercial issues would have an impact on sales to Cuba.

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