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U.S. Presidential Candidates Hint At Their Cuba Policy

by Mike Leffert

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Democratic presidential candidate Barack Obama raised the possibility of a somewhat-less-bellicose policy toward Cuba after the 2008 US presidential elections. He proposed easing limits on travel by Cuban exiles visiting the island and on sending money home. The Bush administration has tightened the restrictions.

Cuban Foreign Minister Felipe Perez Roque commented on the news, saying, "These declarations appear to express the sentiment of the majority of the United States." Perez Roque called present policy barbaric and the Bush tactics an effort to "try to force our people to surrender through hunger and illness. The blockade has to be dismantled and the rights of Cuba respected."

Second-place-runner Obama broke with his rivals in an attempt to win Florida's vote. Cuban exiles are important to that effort, but it is uncertain whether Obama's call for letting up on curbs will help him with that constituency. The exiles support the embargo today much as they did when it was imposed in 1962 but have softened and are now divided on travel restrictions and other policies Bush introduced in 2004.

But even being given full marks for stepping out in front of his democratic rivals, Obama is no champion of the revolution and gave the rest of the pack no lessons in forthrightness. "The primary means we have of encouraging positive change in Cuba today is to help the Cuban people become less dependent on the Castro regime in fundamental ways," he said.

Among the rest of the Democratic pack, front-runner Sen. Hillary Clinton (D-NY) supports present policy. "Until it is clear what type of policies might come with a new government," she ventured, "we cannot talk about changes in the US policies toward Cuba." The beard-stroking quality of the statement is thought to play to her current strategy of seeking to frame Obama as naive in foreign policy and herself as wise and deliberate.

Sen. Joseph Biden (D-DE) also supports the Bush position on Cuba, while former senator John Edwards played both ends against the middle. The travel restrictions should go, he said, but the remittance limits should stay. In the Senate, Edwards voted twice to cut off TV Marti funding.

New Mexico Gov. Bill Richardson favors an end to both categories of restrictions. He is not in favor of lifting the blockade, however, and has said the US should be "re-evaluating it." He has put forth the idea that Cuba should have a negotiated transition, with input from other Latin American leaders, "where you push for fair elections, where you push for long-term viability of that country, and reintegrate it into the Americas."

Sen. Chris Dodd (D-CT) would lift the travel restrictions, but that is as far as he is prepared to go at this time. US Rep. Dennis Kucinich (D-OH) reaches farthest but gets little play for his positions

because he is so widely ignored by the mainstream press that his lack of coverage has become news. Kucinich would jettison the US blockade altogether. He has said US Cuba policy "has failed." He also wants the Helms-Burton Act repealed.

In 2001 Kucinich voted for a bill that would have stopped the enforcement of travel restrictions on Cuba in return for the release of all political prisoners in Cuba and extradition of those wanted in the US. Mike Gravel opposes the blockade and supports normalization of relations with Cuba. Republican positions on Cuba Republican candidates have reacted to the Obama statement with disdain.

Said Sen. Mel Martinez (R-FL), chair of the Republican National Committee (RNC), "We're in a very critical moment where many of us are hoping that we will see a transition as opposed to a transfer of power. Frankly I think his [Obama's] comments are ill-timed. It shows that he either didn't think it through very well or simply hasn't had enough experience on these tough foreign-policy problems."

Mitt Romney supports the blockade. "I think we need to continue the pressure and to develop a Latin American strategy that will move more countries toward us and away from the Castro brothers and individuals like Hugo Chavez." Romney is running with the support of Cuban-born Al Cardenas, former chair of the Florida Republican Party. Sen. Sam Brownback (R-KS) supports the blockade but voted in 2003 to ease restrictions on travel to Cuba. New York former mayor Rudolph Giuliani has called Castro names and launched any number of ad hominem attacks against the Cuban leadership but has been short on policy specifics. He has said the US must build an alliance with Colombia and Mexico to counter the leftward shift in Latin American governments.

Rep. Duncan Hunter (R-CA) is an anti-Cuba hard-liner. The congressman's record goes back to the 1992 Cuban Democracy Act, for which he voted. The act prevents subsidiaries of US companies from doing business with Cuba and restricts travel by US citizens.

Sen. John McCain (R-AZ) cosponsored the 1992 Cuban Democracy Act and has not lightened up since. Three Cuban-American Republican representatives from Florida, Ileana Ros-Lehtinen, Lincoln Diaz-Balart, and Mario Diaz-Balart, have endorsed his campaign. Rep. Ron Paul (R-TX) is against Cuba sanctions. He said trade sanctions "have done nothing to topple the Castro regime, but they have hurt American farmers and the Cuban people." He voted for the 2001 bill to stop enforcement of travel restrictions.

Rep. Tom Tancredo (R-CO) voted against the 2001 bill and against a 2006 bill that would have prohibited using funds to enforce regulations preventing humanitarian donations to Cuba. Some major-party candidates have not expressed a view on Cuba policy.

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