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U.S. Still Misreading Cuba

by LADB Staff

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Cuban President Raul Castro excited the hopes of US President Barack H. Obama just prior to the start of the Fifth Summit of the Americas in Trinidad and Tobago with the statement that he would be willing to discuss "everything, everything, everything" with the US, and the strong suggestion that all issues were up for negotiation including those used to justify the economic blockade of Cuba human rights, press freedom, imprisoned dissidents, and more. But now the Cuban president's brother, former president and leading journalist Fidel Castro, has written that Obama and his administration have "misinterpreted" Raul's words. In an article published April 14, Fidel said Obama "without a doubt misinterpreted Raul's statement." The correct interpretation according to Fidel is, "When the president of Cuba said he was ready to discuss any topic with the US president, he meant he was not afraid of addressing any issue. That shows his courage and confidence in the principles of the revolution." Raul did not enter the fray, with the result that the error went into a second iteration when Secretary of State Hillary R. Clinton interpreted Fidel's statement as a contradiction of Raul, evidence, she insisted, that "there is beginning to be a debate" in Cuba about the relationship with the US. If that were the case, it would be more than a debate. Fidel is neither just a revered elder statesman nor even the ultimate insider journalist. He retains his position as head of the Partido Comunista de Cuba (PCC). Clinton's interpretation would mean that a dispute between the government and the party had been reduced to a catfight in the local media. More seriously, it suggests that neither the US State Department, nor the US media, is equipped to analyze the highly coordinated relationships between Cuban state and national institutions. Unless and until Raul speaks, the kind of evidence most widely accepted in the US will not be available. What remains is to parse out what the discussion might mean. To some analysts, the fact that the Obama administration seizes on issues that reflect US cultural and political norms and insists that Cuba come round to its way of thinking strongly indicates that Obama either does not understand the situation or that he is still looking over his shoulder at domestic critics whom he might need for other matters. In the present instance, a CNN poll taken in early April showed US citizens far ahead of their president; 71% of the US public are in favor of re-establishing relations with Cuba, and only 27% are opposed. Following the bouncing ball Obama went to the summit in Trinidad knowing that this is not the world it was when the hemisphere danced to Washington's tune. With the announcements from El Salvador and Costa Rica that they would restore relations with the island, Obama was aware that the isolation his country sought to impose on Cuba could boomerang. The administration sought, by lifting travel and remittance restrictions, to place the ball in Cuba's court. White House spokesman Robert Gibbs said as much on a couple of occasions, and Obama is reported to have implied it in Trinidad. But it appears that the weight of world opinion rejects that notion, turning more toward the point of view expressed by Pascual Serrano in Spain's Rebellion. In a column titled in translation The Ball Remains in Washington, Serrano, a Latin America specialist, writes: "There will be those who say it is Cuba's turn to move the chip. Nothing could be more wrong. The relations of the US and Cuba have been founded on a small country that wanted to choose its own path and the most powerful on earth that resorted to every kind of method, including violent and illegal ones, to destabilize the other.... "The ball remains in the North American court. Washington has two options continue with the imperial manipulations derived from its aggressive

policy toward Cuba, or listen to the call of the international community to end the blockade and normalize relations with the island, respecting its sovereignty and independence. That is to say, the United States must decide if it will stay isolated or integrate itself in Latin America." Little has come from the administration to suggest that the US has heard the call or that it has moved politically beyond hearing it as far-left fringe rhetoric. James Petras, emeritus professor at State University of New York, Binghamton, framed the situation in stark terms. Interviewed in mid-April, on the day Obama announced easing restrictions, the sociologist and Latin Americanist correctly predicted the summit, that Obama would pursue an essentially rightist policy. "The measures put in place by Obama today are not an indicator of his progressiveness. Obama is closer to the policy of Miami than the majority of Americans. He is not going to lift the embargo and doesn't even plan to recognize the Cuban government. His problem is that in the Summit of the Americas he is going to find that all of Latin America already has relations with Cuba, and he is going to demand profound changes to reinstate the island...." And so he did.

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