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LADB Staff

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## **No Change in New US Administration's Cuba Policy**

*by LADB Staff*

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During the first weeks of George W. Bush's presidency, the administration signaled its commitment to maintain the longstanding sanctions against Cuba. Cuban exile groups in Florida moved quickly to take advantage of Bush's election victory by calling for more aggressive action to bring down the regime of President Fidel Castro.

On leaving office in January, former Secretary of State Madeleine Albright implied that she regretted Castro was still in power and expressed her hope for his early death. During her final appearance before the Department of State press corps Jan. 9, she said that one of her wishes for the incoming Bush administration was "the actuarial tables in Cuba." UN longevity statistics for Cuba show Castro, at 74, is about six years over the average live span for Cuban males. Yet, a few weeks later, Albright criticized the static Cuba policy.

In a speech to the Organization of American States (OAS) Feb. 22, the former secretary said that Bush would find it difficult to change the US Cuba policy "until a near-perfect democracy was in place" in Cuba. Referring to sanctions imposed by Congress, Albright said the legislation amounted to "a prescription for paralysis." "Congress should give President Bush the capacity to offer incentives aimed at shaping events in Cuba and not merely reacting to them." She said prospects for a democratic Cuba were "less remarkable than many of the transformations that we have witnessed [elsewhere] in recent years."

The most restrictive and far-reaching set of sanctions the 1996 Helms-Burton Act was signed by then President Bill Clinton during Albright's time in office. The legislation effectively deprived the chief executive of authority to manage or alter Cuba policy.

A reporter asked State Department spokesman Richard Boucher why Albright now thought there was a need to change the policy. "My question is what's happening with the former secretaries of state?" said the reporter. "As soon as they get out of this building they change their view toward the policy on Cuba." Albright's remark about actuarial tables aptly summarized Clinton's Cuba policy, which was essentially passive, relying on Castro's death to somehow bring about US-style elections and a free-market economy in Cuba. Bush administration officials have not called for the changes Albright recommended, nor have they suggested a more aggressive policy the hard-liners are demanding.

Vice President Richard Cheney said Cuba, like Iraq, would continue to be on the US enemies list until they made the changes the US wanted. "As soon as Castro disappears from the scene, there would be no reason why we could not have first-class relations with Cuba," Cheney said.

During his confirmation hearings in January, Secretary of State Colin Powell also implied that the Bush strategy would be to await Castro's death. Referring to Castro as "an aging starlet," Powell

told the Senate Foreign Relations Committee, "We will have to keep containing him." He added, "It is President-elect Bush's intention to keep the sanctions in place." As for Clinton's modest steps to relax some restrictions on Cuba, Powell said Bush might make similar adjustments provided no benefit from them went to the Castro regime. At the same hearings, Powell criticized the excessive use of sanctions now applied to several countries, but said the sanctions on Cuba should remain in place. Business leaders and their allies in Congress who complain of lost sales abroad because of sanctions were encouraged by Powell's remarks. However, many of these same business executives are pushing for trade with Cuba.

During the last two years, an emerging majority in Congress, which includes some conservative Republicans from farming states such as former senator and now Attorney General John D. Ashcroft and Sen. George R. Nethercutt (R-WA), supported bills to end restrictions on the sale of food and medicine to Cuba. However, in a last-minute maneuver, hard-liners attached amendments that prohibited giving export credits to Cuba and further tightened travel restrictions. Cuba said it would buy nothing from the US under those conditions (see CubaSource, 2000-06-09, 2000-07-10)).

In mid-January, senators introduced a bill to eliminate the credit and travel restrictions. However, a countermovement has developed on the right, which some see as a resurgence of anti-Castro lobbying power in Washington. Even by its own account, the Cuban American National Foundation (CANF), as well as other prominent exile organizations, was hurt by the attempts to keep Elian Gonzalez in the US last year (see NotiCen, 2000-07-13). That public-relations debacle, the death of CANF founder Jorge Mas Canosa in 1997, and the growing consensus in Congress for trade with Cuba brought the hard-liners to a low point in their influence on public policy.

### *Hard-liners move closer to power*

But the decisive Florida vote count in the 2000 presidential election and the strong support Bush received in the Cuban exile community has suddenly put hard-liners closer to the centers of power in Washington. "The Cuban-American community was an effective instrument in the election of Bush," said Dennis Hays, CANF's executive vice president. Bush rewarded the community with his appointment of Cuban-born Mel Martinez to head the Department of Housing and Urban Development (HUD). He is the first Cabinet secretary selected from the exile community. Martinez is an Orlando businessman who served as Orange County chairman for two years but had little expertise in housing issues when nominated. He has been a CANF board member and took part in the Elian affair, making headlines when he spent US\$2,000 taking the boy and his Miami relatives to Disneyworld.

The Cuban news agency Prensa Latina said the nomination was a payoff to the exile community for its electoral support, and it called Martinez "a rabid anti-Cuban Republican." A Washington Post report on the appointment noted that even some Republican leaders admitted that Bush chose Martinez for his political value in Florida. One Republican said, "Have you watched TV for the last year? Elian! Florida! They had to give the Cubans something!"

Hints that a more aggressive Cuba policy could develop came from the nominations of John D. Negroponte to be US ambassador to the UN and Otto Reich to the post of assistant secretary of state

for Western Hemispheric affairs. Negro ponte was US ambassador in Honduras during the 1980s when Battalion 3-16, a CIA-backed Honduran military unit, was engaged in massive human-rights violations.

Critics like Honduran human rights commissioner Leo Valladares say Negro ponte knew about the violations but covered them up and lied to Congress about them (see NotiSur, 1994-01-07, 1995-08-04). The Cuban-born Reich headed the State Department's Office of Public Diplomacy for Latin America and the Caribbean during the Ronald Reagan administration. Opponents of his nomination cite official documents showing that he used the office to run an illegal propaganda campaign in support of the Reagan war against the Sandinista regime in Nicaragua.

### *Exile leaders want to turn up heat on Cuba*

CANF chairman Jorge Mas Santos and other exile leaders say they are moving beyond the static policy which Powell referred to as containment. CANF's executive director Joe Garcia told the Associated Press that the status quo was "unacceptable," and that prospects for change under Bush were "positive." Exile organizations have moved quickly to get new commitments from Bush.

In January, Hermanos al Rescate leader Jorge Basulto said he hoped for an early meeting with Bush to press the Justice Department to bring criminal charges against Castro for the 1996 shutdown of the organization's planes near Cuba (see NotiSur, 1996-03-01). In a major policy speech in February, Mas Santos called for more government funds to finance dissident activities in Cuba. For some time, the US Agency for International Development (USAID) has channeled funds to Cuban dissidents through private agencies (see NotiCen, 2001-02-22). Sen. Jesse Helms (R-NC) said a similar aid program under Reagan had brought down the communist regime in Poland.

However, Harvard Cuba scholar Jorge Dominguez told The Washington Post, "I have never seen any evidence at all that these things have any impact in Cuba." A congressional aide said, "This doesn't belong in AID at all. It is basically a covert-aid program for Cuba. We don't even know who the final recipients are. The host government doesn't accept it. It's nuts." Nevertheless, Helms said in January that a more aggressive policy would unseat Castro. He predicted that Bush would attend the inauguration of a democratically elected president in Cuba within four years.

The first test of Bush's intentions may not come until July when he will have to decide whether to waive enforcement of Title III of Helms-Burton, which allows for lawsuits against firms that "traffic" in confiscated property in Cuba. Just before leaving office in January, Clinton signed the last of his biannual waivers of Title III. Implementing it could unleash a flood of litigation, most of it against European firms like the Spanish hotel chain Sol Melia, which has extensive business interests in Cuba.

The reaction in Havana to the Bush administration has been one of stoic resignation. Castro said he hoped the new president was not as stupid as he seemed or as criminal as were his predecessors. Ricardo Alarcon, president of the Cuban National Assembly, called Bush's presidency "illegitimate," and described his election as a "scandalous electoral fraud." Alarcon said he expected no improvement in bilateral relations during the Bush presidency but was optimistic that relations

would improve in the long run. The US policy of "hostility and economic warfare against Cuba is condemned to failure," he said.

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