

5-23-2002

President Carter Goes To Cuba

LADB Staff

Follow this and additional works at: <https://digitalrepository.unm.edu/noticen>

Recommended Citation

LADB Staff. "President Carter Goes To Cuba." (2002). <https://digitalrepository.unm.edu/noticen/8963>

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by the Latin America Digital Beat (LADB) at UNM Digital Repository. It has been accepted for inclusion in NotiCen by an authorized administrator of UNM Digital Repository. For more information, please contact amywinter@unm.edu.

President Carter Goes To Cuba

by LADB Staff

Category/Department: Cuba

Published: 2002-05-23

On invitation from Cuban President Fidel Castro, former President Jimmy Carter (1977-1981) visited Cuba May 12-17, meeting dissidents, addressing the nation on television, criticizing some of Cuba's policies, and lambasting the administration of US President George W. Bush for resurrecting an old and discredited claim that Cuba is developing biological weapons. The next week, Bush said he would not change policy unless Cuba made radical changes.

The Treasury Department approved Carter's application for a license to travel to Cuba despite efforts by Reps. Lincoln Diaz-Balart (R-FL) and Ileana Ros-Lehtinen (R-FL) to persuade Bush to block the trip. In a letter to Bush obtained by The Miami Herald, the lawmakers asserted that US policy prohibits travel to Cuba by "former presidents seeking to appease anti-American dictators."

Welcoming Carter to Havana, Castro said the former president could make all the criticisms he wanted from the Plaza de la Revolucion. "You will have free access to any place you wish to see, and we will not be offended in any way by any contacts you wish to make, including with those who do not share our struggles," Castro said. Carter's visit was notable for the speeches he delivered in Spanish, the free rein given him to say what he wished, and for the balance he tried to strike between criticizing shortcomings of the Cuban regime and the obsolescence of US Cuba policy. Besides discussions with Castro and other high officials, Carter visited schools and farms, held an open debate with University of Havana students, and gave an address in Spanish on Cuban television. The Cuban official press printed verbatim transcripts of his remarks.

Carter also met with a group of dissidents and held private meetings with Vladimiro Roca, who had been released from prison two days before Carter's arrival, and Oswaldo Paya, the principal leader of a petition drive (Proyecto Varela) seeking government reforms. In his television address, Carter acknowledged Cuba's achievements in education, health, and medical research but also called for democracy, an end to restrictions on speech and association, and improvement of the island's human-rights record. He asked that the Cuban government allow the International Red Cross to inspect prisons.

Following the recent recommendation of the UN Human Rights Commission, he asked that the UN Human Rights Commissioner be invited to visit the country (see NotiCen, 2002-05-02). The commissioner's visit, he said, "could help to refute a series of unjustified criticisms." But Carter also called for lifting the US embargo and travel ban, and he proposed a bilateral commission to examine ways to resolve the Cuba-US conflict. Carter supports petition drive Coinciding with the Carter visit was the delivery of Paya's petition to the National Assembly. The petition asks the Assembly to call a referendum in which Cubans would vote on several propositions, including whether there should be amnesty for political prisoners, greater freedom of expression and association, permission for Cubans to start businesses, a new electoral law, and elections within a year.

The Cuban government view is that the petition drive was the work of the US. Justice Minister Roberto Diaz Sotolongo said, "We know that the government of the United States, and especially the US Interests Section in the country, have a role in this." Paya denied the project had outside help and said Cuban agents had harassed petition workers. Cuba's 1976 Constitution allows for the initiative, but it does not require the National Assembly to hold a referendum requested by petition.

US attorney and scholar Debra Evenson has pointed out that some initiatives in the petition would require constitutional amendments but the Constitution has no provision for amendments originating outside the National Assembly. Carter said he had the feeling Castro and the other top leaders with whom he talked had not decided what they would do about the petition.

Administration says Cuba works on biological weapons

On May 6, Undersecretary of State for Arms Control and International Security John Bolton suggested in a speech to the Heritage Foundation that Cuba was engaging in production and transfer of biological-weapons technology. Bolton gave a speech in January in which he discussed a thorough administration review of the 1972 Biological Weapons Convention but did not mention Cuba. In his Heritage Foundation speech, Bolton offered no evidence for his accusations but said "analysts and defectors" had raised suspicions about what goes on in Cuba's pharmaceutical facilities.

A Defense Department official said he had never seen any supporting evidence from all the information coming from intelligence and defectors. Bolton said that what the US "knows" is that it "believes" Cuba at least has "a limited offensive biological- warfare research and development effort." The US also believes, he said, that "Cuba has provided dual-use biotechnology to other rogue states." Bolton called on Cuba "to cease all BW-applicable cooperation with rogue states and to fully comply with all of its obligations under the Biological Weapons Convention." Bolton's statements revived similar charges that US officials have consistently downplayed or dismissed.

The most recent version came from a book by a Soviet defector who based his claims largely on hearsay (see NotiCen, 1999-07-15). Replying to Bolton, the Cuban government recounted its allegations, going back decades, that the US had repeatedly violated the Biological Weapons Convention through biological attacks on Cuba.

In 1997, Cuba complained to the UN about the appearance in central Cuba of Thrips palmi plague, which it said was introduced through aerial spraying by an aircraft registered to the US State Department (see EcoCentral, 1997-08-21). Cuba's accusations, some meticulously documented, included that the US has introduced various virus strains, rusts, blights, and pests not previously found in Cuba. Cuba also alleged the US introduced exotic forms of dengue fever. Castro invited Carter to inspect Cuba's pharmaceutical- research laboratories, promising him complete access, and said the doors of these facilities were open to any international organization.

After a tour of the Genetic Engineering and Biotechnology Center and talks with Cuban scientists, Carter said he saw no evidence to support Bolton. "These allegations were made, maybe not coincidentally, just before our visit to Cuba," Carter said. He added that neither the State

Department, intelligence agencies, nor the White House mentioned anything about biological weapons during briefings he received before his trip began. "I asked them specifically on more than one occasion: 'Is there any evidence that Cuba has been involved in sharing any information to any other country on Earth that could be used for terrorist purposes?' And the answer from our experts on intelligence was, 'no.'"

Some of Bolton's critics accused the administration of outright lies. The Council on Hemispheric Affairs (COHA), a Washington think tank, said Bolton was a liar serving the electoral interests of the president and his brother, Florida Gov. Jeb Bush. Administration unclear on bioweapons charges During a press briefing May 9, State Department spokesman Richard Boucher said that Bolton's charges were true and that his speech "was carefully researched and carefully worked out. IT IS TRUE [emphasis in original]." Boucher appeared much more certain than Bolton, who cast most of his claims as matters of belief. Later, on May 13, Powell toned down Bolton's claims. "We didn't say that [Cuba] actually had some weapons, but it has the capacity and the capability to conduct such research," said Powell. But Bolton did not say Cuba simply had capacity but rather that it was making a limited "effort" in offensive biological-warfare research and development and that it had transferred that technology to rogue states.

News organizations generally reported the secretary's remark as "amending" or "stepping back" from Bolton's accusations, though none repeated the official Cuban newspaper Granma's claim that Powell had called Bolton a liar. Subsequent State Department clarifications that the secretary had not softened Bolton's charges left observers to choose among the Bolton, Boucher, and Powell versions. The administration's motives in first asserting and then pulling back from the incendiary accusations remain unclear. The US is skeptical about the usefulness of spot inspections and opposes inspections of its own laboratories for commercial and security reasons.

In 2001, the Bush administration refused to sign a protocol that strengthened verification procedures in the 1972 convention. Yet Boucher and Assistant Secretary of State for Western Hemisphere Affairs Otto Reich said the administration was looking for ways to get Cuba to open its pharmaceutical laboratories to international inspection to show its compliance with the convention something Castro had already offered to do. There is some speculation that the administration hoped to use the Bolton speech to pressure Cuba out of the lucrative pharmaceutical market by defining sales of commercial medical products, such as its hepatitis-B vaccine, as a dual-use transfer of weapons technology.

Whatever the purpose behind the Bolton speech, the administration appeared to have forgotten it by May 20 when Bush gave a major policy speech on Cuba and made no mention of Cuba as a biological-weapons power.

On May 21, the State Department released its annual report on terrorism (Patterns of Global Terrorism 2001). The report also failed to mention the Cuba weapons accusations. When asked about it during a Senate hearing, Reich appeared to have no answer and said he did not know who put out the report. "It's your department that publishes it," said Sen. Byron Dorgan (D-ND). "This is a State Department publication."

Bush restates US policy

Bush restated the administration's hard-line policy in a speech from the White House commemorating Cuban Independence Day May 20. Following the speech, he went on a fund-raising trip to Miami for Gov. Bush and there gave a similar speech. "Without major steps by Cuba to open up its political system and its economic system, trade with Cuba will not help the Cuban people," he said. He pledged that the US would continue enforcing all economic sanctions on Cuba, maintain the travel ban, and prohibit commercial credits for Cuba.

Bush outlined "minimum steps" Cuba would have to take toward democracy. He proposed that the Cuban government permit opposition parties to organize and participate in the 2003 National Assembly elections, which would be monitored by human rights organizations. He further proposed that all political prisoners be released and allowed to participate in the elections. On economic matters, Bush wants Cuba to expand the private sector, making "meaningful market-based reforms"; permit independent trade unions; and allow employers to negotiate wages and pay their workers directly instead of through the government. Bush said that if Cuba takes all the steps he outlined, he would work with Congress to ease the travel ban and embargo. Since the measures amount to an almost complete abandonment of Cuba's political and economic systems, Cuba is unlikely to adopt them.

The speech, labeled beforehand as a toughening of US Cuba policy, essentially repeated well-established policy tenets. The call for electoral democracy was new only in the sense that it outlined proposals for the 2003 National Assembly elections, the existence of which US officials have seldom acknowledged. His proposal to increase US government aid to dissident groups in Cuba through nongovernmental organizations something Carter warned against on his final day in Havana has been a staple of US policy. Carter told a news conference that some of the dissidents he met opposed direct assistance because it would undermine and stigmatize their efforts. The Cuban government maintains that US aid to political movements bent on changing the government is justification enough to prohibit multiparty elections.

Dissident Roca said that changes should also come from the US, and Elizardo Sanchez said most of the speech "was more of the same prickly rhetoric from the time of the Cold War that has characterized the relationship between the countries for 40 years."

New group in Congress formed against embargo

During the Carter trip, a group formed in the House of Representatives to work toward expanding trade with Cuba. With the failure earlier in May of farm-state lawmakers to legalize private commercial credit for Cuba (see NotiCen, 2002-05-16), the newly formed Cuba Working Group called for an end to the embargo. Some of the group's members, like Rep. Jeff Flake (R-AZ), are conservatives who accept the traditional US line on Cuba but have placed markets over ideology. The group released a nine-point proposal calling for ending the travel ban, cooperating with Cuba on hemispheric security and environmental protection, and settling property claims arising from expropriations in Cuba in the 1960s. The proposals did not call for repealing the 1996 Helms-Burton Act, or resuming full, normalized relations with Cuba.

-- End --