



Oh, Brother! Another Castro Clings to Power in Cuba

By Roger F. Noriega

One step ahead of the devil himself, Fidel Castro is proposing to pass the baton to his revolutionary partner and younger brother, Raúl. With characteristic audacity, the old dictator is hoping that he can bamboozle a gullible international community into recognizing such a succession as a fait accompli. Of course, there is no reason that the successor regime will be able to consummate this arrangement as long as the rest of the world gives the welfare of the Cuban people a second thought. Fidel's disintegration makes way for an extraordinarily expectant time in Cuba's history. Men and women of good will on the island may yet snatch their future from a decrepit and discredited regime, and outsiders' only role should be to help them in every way possible. We should bear in mind at this critical hour that one false move—by the United States, in particular—could confer legitimacy on a “new” Cuban dictator and consign 11 million Cubans to prolonged desperation.

The Castro regime's bid to have a different fist wield the same iron is a distraction from the genuine drama being played out just under the surface in Cuba. As a mythic revolutionary fades into the background, expectations among the long-suffering population are bound to rise. If the regime's new leadership fails to keep the lid on the natural forces for change, it will lose control in a hurry. And if it cracks down with characteristic ruthlessness, the reaction from the population and from an observant world community might knock the blocks out from under the old order. We can start by warning those seeking to crush these aspirations that the world, at long last, is watching and that they will be held accountable for their abuses.

Challenging Conventional Wisdom

Idle chatter about Cuba in recent weeks includes the suggestion that the island's inhabitants may have to settle for the status quo. A charitable inter-

Roger F. Noriega (rnoriega@aei.org) is a visiting fellow at AEI. His law and advocacy firm, Tew Cardenas, LLP, represents foreign governments and companies.

pretation of this commentary might be that fewer people will get hurt if there is—to use a misnomer deployed by many a cautious diplomat—“peaceful” change. What's so peaceful about 11 million Cubans trapped in the wreckage of a Stalinist regime, afraid that they might lose their miserable jobs, their meager food rations, or their “freedom” if a nosy neighbor overhears them complaining about Raúl or fretting about their children's future? Cubans have been up to their necks in the kind of “stability” produced by a police state. “Peaceful,” in this case, depends on how far away you are from Cuba.

Some of those counseling “stability” may be concerned about a mass migration of Cubans fleeing chaos. It is time to rethink that argument, which is usually wielded by those policymakers counseling a “go slow” approach. The best hope for avoiding a dangerous mass migration of Cubans to our shores in a post-Fidel world is to help them press for real change at home. If we stand by as their dreams of a new future are dashed by Raúl, we are inviting a burst of migration by a new generation of desperate Cubans.

This succession gambit presents one last opportunity to educate the establishment thinkers who have yearned for the day when Fidel would redeem himself as being a “Robin Hood,” rather than just a “hood.” In his 2005 book *After Fidel*, Brian Latell, the Central Intelligence Agency’s former top Latin American analyst, paints a chilling portrait of a rotten bully who organized his narcissistic project around an implacable hatred for the United States.¹ The elder Castro has made it abundantly clear that his non-negotiable demand was an abject surrender of our principled opposition to his dictatorship. Regardless of any U.S. concessions, the Castro regime has always made clear that it will never loosen its grip on power. Yet, there are those who continue to recommend patience for or generous gestures to Fidel’s brother, key conspirator, and handpicked successor.

In short, conventional wisdom has usually been wrong on Cuba, and it is of less use to Cubans than ever before. Lately, some are trying to use the transition to Raúl to leverage a shift in U.S. policy. Despite what is happening on the ground in Cuba, there are skeptics of our policy whose prescription usually includes unilateral concessions by the United States to an intractable regime. Richard Nixon’s foreign policy team sought to warm relations with Havana—with the Cold War going full-bore. Twenty years later, some of the same establishment figures counseled a weakening of our Cuba sanctions, arguing that the Cold War was over. The fact is, the Cold War has never been over for the Cuban people. Today, in Cuba, that war is heading into extra innings with a substitute pitcher.

What about Raúl?

Latell, who has provided the only thorough profile of Raúl to date, caught a bit of flack for humanizing the brothers in his excellent character study. But he portrays the Castro brothers as a pair of gangsters—Fidel, an opportunistic fascist, and Raúl, a committed communist. Sure, Raúl is described as a doting family man, nostalgic for his simple, small-town upbringing, but Latell also documents how a murderous and methodical Raúl has served his brother’s violent struggle and his own communist principles. Raúl’s talent for organization was indispensable in honing a Stalinist regime that has terrorized opponents and held onto power for fifty years.

Recall that Raúl played a direct role in ordering and organizing the premeditated murder of four innocent people aboard two U.S. rescue planes in international air space twelve years ago.² Before that, he was caught abetting cocaine smuggling to the United States through

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Cuban territory. To cover his tracks in that case, Raúl organized the show trial and televised execution of several of his chums who testified to delivering satchels of narcodollars directly to him.³

Despite decades of evidence to the contrary, there are academics and others still hoping that the Castro revolution will redeem itself. Sifting through the

pile of manure that is what is left of the regime, they are still looking for a pony. And so it is that those hoping for a soft landing for the regime expected Raúl to reveal his receptivity to reforms by naming the revolution’s official inside-the-box thinker and economic tinkerer, Carlos Lage, as first vice president. But the seventy-six-year-old Raúl did what his long record predicted he would, designating hard-line military rogues to vice presidential slots. Their average age is above seventy, and they are among the most ruthless and orthodox thinkers that a ruthless and orthodox system has to offer.⁴ Even Raúl’s rhetoric offers little hope for change: in his acceptance speech as president, he interpreted his appointment as a mandate “to continue to strengthen the revolution at a historic moment” and stated that “Fidel is irreplaceable, and the people will continue his task after he’s no longer physically here.”⁵

Latell recently postulated that Raúl’s succession was really more of a coup d’etat, with an ailing Fidel shoved aside. He fiercely defends the dubious proposition that the younger Castro is genuinely committed to a controlled economic opening as an essential part of meeting the material needs of the people. But Latell also argues that by promoting an aged, hard-line cadre and pretending that Cubans can “debate freely” their country’s future, Raúl is “playing with fire” by alienating a corps of midlevel bureaucrats and military officers and by stoking expectations for political reform that he has no intention of satisfying.⁶

Nothing in Raúl’s slavish service to a communist ideal supports the suggestion that he is a frustrated reformer straining at his brother’s leash. The idea that he might adopt the “China model”—allowing economic change while holding onto political control—is wishful thinking. Raúl is the man who engineered the

crackdown a decade ago on academics who dared to propose liberal remedies for Cuba's ailing post-Soviet economy. His only role in grudging, stopgap reform measures in the late 1990s (such as a faltering self-employment program) was to see that they were restricted or reversed. He has indulged market solutions just enough to allow his military cadre to scoop up 40 percent of Cuba's budding tourism industry, with the primary goal of building loyalty within the regime's security apparatus. As a matter of fact, Latell reports that Raúl confronted Fidel to demand this economic advantage for the military in the 1990s. This episode is telling because Raúl pried open this economic space but refused to share it with the Cuban population. Indeed, his long record of ideological rigidity suggests that what he finds most appealing about the "China model" is not measured reform but the preservation of absolute political control.

In the nineteen months since Raúl has been in charge in Cuba, he has delivered no meaningful economic or political change. Instead, he has surrounded himself with militant defenders of the old order. "But wait," the conventional wisdom goes, "When Fidel dies, Raúl will spread his reformist wings." If anything, with Fidel's death the expectations among the Cuban people will rise explosively. This pent-up demand for change can only be satisfied by liberating the resources, creativity, and spirit of the Cuban people. Unleashing these forces will sound the death knell for what is left of the Castro regime. Raúl—who counts Soviet ideologues and generals among his lifelong partners—is no Mikhail Gorbachev. And if he harbored any humanitarian instincts in his heart, he could not possibly have done his brother's dirty work for fifty years.

To be sure, Raúl has access to shrewd economic managers who understand market forces and are able to manage the regime's economic holdings at home and abroad. But learning to manipulate the market to generate capital to hold a police state together is hardly the same as sharing the market with everyone else on the island. There is scant evidence that Raúl is a closeted reformer; there is even less evidence that this wily and ruthless survivor is either stupid or suicidal. He knows better than anyone that an illegitimate and failed regime

cannot risk the instability that comes with letting people think for themselves.

Finally, regardless of what Raúl has in store for the Cuban people, his advanced age, and that of the men around him, has already touched off yet another succession crisis that could make it difficult for him to get his bearings.

The U.S. Response: To Help—Or at Least to Do No Harm

If Fidel's little brother promises nothing new to help Cubans, why would unilateral relaxation of U.S. policy help him hold onto power?

The fact is that Americans committed to freedom in Cuba are not obsessed with *punishing* Cuba by preserving sanctions. The embargo is one tool in the service of a policy that recognizes that every day Fidel's chorus line of thugs keeps kicking is a tragedy for Cubans everywhere. That tough policy insists on change as a precondition for normal economic and political relations with the United States. For example, U.S. policy calls for the release of all political prisoners, the dismantling of the police state, and the promise of free and fair elections. These are standards with which virtually every imperfect nation of the Western Hemisphere—rich or poor, Right or Left—complies today (with the possible exception of Venezuela).⁷ It makes good sense to reserve any relaxation of U.S. sanctions to encourage a new brand of Cuban leader who is not obsessed with tormenting and oppressing his countrymen.

Despite the understandable frustration that the Castro brothers may be burrowing in under new management, no one is suggesting an invasion to liberate Cuba by force. Most people accept that change will have to come from the Cuban people themselves. But great care must be taken to avoid doing anything to undermine the ability of the Cuban people to seize the opportunity to press for real change. It would be a historic tragedy if foreigners were to intervene directly in Cuba's transition, which includes doing anything that confers legitimacy on a thug who has no other claim to it. In this post-Fidel period, any clumsy word or deed suggesting that the United States accepts the transfer of power from one dictator to another would snuff out the nascent hopes for

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When a leading contender for the U.S. presidency, Senator Barack Obama (D-Ill.), says he will sit down to meet with Raúl Castro without preconditions, his words matter. If that pledge is repeated or that candidate elected, the perception that the United States will accept Raúl as a legitimate interlocutor will buy time for the hard-liners to consolidate their regime and intimidate their opposition. Worse yet, it will marginalize genuine would-be reformers inside the regime and demoralize the democratic opposition that has come to see the United States as their most important friend.

The international community can play a vital role in encouraging democratic change. Recent visits to the island by Brazilian president Luiz Inácio Lula da Silva and Mexican secretary of foreign affairs Patricia Espinosa to meet with the Castro brothers without visiting political dissidents sent a disheartening message to observers in Cuba. Such indifference in the midst of the “succession” could be devastating to democratic hopes on the island. Latin American neighbors in particular should hold the emerging Cuban government accountable to the standards of the Inter-American Democratic Charter, a document signed by all members of the Organization of American States on September 11, 2001, that calls on governments to fully respect representative democracy.

The late-February visit to Havana by Vatican secretary of state Tarcisio Cardinal Bertone was an extraordinarily reckless gesture. Being photographed with Cuba’s new “jailer” and making it clear publicly that the Vatican accepted the de facto succession was a diplomatic coup for Raúl. Days later, Bertone discredited himself thoroughly when he conveyed Raúl’s offer to release prisoners of conscience being held arbitrarily in Cuba in exchange for Cuban spies convicted and jailed in the United States for acts of espionage and, in one case, murder.⁸ Bertone’s disgraceful performance should serve as a cautionary tale for other diplomats who may also be duped by the new Cuban dictator.

President George W. Bush has repeated the U.S. offer to normalize political and economic ties with Cuba once a genuine transition to democracy is underway.⁹ It should be clear that the United States will neither appease nor legitimize Raúl’s regime. Bush would do well to restate this offer as the Castro regime clings to power in order to underscore that Raúl has replaced his brother as the biggest obstacle to progress in Cuba. Bush should also repeat his admonition to the Cuban security

forces that those who abuse their people as they make a bid for freedom will be held accountable, and those who respect these legitimate aspirations at this crucial hour may have a place in shaping Cuba’s future.

U.S. freedom broadcasts to the island—Radio Martí and TV Martí—should be stepped up to convey a message of international solidarity with the Cuban people and to reassure them that they have nothing to fear as they reject dictatorship and reclaim their future. To elude the regime’s electronic jamming of these broadcasts, Bush should overrule bureaucratic lawyers to authorize airborne broadcasts over international waters.

The U.S. government should move quickly to disperse the new funds approved by Congress to support the forces of democratic change and economic recovery on the island. Such programs should include activities that will, once an irreversible transition is underway, mobilize private capital to develop the immense entrepreneurial potential of the Cuban people.

Students from around the globe should be encouraged to travel to Cuba now to meet with young dissidents who have been jailed and are being harassed for demanding *cambio* (change). The United States should mobilize the best and brightest minds from within the Cuban-American community to form a “Democracy Corps” to be prepared to work on the island to nurture the indigenous forces for change.

Raúl recently signed two United Nations (UN) human rights accords, including one that recognizes peaceful assembly.¹⁰ The international community should make clear that signing scraps of paper is no substitute for respecting human rights on the ground, in reality, every day. Cubans should be allowed to form political parties, hold public gatherings to discuss their future, and exercise their fundamental political freedoms without persecution, harassment, or infiltration by the police state. This political activity is essential as the country moves toward free and fair elections. Indeed, the whole world should insist that the regime—as well as foreign investors operating on the island today—respect the Arcos Principles, a home-grown declaration named for the late Cuban dissident Gustavo Arcos that calls for companies to respect universally recognized labor rights.

If Raúl were sincere about bringing about real change, he would have opened his country—including his jail cells—to international human rights monitors from the UN, the Inter-American Commission on Human Rights, and other respected independent human

rights groups. At the very least, these organizations should be demanding this access today.

Anyone who has visited a dinosaur exhibit at any museum in the world will attest to the fact that the old bones do not move. So when the fossils in Havana fail to deliver even the faintest reforms in the months ahead, one can only hope that the international community will step up demands that the regime yield to the aspirations of the Cuban people by scheduling free and fair elections.

Don't Bet Against the Cuban People

Before Fidel's revolution, the Cuban people had built one of the most prosperous and progressive societies in Latin America.¹¹ Although fifty years of dictatorship have reduced Cuba to one of the most backward economies in the Western Hemisphere, the natural talent and industry of the Cuban people is evident in exile communities throughout the world. Underestimating these people is unwise.

Still, some recent commentary on Cuba includes the cynical prediction that the Cuban people will settle for the fate that the Castro brothers have in store for them. Although it is possible that many Cubans are prepared to give Raúl the benefit of the doubt for the sake of stability, it is inconceivable that any outsider would do anything to legitimize his hold on power. After all, one irrefutable fact is that the regime's survival *depends* on ruthless Stalinist coercion, and another is that the Cuban people would be better off, by far, with the regime's early demise. We should join the Cuban people when they tell the old crowd, "Basta, ya!" Enough, already!

AEI research assistant Megan L. Davy and editorial assistant Christy Hall Robinson worked with Mr. Noriega to edit and produce this Latin American Outlook.

Notes

1. Brian Latell, *After Fidel: Raul Castro and the Future of Cuba's Revolution* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2005).

2. Three U.S. citizens and a legal permanent resident were killed when Cuban military aircraft attacked their Brothers to

the Rescue planes over international waters north of Cuba on February 24, 1996. Years later, in the trial of a Cuban spy, it was established that the attack was premeditated.

3. Andres Oppenheimer, *Castro's Final Hour: An Eyewitness Account of the Disintegration of Castro's Cuba* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1992). See also Brian Ross and Vic Walter, "Raúl Castro: Cocaine Connection?" ABC News, April 14, 2006, available at http://blogs.abcnews.com/theblotter/2006/08/raul_castro_coc.html (accessed March 4, 2008). Ross and Walter report that "Federal prosecutors in Miami were prepared to indict Raúl Castro as the head of a major cocaine smuggling conspiracy in 1993."

4. On February 24, 2008, the day that Raúl Castro was elected president of Cuba's council of state, three military generals were also elected to vice presidential slots: General José Ramón Machado Ventura, General Julio Casas Regueiro, and General Leopoldo Cintra Frías. In addition, economic policymaker Carlos Lage held onto his vice presidential post.

5. "Excerpts: Raúl Castro's Speech," *Miami Herald*, February 25, 2008.

6. Brian Latell, "Cuba's Generation Gap," *Wall Street Journal*, March 1, 2008.

7. The deterioration of freedom in Venezuela is described at length in Roger F. Noriega, "Venezuela under Chavez: The Path toward Dictatorship," *Latin American Outlook* (June 2006), available at www.aei.org/publication24491/.

8. Pablo Bachelet, "Cardinal: Castro Open to Trade Dissidents, Spies," *Miami Herald*, March 1, 2008.

9. President Bush reiterated U.S. policy in a forceful speech delivered at the State Department. George W. Bush, "President Bush Discusses Cuba Policy" (speech, Washington, DC, October 24, 2007), available at www.whitehouse.gov/news/releases/2007/10/20071024-6.html (accessed March 4, 2008).

10. Will Weissert, "Raúl Takes Small Steps on Human Rights," Associated Press, March 1, 2008.

11. Cuba's relative wealth before the devastation of Castro's revolution is detailed in Roger F. Noriega, "Let Cuba Be Cuban Again," *Latin American Outlook* (February 2007), available at www.aei.org/publication25574/. See also U.S. Department of State, Bureau of Inter-American Affairs, "Zenith and Eclipse: A Comparative Look at Socio-Economic Conditions in Pre-Castro and Present Day Cuba," February 9, 1998 (revised June 2002), available at www.state.gov/p/wha/ci/14776.htm (accessed March 4, 2008).