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POLITICS

Bush Passes on Cuban Exiles' Right

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He panders to a narrow, reactionary slice of a politically diverse community.



By Ann Louise Bardach

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Earlier this month, President Bush gathered 100 Cuban Americans in the White House Rose Garden to outline his new Cuba policy. Sprinkling his speech with a few words of well-rehearsed Spanish, the president announced a new commission, co-chaired by Secretary of State Colin Powell and Housing and Urban Development Secretary Mel Martinez. Its mission: to draw up a transition-to-freedom plan for a post-Castro Cuba and to "identify ways to hasten the arrival of that day." But judging from the reception of the president's speech — most notably within the Miami exile community — Operation Cuba could be as controversial as Operation Iraqi Freedom.

The cornerstone of the president's initiative is to aggressively criminalize travel to Cuba by asking the Department of Homeland Security to identify and punish those who visit Cuba in violation of U.S. laws, whether they travel from the United States or via a third country. The president also vowed to crack down on people sending money to Cuba. What this policy fails to take into account is that it is Cuban Americans who will be most penalized by the crackdown. Not only do they travel often to Cuba to see family, they also send an estimated \$1 billion annually to the island.

Bush's speech was carefully calibrated to appeal to a narrow — and extremely reactionary — section of the exile community. He spoke about Cuban dissidents jailed by Fidel Castro, but he failed to mention Cuba's most prominent dissidents, including Nobel Peace Prize nominee Oswaldo Paya, leader of the respected Varela Project; and human rights activist Elizardo Sanchez. Dissidents like Paya are ignored because, although they would like to see the end of Castro's reign, they also argue that the U.S. embargo is counterproductive. Moreover, such charismatic and popular figures represent a threat to the ambitions of White House favorite Rep. Lincoln Diaz-Balart, the Miami congressman who has made no secret of his desire to succeed his uncle by marriage, Castro — the sooner the better.

Perhaps the clearest signal of just how extreme the Bush policy is can be gleaned from the list of those invited to the Rose Garden. Amply represented were members of the Cuban Liberty Council, a group that broke away from the conservative Cuban American National Foundation on the grounds that it was too moderate. Also present was Alberto Hernandez, an exile known for his militancy who is profusely thanked for his support and friendship in the memoirs of Luis Posada Carriles, currently in prison in Panama on charges that he attempted to assassinate Castro.

Though the president spoke of his intentions "to hasten the arrival of a new, free, democratic Cuba," it was the wind of political partisanship, not the spirit of democracy, that blew in the Rose Garden. Miami's three Cuban American Republican congressional representatives chatted with the president, but their colleague Robert Menendez, a fervently anti-Castro exile who represents a district in New Jersey, was left off the list. He is a Democrat. More stunning was the omission of representatives from the Cuban American National Foundation, a prominent exile group. The slight was viewed by insiders as part of ongoing punishment for the group's not having endorsed Bush (or any other candidate) in the 2000 presidential campaign. "These guys have no equal when it comes to revenge," says one foundation board member.

Members of the Cuba Study Group, an exile organization made up of the most influential Cuban business leaders in Miami, were also excluded. One of its founders, Carlos Saladrigas, who describes himself as a "lifelong conservative Republican," attributes the snub to the group's recent polling, which found that a majority of South Florida's exiles now favor a nonconfrontational approach to Cuba.

Of course, the president's speech omitted mention that the sole point of consensus among Cuban exiles has been their belief that the U.S. economic embargo has utterly failed to meet its stated goals — although hard-liners would advocate strengthening rather than eliminating it. "If not for the embargo," says Saladrigas, "Castro would just be another tin-pot Third World dictator. He is the one who really needs to keep it in place, because it gives him his best excuse. And it really helps keep him in power."

Seeking to justify his hostile policy toward Cuba, the president peppered his speech with incendiary allegations. "A rapidly growing part of Cuba's tourism industry is the illicit sex trade, a modern form of slavery which is encouraged by the Cuban government," he charged. Certainly, prostitution has flourished in Cuba since the advent of tourism, and that is worrisome. But it is hardly comparable with the skin trade in Rio de Janeiro, Mexico City or a dozen other Latin American cities, and there is no evidence that the government is complicit. Nor is prostitution as prevalent as it was in the 1950s when Cuba was America's sex and sin parlor.

The president's policies are not only at odds with public opinion on Cuba; he has squared off against his own party. In September, the Republican-controlled House of Representatives passed amendments to ease the embargo against Cuba. For the fourth time in three years, it voted to ease restrictions on travel. Thursday, the Senate for the first time passed the measure as well. The president has said he will veto such a bill if it comes to him.

Bush's hard-line policies are not without political peril. "It would be close to impossible for President Bush to carry Florida if he does not get the 80% or 85% level of the Cuban American vote," says pollster Sergio Bendixen, adding that the administration is "risking 15% to 20% of the vote by listening only to the most extreme element who favor a confrontational approach." Bendixen points out that more than half of South Florida's exiles are fairly recent émigrés "who are basically economic refugees and who have family in Cuba." This group, he says, no longer wants sanctions to be the focus of U.S. policy.

One might reasonably ask, then, what the Bush administration believes it stands to gain by tailoring its policy to please only hard-liners. The answer may be that, though Cuban exiles have a multiplicity of political views, the extreme right wing still controls the political leadership and electoral machinery of Miami-Dade, along with the vitally important Spanish-language radio stations. Bush is unlikely to have forgotten that it was Miami exile radio that summoned rowdy protesters to the canvassing board during the 2000 presidential recount. And Miami-Dade County officials decided to shut the recount down.

The current U.S. stance toward Cuba has little to do with effective foreign policy and everything to do with Miami-Dade politics. All of which may explain why Fidel Castro seems so amused by George W. Bush, the 10th American president to face off against him. With enemies like this, Castro hardly needs friends.

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