Letter From Miami

Florida's Zeal Against Castro Is Losing Heat

By ABBY GOODNOUGH
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MIAMI, July 5 - Fidel Castro is not dead, but he has haunted Miami for nearly 50 years. This is a city where newscasters still scrutinize Mr. Castro's health and workers conduct emergency drills to prepare for the chaos expected upon his demise. Spy shops still flourish here, and a store on Calle Ocho does brisk business in reprints of the Havana phone book from 1959, the year he seized power.

But if Mr. Castro's grip on Cuban Miami remains strong, the fixation is expressed differently these days. The monolithic stridency that once defined the exile community has faded. There is less consensus on how to fight Mr. Castro and even, as Cuban-Americans grow more politically and economically diverse, less intensity of purpose. Some call it shrewd pragmatism, others call it fatigue.

In May, Luis Posada Carriles, a militant anti-Castro fighter from the cold war era, was arrested here on charges of entering the country illegally and was imprisoned in El Paso, where he awaits federal trial. Barely anyone in Miami protested, even though many Cuban-Americans consider Mr. Posada, 77, to be a hero who deserves asylum.

A month earlier, two milestones - the 25th anniversary of the Mariel boatlift, which brought 125,000 Cubans to the United States and transformed Miami, and the fifth anniversary of the seizure of Elián González - passed almost quietly.

When a Miami Herald columnist went to Cuba in June and filed dispatches critical of Mr. Posada, who is suspected in a deadly airline bombing and other violent attacks, indignant letters to the editor were the only protest. In the past, Cuban-Americans boycotted The Herald and smeared feces on its vending boxes to protest what they considered pro-Castro coverage.

This city where raucous demonstrations by exiles were once as regular as summer storms has seen few lately. One theory is that the people whose life's mission was to defeat Mr. Castro and return to the island one day - those who fled here in the early years of his taking power - have grown old and weary.

"We are all exhausted from so much struggle," said Ramón Saul Sánchez, leader of the Democracy Movement, an exile organization that once ran flotillas to the waters off Cuba to protest human-rights abuses. Mr. Sánchez, 50, also belonged to Alpha 66, an exile paramilitary group that trained in the Everglades, mostly in the 1960's and 70's, for an armed invasion of Cuba, and later protested around the clock outside Elián González's house. Now, he said, he prefers less attention-grabbing tactics, quietly supporting dissidents on the island from an office above a Laundromat.

The subtler approach is gaining favor. Cuban-Americans have grown more politically aware since the Elián González episode, many say, when their fervor to thwart the Clinton administration and the boy's return to his father in Cuba drew national contempt. Americans who had paid little attention to the policy debate over Cuba tended to support sending Elián home, polls showed, and were put off by images of exiles blocking traffic and flying American flags upside down in protest.

"Elián González was a great lesson, a brutal lesson," said Joe Garcia, the former executive director of the Cuban-American National Foundation, a once belligerent but now more measured exile group. "It woke us up."

Mayor Manny Diaz, a Cuban-American whose political career took off after he served as a lawyer for Elián's Miami relatives, said he decided afterward it was more important to heal the wounds in Miami than to criticize the Castro government. Mr. Diaz did not mention Cuba in his State of the City speech this spring - an absence the local alternative newspaper called "downright revolutionary." In fact, Mr. Diaz said he had never used Mr. Castro's name to rouse support.

"I wish he'd get run over by an 18-wheeler tomorrow," Mr. Diaz said of Mr. Castro. "But as mayor, I'm supposed to fix your streets and your parks and your potholes."

Also revolutionary is that Cuban-Americans, solidly Republican since President John F. Kennedy's decision not to support the 1961 Bay of Pigs invasion, are reconsidering their allegiance. Most still stand by President Bush, which helps explain their silence after the arrest of Mr. Posada. Yet they also say Mr. Bush has repeatedly let them down.

He has continued the "wet foot, dry foot" policy that President Bill Clinton adopted, letting Cuban refugees who make it to shore remain in this country but sending back those stopped at sea. Mr. Bush also adopted new restrictions last year on visiting and sending money to relatives in Cuba, which all but the most hard-line exiles say hurts Cuban families more than Mr. Castro.

More recently, the Bush administration discussed reassigning to Iraq a special military plane it bought to help broadcast TV and Radio Marti in Cuba, a priority of exile groups.

"The Cuban-American community helped elect this guy," Mr. Garcia said, "and even then Cuban-Americans get short shrift."

Mr. Garcia made waves last fall by resigning from the Cuban American National Foundation to join a Democratic advocacy group. José Basulto, the leader of Brothers to the Rescue, a group that flew over the Florida Strait in the 1990's seeking rafters in distress, held a news conference in 2003 to announce that he was abandoning the Republican Party.

But while Mr. Garcia, 41, has severed ties with the Bush White House, Mr. Basulto, 64, has hope. His new goal is the indictment of Mr. Castro's brother and chosen successor, Raúl Castro, for drug trafficking or for the 1996 shooting down of two Brothers to the Rescue planes by Cuban fighters, in which four men were killed.

Mr. Basulto announced in May that he was offering $1 million for information that could lead to the indictment. So far, he said, he has received no word from Washington.

"The United States is duty bound, duty bound, to act in bringing justice for these guys," Mr. Basulto said, speaking of the downed pilots. Like other outspoken exiles, he questions the administration's ousting of Saddam Hussein in Iraq before Mr. Castro.

"We don't want to see a double standard," he said. "We don't want to see democracy in Iraq and not in Cuba. We are owed that much."

His frustration was echoed by Miguel Saavedra, the leader of Vigilia Mambisa, a hard-line exile group. Mr. Saavedra said some exiles had been discouraging protests for fear of antagonizing the White House - but not his faction.

"We're not calming down," he said. "We're not tired. We haven't surrendered."

But when Vigilia Mambisa tried to rally support for Mr. Posada in May at the revered Cuban restaurant Versailles in Little Havana, and at the Torch of Friendship, a downtown monument, only a few dozen people showed up. Their shouts could not pierce the buzz of traffic.

The eclipse of the old exile passions is looming in a more literal way down the street from the Torch of Friendship, at the Freedom Tower, an elegant yellow beacon where more than half a million Cuban refugees were processed in the early years of the Castro government.

The family of Jorge Mas Canosa, the founder of the Cuban American National Foundation, once had plans to spend $40 million restoring the building as a museum of the exile experience. The tower's new owner is Pedro Martin, a Cuban-American who remembers going there in the 1960's to pick up food for his family.

The museum is still in the works, but Mr. Martin's larger plan is to erect a 62-story condominium building around it, all but making the Freedom Tower vanish from the Miami skyline.

Terry Aguayo contributed reporting from Miami for this article.

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