

Change in Cuba?

by The San Diego Union-Tribune

After nearly 50 years and the unsuccessful efforts of 10 American presidents to loosen his iron grip on Cuba, Fidel Castro is voluntarily giving up supreme power over the small island nation that has been so much a part of the U.S. foreign policy focus in recent decades.

In a letter appearing in Cuban newspapers Tuesday, Castro, 81, announced that his health will not allow him to accept another five-year term as president of the ruling Council of State. Weekend elections by the National Assembly of People's Power had been scheduled before Castro announced his decision to resign. About 19 months ago, Castro provisionally surrendered leadership of the country to his 76-year-old brother, Raul.

Were it not for the long and intense history of antagonism that grew out of the Cold War and the Cuban Missile Crisis, Castro's announcement would mean little to the United States. Cuba had a thriving but corrupt economy before a guerrilla war led by the Castro brothers toppled Fulgencio Batista in 1959. As the middle-and upper-middle classes fled mostly to the United States, Fidel Castro, a lawyer by training, assumed power and nationalized just about everything. Castro embraced the Soviet Union as his nation's economy collapsed. It never began to recover, even with \$4 billion to \$6 billion in annual subsidies from the Soviets. Today, Cuba depends heavily on \$2 billion in annual subsidies from the oil-rich government of Venezuelan President Hugo Chavez.

In large part because of the economic plight of Cuba, the United States has used mostly economic pressure in an attempt to isolate, if not topple, the only Communist dictatorship in the Western Hemisphere. In 1996, after Cuban fighter jets shot down two private planes owned by a Miami-based anti-Castro group, Congress passed the Helms-Burton Act, which gives the U.S. president no choice but to maintain an economic embargo against Cuba. That embargo remains the center of U.S. policy, and it is a mark of faith for politicians to periodically express support for it. At its heart, the aim of Helms-Burton, named after former North Carolina Sen. Jesse Helms and Indiana Rep. Dan Burton, was to force political change in Cuba. The United States rightly demanded political freedoms for the Cuban people. It called for a halt to political suppression, including the jailing of dissidents. None of this moved Fidel Castro. In fact, he likely drew power from the U.S. actions.

With Castro's passing, and with Raul Castro's seeming willingness to loosen some political control, is it time for the United States to act? Tuesday, President Bush announced there would be no change in U.S. policy, a message pretty much echoed by the three major contenders to replace him.

There are many potential hazards for the Cuban people and for America as Cuba begins its transition from Fidel Castro's rule. For Cubans, the primary hazards are political and economic turmoil. For the United States, that turmoil could produce a regime 90 miles off our coast supported by drugs and other crime. It also could produce boatloads of refugees.

There are many questions to be asked during this transition. It will be important, mostly for the sake of the Cuban people, that there be a thorough debate in this country over whether to maintain current policy or change as Cuba does.

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