

Fidel fades

by The St. Louis Post-Dispatch

Cuba's Fidel Castro continued his slow fade into history Tuesday, giving up the nation's presidency because of failing health. That opens the door for diplomatic overtures that could pay big dividends for the United States.

Castro's brother, Raul, essentially has been running the country for almost two years with Fidel's blessing as the old dictator's health declined. However, Fidel may remain the power behind the curtain until he dies or loses his intellect. "This is not my farewell to you," he noted in his retirement letter.

The next few weeks will provide hints of what plans Cuban leaders have made for the post-Castro era and whether reform is possible. Washington could help that process along. It's time to loosen our sanctions on Cuba in order to begin pulling the country toward democracy and out of poverty. In that effort, carrots will work better than sticks.

Fidel Castro is 81 and very ill. Raul is 76 and controls the police and military. The two soon may name a younger protege who would try to continue the Castro regime. One oft-mentioned possibility is Vice President Carlos Lage, a 56-year-old physician who has pressed for modest reforms allowing Cubans to open their own businesses.

The passing of the Castros could open the gates for serious change. By loosening sanctions on Cuba and holding out the promise of help, America would be in a better position to influence the result.

Fidel Castro took power in 1959 as a revolutionary. He will end his reign as a last-ditch defender of the anachronism that is communism. He maintained power through a cult of personality and the exercise of unchecked power, jailing all who opposed him, even as the rest of Latin America turned almost entirely democratic. He is a man stuck in the past.

Sadly, so is Cuba. Castro saw himself as a benevolent dictator, providing health care for all and free higher education, goals we haven't achieved in America. But in sticking with Soviet-style communism, he doomed Cuba to Soviet-style economic failure and earned the enmity of the United States during the Cold War. The enmity lingers, nurtured by older anti-Castro Cuban-Americans, who have become a powerful force in Republican politics in Florida.

Meanwhile, the Cuban economy is a wreck, and its people are disastrously poor. Cuba's per capita gross domestic product is a mere \$4,500, about a third that of Mexico and a tenth that of the United States.

Such poverty represents the failure of socialism. But the U.S. embargo plays a role, too, and it has provided Castro with a useful excuse, blaming it for Cuba's poverty and bandying about the specter of a U.S. invasion.

America now has a chance to plant the seeds of change. The first steps should be removing the prohibition on Americans visiting Cuba and loosening limits on trade and remittances. As younger Cuban leaders emerge, the United States should open a dialogue with them.

Let Cubans see well-dressed Americans strolling through Havana, spending money freely and offering business deals. Let Cubans see how well their countrymen have done in America. Let them spread more of that wealth among their poorer relatives. Let Cubans see the jobs produced by American trade. Promise more of the same if Cuba holds free elections.

Cubans will see that capitalism works and socialism doesn't. Word will spread and, with it, a popular demand for reform. The goal should be to generate the same sort of peaceful change that brought democracy to Eastern Europe in the early 1990s.

None of this will happen this year, of course. President Bush isn't about to ease the embargo, and the realities of Florida electoral politics require candidates to take a firm anti-Castro line. But the next U.S. president will have the chance to reform Cuba by embracing it.

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