

On eve of Carter's trip to Cuba

Bush administration split over anti-Castro blockade

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Jimmy Carter's six-day trip to Cuba—the first by any US president, past or present, since the 1959 revolution toppled the Washington-backed dictatorship of Fulgencio Batista—has cast a spotlight on a bitter internecine dispute within the Bush administration over the four-decades-old economic blockade against the island nation.

Carter's visit, which begins May 12, is to include meetings with President Fidel Castro and political dissidents as well as a live television broadcast over Cuban state television. It has the backing of powerful corporate interests as well as politicians in both the Democratic and Republican parties.

These layers see the ex-president's trip as a step toward lifting an embargo that has shut US corporations out of Cuba, even as their European, Japanese and Canadian rivals are reaping substantial profits off both trade and direct investment in the Caribbean country.

The virulently anticommunist Cuban exile lobby, however, has denounced the trip as virtual treason. The *Miami Herald* recently released the text of a furious letter to President Bush sent by two Cuban-American House members from Miami—Reps. Lincoln Diaz-Balart and Ileana Ros Lehtinen—urging the White House to block the visit.

"We write to request that you deny permission for Mr. Carter to visit the Cuban dictator," the letter declared. "While US law authorizes the granting of licenses by the Treasury Department to US officials and members of Congress to visit Cuba on official business for the US government, it does not do so for former presidents seeking to appease anti-American dictators."

Going on to describe Carter as "directly responsible for having brought to power the terrorist regime of the Ayatollah Khomeini in Iran," the two congressmen pointedly informed Bush that they had not sent the letter to Treasury Secretary Paul O'Neill, whose department is in charge of enforcing the embargo, "because of Mr. O'Neill's publicly professed opposition to your policy in Cuba."

O'Neill recently provoked the ire of the Miami-based anti-Castro lobby by telling a congressional committee that he would rather use Treasury Department resources to pursue terrorists than to ferret out US citizens who have violated the embargo.

A Congressional coalition is preparing to pass legislation that would knock a significant hole in the blockade, amending a Treasury Department appropriations bill to prevent the department

from spending any money on prosecuting US citizens who violate a ban on travel to Cuba. The anti-Castro exile groups are pressuring for Bush to veto the entire appropriations bill until the amendment is rescinded.

In an apparent bid to derail any move to ease the embargo policy, John Bolton, the State Department's undersecretary for arms control and international security affairs and one of the most right-wing figures in the administration, earlier this week made unsubstantiated accusations that the Castro government was using Cuba's advanced biotechnology industry to promote "at least a limited" research and development program on biological weapons. He declared Cuba part of the "axis of evil," and warned that it could become a "target" of the US war on terrorism.

The *Wall Street Journal* called attention to this bitter debate over the blockade in an editorial this week entitled "Bush's Cuban Pickle."

"Now, back in the days when a younger Fidel was rapidly turning his island into a Soviet client state, an embargo had a certain logic," said the *Journal*, which generally reflects the views of those sections of big business that brought the Bush administration to power. "But with the collapse of the USSR ... it's time to acknowledge that the primary victim of our embargo is not Fidel but the Cuban people." Had the *Journal* chosen to be more forthright, it would have added, "and US profits."

The editorial noted, however: "When the Bush administration looks at the embargo ... it sees a President whose bacon was saved in Florida in 2000 by the Cuban-American vote. Not to mention the ghost of Elian Gonzalez now hovering over Janet Reno's gubernatorial bid to unseat Mr. Bush's brother Jeb. Which means that if you're White House politico Karl Rove, you'd rather see your boss declare war on Canada than risk upsetting a key constituency in a key state by lifting the embargo with Cuba."

The struggle over Cuba reflects an underlying contradiction in the administration between the essential big business interests it promotes and the policies demanded by the rabidly right-wing, middle-class elements—from Cuban exiles and the gun lobby to Christian fundamentalists—which constitute the Republican Party's active "base." These conflicting social and political agendas lend an air of crisis and instability to its pursuit of both domestic and foreign policy.

Claims that the embargo is necessary to counter a security threat

from Cuba become ever more preposterous. The Castro regime has long ago given up any pretense of backing social revolution abroad. In recent months, it has not only accepted the use of Guantanamo Bay Naval Base as a US detention camp for prisoners of war captured in Afghanistan, but has guaranteed Washington that should any of these POWs escape, the Cuban authorities will hand them back.

Those defending the embargo, however, have substantial bases of support within the administration. A significant number of right-wing Cuban-Americans with intimate ties to the anti-Castro groups operating out of Miami have gained key positions within the Bush administration. Most prominent among them is Otto Reich, the assistant secretary of state for the Western Hemisphere, a former CIA operative who under the Reagan administration directed an illegal propaganda campaign in support of the contra mercenary war on Nicaragua.

In a speech before a meeting of the Council of the Americas held at the State Department May 6, Reich insisted that the administration was not about to budge from a hard-line defense of the economic blockade.

“We’re not going to launch a lifeboat to rescue a regime that is sinking under the weight of its historical failures,” he declared, asserting that Washington would maintain and strengthen the economic embargo against Cuba. Many of those in the audience represented US corporations that are chaffing at the restrictions, anxious that the potential profits from Cuban markets are falling to Canadian and Western European firms.

“With so many opportunities for investment and business in Latin America, why would anyone want to associate themselves with a bankrupt, totalitarian regime, when you have to be partners with the owner of all the country’s wealth, who decides laws and judicial rulings on his own, who jails or expels those business partners he doesn’t agree with?” he asked.

The warning that businessmen could be jailed must have sounded somewhat ironic to the assembled corporate executives, given that the Bush administration has attempted to do just that to enforce its blockade against Cuba.

A federal jury in Philadelphia last month found a Canadian businessman living in the US, James Sabzali, guilty of violating the US embargo by selling water purification materials to Cuba through a middleman. The Canadian government denounced as “objectionable and unacceptable” the conviction of Sabzali for sales he made in Canada that are entirely legal there.

Sabzali is the first foreign national indicted for “trading with the enemy.” He and two American partners are appealing the verdict. If the verdict is upheld, they will face prison terms of four years or more.

Any Canadian or European businessmen who had previous dealings in Cuba could be similarly prosecuted if they established residence in the US. The prosecution was carried out under the terms of the “Cuban Democracy Act,” a 1992 law signed by the elder George Bush that prohibits overseas subsidiaries of US corporations from trading with Cuba.

Four years later, the Helms-Burton act was signed into law by Clinton, allowing American companies or citizens to sue foreign corporations “trafficking” in property that they had owned before

the nationalizations carried out by the Castro government beginning in 1960. The act was known on Capitol Hill as the “Bacardi law” for the rum manufacturer who was one of its key backers. When this bill was moving through Congress, Reich was serving as the company’s leading lobbyist.

The Helms-Burton act, with its threat of extra-territorial enforcement of US laws against foreign business interests, provoked bitter protests from European and Canadian business circles, as well as fears within the US corporate elite that it could engender retaliatory trade war measures.

Differences within Republican circles over the embargo issue are also expressed in opposed views on a post-Castro “transition” in Cuba. Those backing an easing of the economic sanctions argue that Cuba can follow the path taken by the former USSR and Eastern Europe, where triumph of the “free market” was embraced by decisive layers of the old ruling bureaucracies, who turned themselves into businessmen. The result has been a historically unprecedented growth of poverty and social polarization.

Cuba has already seen fundamental changes in social relations since Castro’s nationalist regime opened up the island to widespread foreign investment in the mid-1990s. There is an ever-widening gulf between those with access to the tourist industry, foreign business and dollars, and the vast majority of workers who depend upon diminishing real wages. Trade and investment, corporate opponents of the embargo argue, will accelerate the emergence of a privileged, propertied elite, while placing the levers of Cuba’s economy in US hands.

The Cuban-American lobby, on the other hand, which counts among its allies those now directing US Latin American policy, rules out any rapprochement between Washington and the Castro regime, no matter how sweeping the latter’s concessions. They are determined to see a counterrevolution in Cuba that will erase, root and branch, every trace of social progress brought about since the fall of the Batista dictatorship in 1959, and place in power the extreme right leaders of the Miami-based exile groups.



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