

Bush vows tighter blockade, Castro pushes for rapprochement with US

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Just three days after former president Jimmy Carter ended his trip to Cuba by urging an end to Washington's 40-year-old embargo and closer economic ties with the island nation, President Bush vowed to tighten the blockade.

"Without major steps by Cuba to open up its political system and its economic system, trade with Cuba will not help the Cuban people; it will merely enrich Castro and his cronies and prop up their dictatorship," Bush declared in a May 20 speech at the White House. He traveled to Miami later in the day to deliver the same hard-line message to anti-Castro Cuban exile organizations.

Bush's speech and Carter's visit express the deep divisions within the US ruling elite over what policy should be pursued toward Cuba. The right-wing Cuban-American organizations have long wielded disproportionate clout within both the Republican and Democratic parties, effectively dictating Washington's Cuba policy.

This has never been more true than under the Bush administration, which leaned heavily on the Cuban American National Foundation and other anti-Castro outfits, many of them tied to CIA-backed terrorism against the island, in pulling off the Republican Party's electoral coup in the 2000 election. The president's brother, Florida Governor Jeb Bush, is counting on these groups to get him reelected later this year.

The administration has reciprocated this support by naming a large number of Cuban-Americans tied to the anti-Castro groups to top positions in the State Department and other US agencies.

While Carter was in Cuba, on the other hand, a group of 40 members of Congress, evenly divided between Democrats and Republicans, called for easing the embargo. House and Senate leaders have said that there are sufficient votes to pass measures that would effectively lift the sanctions presently in effect against US citizens who travel to the island as tourists.

Agri-business, the tourist industry, US-based pharmaceutical giants and other sections of corporate America are lobbying heavily against the continuation of the embargo, which they see as an impediment to reaping large profits in a market that is currently restricted to their European, Canadian and Japanese competitors.

Fidel Castro is now banking on this drive by sections of US

capital to return to Cuba to salvage the island's economy and his own regime. The Carter visit, in which the former president was allowed to lecture the Cuban president and the Cuban people on the need for "democracy" and "free enterprise" in a nationally televised speech, is only the latest in a series of extraordinary measures by the Cuban regime aimed at working its way back into Washington's good graces.

More than 43 years after coming to power in a nationalist revolution that vowed to liberate Cuba from decades of US semi-colonial domination, Castro has embarked on a concerted policy of rapprochement with Washington and the reopening of the island to US trade and investment.

This turn took a particularly grotesque form earlier this year, with the Castro regime's endorsement of the use of the US naval base at Guantanamo Bay as a prison camp for alleged supporters of the Taliban and Al Qaeda captured during the invasion of Afghanistan.

While human rights groups internationally were denouncing Washington's refusal to observe the terms of the Geneva Conventions and the appalling conditions in which hundreds of prisoners were being held, the Castro regime gave its blessing to the US actions.

Raul Castro, the Cuban president's brother, chief of the armed forces and widely considered Fidel's likely successor, told reporters that he was confident the US would treat the prisoners "humanely," and assured Washington that if any of them were to escape from the base and reach Cuban soil, they would be apprehended and handed back to US authorities.

Fidel himself described the Cuban regime's acceptance of its soil being used as a concentration camp as a "goodwill gesture," adding that if the military personnel of the two countries could collaborate in this fashion, then the door was open to the closer political and economic relations.

The position put forward by the Castro brothers represented a deliberate shift in Cuban policy. Initially, other top government officials denounced the sending of the prisoners to Guantanamo.

"I think it would be yet another mistake by the Americans to use that usurped territory," declared Higher Education Minister Fernando Veciono Alegret. "I think there will be repudiation of that around the world."

General Ramon Espinosa, commander of the Cuban Revolutionary Armed Forces' eastern section, which includes Guantanamo, said, "Of course we don't agree with this, since even though it's occupied by the Americans, this is Cuban territory."

Once the Castros had spoken, however, the criticism ceased.

That this issue was the one chosen by the Cuban regime to curry favor in Washington was doubly significant. The very existence of the 45-square-mile Guantanamo Bay base is bound up with the historic domination of the island's affairs by US imperialism. It was ceded to the US under the terms of the Platt Amendment, a constitutional provision forced upon Cuba, which allowed Washington to intervene militarily as it saw fit and to establish military bases as needed. The base remains the most concrete vestige of the unrestricted manipulation of Cuba's economic and political life that prevailed from the Spanish-American War in 1898 to the Cuban revolution of 1959.

Ironically, the use of Guantanamo as a prison camp was also hailed by the anti-Castro groups in Miami, seeing it as a means of strengthening the US military presence in Cuba and a revival of interest in a base that has increasingly been seen as strategically irrelevant.

Having for decades proclaimed his regime's "internationalism" and dedication to "Third World" revolution, Castro's endorsement of the illegal transfer of hundreds of Afghans, Arabs, Pakistanis and other nationals captured by the US military to be held in animal cages and subjected to interrogation by CIA agents on Cuban soil could not send a clearer signal. In return for economic concessions, the Cuban regime is prepared to acquiesce to US militarism abroad.

The clear aim of the Castro regime is the scuttling of the US blockade. For nearly 30 years, Cuba overcame the impact of the embargo—imposed by Washington in retaliation for the expropriation of US-owned companies that were sabotaging social reform efforts—by tying its economy to that of the Soviet Union and the Comecon bloc.

Soviet subsidies, which amounted to as much as \$5 billion annually, kept the island's economy afloat. In return for exceedingly favorable terms of trade with the Soviet bloc, Castro subordinated Cuba's policies to the Moscow bureaucracy's diplomatic maneuverings with Washington. The end result was that Cuba's reliance on the export of sugar to pay for imported manufactured goods—the historical foundation of the country's semi-colonial backwardness and dependence—was kept intact.

Throughout this period, the US embargo provided Castro with a useful foil, allowing him to pose as the defender of Cuban sovereignty and the principal opponent of Yankee imperialism.

With the dissolution of the USSR more than a decade ago, Cuba faced catastrophe. The economy shrunk by 35 percent, while the country lost 75 percent of its imports. The Castro

government responded by opening up the island to foreign capitalist investment, together with reductions in the living standards of the average Cuban worker.

By the end of last year, the Cuban government had approved 405 joint ventures, mainly with Western European and Canadian corporations, with a combined total proposed investment of \$5 billion.

By the mid-1990s, tourism surpassed sugar as Cuba's main source of foreign exchange. Plagued by falling world prices, the country's two chief exports, sugar and nickel, have played a declining role in the country's economy. After tourism, the main motor of the economy is provided by remittances from Cuban exiles to family members still living on the island, which has reached an amount estimated at over \$800 million annually.

The result has been growing social polarization between those with access to dollars—either from working in the tourist sector or wired from relatives in the US—and those without. Those dependent on government salaries and declining subsidies find it increasingly hard to make ends meet and are, in many instances, attracted to the tourist sector. As a result, skilled engineers and doctors work as taxi drivers, street vendors and guides, not to mention the well-publicized resurgence of prostitution, a characteristic scourge of pre-revolutionary Cuba.

While the US blockade has unquestionably deepened Cuba's economic problems, the lifting of the embargo can only result in a return of US economic domination over the island.

In a document recently submitted to the United Nations denouncing the effects of the embargo, the Castro government estimated that without the blockade, 1.45 million US tourists would be visiting the island annually. It likewise makes clear that the country's sugar exports would flow to the US, while US-based corporations would dominate the island's imports.

Thus, the Castro regime's strategy appears increasingly one of attempting to manage Cuba's transition back to a dependency of US capitalism, while holding on to its own power and the last vestiges of social reforms won through the 1959 revolution.

The Bush administration and its rabidly anti-Castro Cuban exile supporters in Florida oppose any attempt at such a transition, pushing instead for the overthrow of the regime and a return of the reactionary political elements who formed the social base of the Batista dictatorship overthrown more than four decades ago.



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