

US steps up provocations against Cuba amid speculation on Castro's health

Bill Van Auken
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In the wake of President's Fidel Castro's announcement that he is temporarily turning over the principal reins of power to his brother, Raul, before undergoing emergency surgery for intestinal bleeding, the Bush administration has escalated its provocations against Cuba, posing the threat of a direct US intervention against the island nation.

It was the first time in the 47 years since coming to power as a result of a guerrilla uprising against the US-backed dictatorship of Fulgencio Batista that Castro has relinquished his position as head of all the principal organs of the Cuban state.

The announcement touched off noisy demonstrations by right-wing Cuban émigré elements in Miami and elsewhere in the US, while official Washington stressed that the incapacitation or death of the long-time Cuban leader would not signal any relaxing of the US policy of aggression against the country.

White House press spokesman Tony Snow stressed, "There are no plans to reach out," and described Raul Castro as a "prison keeper."

Right-wing Republican Cuban-American Congressman Lincoln Diaz-Balart demanded at a Miami press conference that the Cuban security forces refuse orders to suppress any unrest, threatening that otherwise "their names will be on a list of infamy." He waved his own alleged list of 56 pro-Castro individuals he said had been identified as participating in protests outside the homes of US-backed "dissidents" in Cuba.

While anti-Castro Cuban exile groups in Florida issued calls for mass civil disobedience and military mutiny, reports from Cuba indicated no signs of unrest.

The Cuban media read out a statement from Castro, describing himself as in "stable condition," adding, "as for my spirits, I feel perfectly fine." In the initial announcement of the "provisional" transfer of power to

his brother, Fidel had described the surgery he was undergoing as "complicated" and said that afterwards he would be "resting for several weeks."

Alongside with the ritualistic calls for "democracy" in Cuba, US government officials announced plans for a major deployment of the Navy and US Coast Guard to effectively blockade the island and prevent refugees from fleeing to the US in the event Washington intervenes militarily or succeeds in precipitating a major crisis on the island.

The attempt to whip up a crisis over Castro's health comes just weeks after the administration in Washington unveiled an \$80 million Cuban "democracy" program to finance internal opposition to the Castro regime and prepare for a "transition" to the installation of a pro-US regime. This comes on top of the \$35 million the US spends annually to finance Radio and TV Marti propaganda broadcasts beamed into Cuba, as well as the secret CIA budget for destabilization efforts on the island.

The public report issued by the Commission for Assistance to a Free Cuba set up by the Bush administration three years ago in collaboration with right-wing exile groups was accompanied by a series of classified recommendations, which apparently involve plans for covert CIA and Pentagon operations if not outright US military intervention aimed at bringing about "regime change" in Cuba.

The bankruptcy of Washington's Cuba policy—maintained over the course of 10 US administrations—is summed up in the fact that the principal US strategy has been reduced to waiting for the 79-year-old Castro to die. A 45-year economic embargo, along with the failed Bay of Pigs invasion of 1961 and countless CIA-backed terrorist attacks on the Cuban people, as well as hundreds of attempted

assassinations of Castro himself have failed to dislodge the regime.

The plans of the commission, which was co-chaired by US Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice and Secretary of Commerce Carlos Gutiérrez, a Cuban-American, consist largely of exploiting the death or incapacitation of Castro and disrupting attempts of the Cuban state to organize an orderly transition to his political successors.

While proclaiming that the US intervention is aimed at aiding the Cuban people to “reclaim their sovereignty,” the plan essentially dictates the form of government and the economic policies—“free market”—that a future US-backed Cuban regime must implement. Washington’s attempt to set the terms for a “democratic transition” in Cuba represents a naked attempt at reestablishing the semi-colonial domination that the US exercised over the country from the time of the Spanish American war until the 1959 revolution.

The US drive to reassert its domination over Cuba is motivated in no small degree by the growing realization that it is losing a potentially profitable market to its economic rivals in Europe, Asia and Canada, all of which have made substantial investments in the island’s tourist industry, as well as in its nickel mining industry and other sectors. Moreover, the recent discovery of off-shore oil reserves, which have attracted significant interest from both European and Chinese oil companies, has increased Washington’s desire to reclaim the long-missing piece of its “own backyard.”

The handover of power to Raul Castro is widely seen as an interim measure that could be followed by the emergence of a new leadership from within the top ranks of the Cuban Communist Party. Nonetheless, this quasi-dynastic form of succession from the elder Castro to his younger brother (Raul is 75) underscores the class character of the Cuban regime, which came to power not on the basis of a socialist revolution by the working class, but through the efforts of a petty-bourgeois nationalist guerrilla movement.

The longevity of the Castro regime—and its survival of the collapse of the Soviet bloc upon which it had depended for some 30 years to subsidize Cuba’s economy—is routinely attributed by Washington to political repression.

In reality, the popularity Castro continues to enjoy in

Cuba is rooted in the nationalist resentment of the Cuban people toward US attempts to starve the island into submission and dictate its future. It also is fed by the hostility and fear directed at the Miami-based exile groups, whose aim is to return to the country and assume political power.

It is widely believed that this semi-fascistic layer, which enjoys vastly disproportionate influence in the setting of US foreign policy, would seek to reclaim the properties of the native oligarchy that were expropriated in the wake of the 1959 revolution, suppress the Cuban working class, and wipe out the limited but significant gains achieved through the revolution of 1959—among them free and universal health care and education.



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