

US baseball manager suspended for comment on Castro

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The American media has been engaged for the last several days in witch-hunting baseball manager Ozzie Guillén of the Miami Marlins for comments he made regarding Fidel Castro, leader of Cuba's 1959 nationalist revolution and longtime ruler of the Caribbean nation.

Guillén's remarks, given in an interview with *Time* magazine, were brief. "I love Fidel Castro... I respect Fidel Castro," he said. "You know why? A lot of people have wanted to kill Fidel Castro for the last 60 years, but that [expletive] is still there."

These words resulted in a firestorm of condemnation led by America's corps of sports "journalists." The affair had particular resonance because Guillén manages the baseball team in Miami, and any positive reference to Castro and the Cuban regime is anathema to the right-wing Cuban émigrés who exercise enormous political influence in that city, in both the Democratic and Republican parties.

Guillén issued repeated apologies beginning over the weekend. This culminated in a Tuesday press conference held in Miami where the Venezuelan native and World Series-winning manager issued a groveling apology that lasted for over one hour. In a spectacle with overtones of a Stalinist show trial, Guillén subjected himself to sharp criticism, at one point calling the comment the "greatest mistake of my life." While he spoke, a small crowd of well-heeled Cuban Americans protested outside, demanding he be fired.

The affair reveals the contempt with which the American ruling class and its media hold the core democratic principle of freedom of speech.

Ken Rosenthal, a baseball writer for Fox News, said a one-month suspension was in order to demonstrate that employees have no free speech rights. A long suspension would "send a powerful message that Guillén's thoughtless remarks on Cuban dictator Fidel Castro will not be tolerated," he said. "[T]he Constitution protects

free speech only from restriction by the state and federal governments. The Marlins, a private entity, presumably can impose the penalty of their choice on Guillén. ... Guillén is an employee, not an owner."

In an open letter written on behalf of Florida's Hispanic Legislative Caucus, State Senator René García demanded the Miami Marlins "execute expedient punitive measures against Mr. Guillén which will rectify the situation."

"Guillén should suffer for this in some way—more than just the sleepless nights he claims to have experienced and the inconvenience of publicly addressing his mistake," intoned Israel Guittierez of ESPN, the major US sports network.

"[F]ree speech can have consequences, as Guillén is learning," warned Mariano Castillo of CNN.

The hypocrisy of silencing an individual for comments "offending" democracy by allegedly praising a dictator apparently did not dawn on these and the countless other commentators braying for Guillén's firing.

The hypocrisy was not lost on Cuban media. "It was pathetic this morning to see this sportsman humiliate himself, humiliate himself to the core to try to keep his job," said Cuban media Miami correspondent, Emilio Garcia.

"How does the much-ballyhooed 'yankee' freedom of expression look now?" remarked Cuban TV anchor Julita Osendi.

Nor have the bright lights of the US media taken the time to subject Guillén's remarks to actual analysis.

His main point, that Castro demonstrated remarkable resilience in surviving numerous US plots on his life, is a statement of fact. These began in the early 1960s under the Kennedy administration, including a scheme to supply Castro with an exploding cigar. In 1975, the US Congress's Church Committee identified eight separate CIA schemes to kill Castro—the real number is almost certainly far greater—revelations that led in part to

President Gerald Ford's executive order of 1976 banning intelligence agents from carrying out political assassinations.

President Obama and his attorney general, Eric Holder, have effectively repealed this ban, declaring the right of the president to assassinate anyone, including US citizens on American soil, whom he declares to be a terrorist. It is telling that the American media has given far more coverage to Guillén's comments than it did to Holder's March speech at Northwestern Law School defending this claim of dictatorial power for the White House.

It would be tempting to call the Guillén affair a diversion. With the world economic crisis mounting, with mass unemployment spreading, with politicians everywhere slashing social spending, and with the US engaged in several imperialist wars while gutting democratic rights at home, the media has found its latest unsuspecting celebrity target in order to stupefy the population and debase the cultural and intellectual level.

But the episode has its own significance. It follows last year's public denunciation of Rashard Mendenhall, the 23-year-old star running back for the Pittsburgh Steelers football team, who tweeted his objections to the official jubilation after the assassination of Osama bin Laden, asking, "What kind of man celebrates death?"

Particularly in the world of professional sports, where athletes are held up as objects of popular adulation and emulation, there is vicious retaliation against any sign of dissent or political consciousness. Even the slightest straying from the narrow spectrum of official politics is considered impermissible.

The author also recommends:

US football player targeted for criticizing celebration of Bin Laden killing

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