



## Let Cuba Be Cuban Again

By Roger F. Noriega

*As Fidel Castro shuffles off the world stage, many non-Cubans are pondering the future of a nation that has spent nearly fifty years trapped under the rubble of the dictator's demented experiment. Too many outsiders, however, are disoriented by the myths that the regime has spun over the past five decades to make the island seem complicated, bedeviled, dangerous, and unapproachable. Castro realized that if the world came to comprehend Cuban reality, then even the intelligentsia might notice something wrong with the way he ran the place.*

After five decades of Castro's embargo on reality, Cuba's transition will be challenging. But several simple facts inspire optimism for the future. First, there is nothing like shedding a worn-out dictatorship to generate a burst of hope and energy. Second, Cuba is packed with Cubans—people who built a successful country before Castro tore it down. Third, the whole world wishes Cuba well, and its historic friend—the United States—is poised and eager to help 11 million people rebuild Cuba in their own image. But reaching the future requires that we shatter the grotesque myths about Castroism and the manufactured misconceptions about Cuba itself.

### Myth: “Castro Has Done Some Good Things for His People”

When Castro dies, more than a handful of commentators will try to market the myth that, despite his mistakes, his revolution was driven by a desire to extend social justice, health care, and education to the poor majority of Cubans. But Castro is drawing his last breaths in a hospital bed as a poster child of Cuba's vaunted health-care system. The fact that the dictator's demise may be hastened by a bungled routine surgical procedure shatters the

idea that the “first world” Cuban medical system is an achievement of the revolution. Castro's shocking deterioration is just a little less surprising to those who know the reality of a health-care system under which patients have to bring their own light bulbs, bedding, and sewing thread for sutures to a typical Cuban hospital.

So why are so many squinting to see a silver lining around Castro's dictatorship? Part of the reason is that most of the world's media have given the anti-American crusader rather generous reviews. In December 2006, the Gallup Organization released the results of a recent poll that found, unsurprisingly, that most Cubans craved more freedom. But editors at the Associated Press ran the story this way: “Poll: 1 in 4 Cubans OK with Freedoms.”<sup>1</sup> This tortured construction—tyranny ain't half bad—is a fresh example of the media and Cubanologists looking to excuse a dictator who, we are meant to believe, rescued Cuba from a wretched past. That depiction of the past is rubbish. One must at least acknowledge this before predicting where Cuba is headed without Castro.

Castro apologists have painted pre-revolutionary Cuba as a repressive backwater, a picture that is not supported by the evidence. In fact, the Cuba Castro took over in 1959 was one of the most prosperous and egalitarian societies of the Americas, near the top according to most sociodemographic indicators, behind only Argentina and Uruguay. The country's social and economic statistics also

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looked remarkably like lesser-developed European countries of the day, such as Spain and Portugal. While it is well-known that Cuba's infant mortality rate is the second lowest in Latin America today, many historians fail to mention that pre-Castro Cuba ranked thirteenth in the world, with the best rate in Latin America. It also had the third highest daily caloric intake, the fourth highest literacy rate, the second highest number of passenger cars per capita, and ranked fourth in the production of rice.<sup>2</sup>

The country was also culturally advanced before Castro seized power, with the third highest newspaper circulation per capita and second highest cinema attendance per capita in Latin America.<sup>3</sup> Although, to be sure, the country suffered from the inequalities of wealth that plagued all countries in Latin America at that time (and still do), Cuba had the largest middle class of its peers in the Western Hemisphere.

Rarely mentioned is the fact that in the 1940s and 1950s the island had progressive labor, land tenure, education, and health laws that rivaled those of many of its neighbors in the region. For example, the 1940 Cuban constitution established such labor laws as the right to work, a maximum forty-hour work week, one month of annual vacation, social security, and the rights to form and join unions. Indeed, by 1958, almost half of the Cuban labor force was unionized. A 1951 World Bank report actually criticized laws protecting Cuban workers because they were considered so generous that they discouraged foreign investment.<sup>4</sup> That fact hardly supports the popular image of a nation plundered by foreign exploitation until Castro rescued her dignity.

The sad fact is that Castro transformed a country that was among the most successful and progressive in Latin America into a nation in which "greater equality" means that almost everyone is destitute. Castro's development strategy was based on an asymmetrical relationship with the former USSR: bartering Cuban agricultural products for Soviet financial and technical aid and military hardware. When the Soviet Union fell, the Cuban economy imploded. According to national statistics, only in 2005 did Cuba return to pre-1990 gross domestic product levels.<sup>5</sup>

With no one left to purchase its goods, Cuba cannot generate enough income to meet domestic demand for the most basic consumer goods. As a result, a country that once set the pace for the region has come to rely upon

foreign largesse (with over \$12 billion in foreign debt in 2002), must depend on over \$1 billion in remittances from the United States (equal to 84 percent of its exports<sup>6</sup>), and—most tragically—has resigned itself to deteriorating living standards in order to *resolver*, or "make ends meet."

While Castro boasts of certain health and education indicators that are actually rather modest, Cubans have paid a dramatic cost for his "achievements." According to the United Nations *Statistical Yearbook*, pre-Castro Cuba ranked third out of eleven countries in per-capita daily caloric consumption. Today, Cuba takes last place for consumption, and in fact suffered a decrease in calorie intake during a period in which most countries improved. Furthermore, the vast strides made by other Latin American countries—including those that are demographically and economically similar but behind Cuba in pre-1959 data—temper any claims of notable progress during Castro's rule.<sup>7</sup>

Anyone who really wants to understand Cuban reality should start by understanding that Cubans managed to build a relatively successful nation before Castro wrecked the place. The sooner the world recognizes the terrible cost of Castro's revolution, the greater the resolve will be to help Cubans recover from the nightmare of dictatorship by casting aside every vestige of a regime that distinguished itself only by its cruelty. Moreover, a fair assessment of pre-Castro Cuba gives plenty of reason to be optimistic about her future once the dictatorship is cast aside. Making that assessment requires debunking the myths about how post-Castro Cuba is likely to evolve.

### **Myth: Only Castro's Cronies Can Manage a Stable Transition**

This is the most dangerous misunderstanding of all. To begin with, after fifty years of totalitarianism, stability might not be the highest priority for 11 million Cubans. In addition, the minute Fidel acknowledged his own mortality by surrendering power "temporarily," every toady of the regime began to ponder his own future. The image of the desiccated, charm-deprived, seventy-five-year-old Raúl Castro as the bridge to the future is one of the last bad jokes of the Castro era.<sup>8</sup> More important, Raúl has no more right to make decisions about Cuba's future than his dying older brother.

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It is clear that Fidel handpicked ideological hard-liners like Raúl, National Assembly president Ricardo Alarcón, and Foreign Minister Felipe Pérez Roque to try to hold the police state together and preserve the economic holdings of regime cronies. However, these second-rate leaders should be the first to recognize that they are incapable of inspiring awe or fear—let alone respect—among Cubans. These insiders recognize that the regime is far more brittle than any observer can imagine. Corruption, inefficiency, exhaustion, and moral bankruptcy have taken their toll on a police state that has long since forgotten what it is fighting for. That is why their “transition” looks more like *Weekend at Bernie’s* than a serious transfer of power.

Some in U.S. intelligence are still peddling the notion that Raúl can hold things together in light of his command of the security forces.<sup>9</sup> Such conclusions may stem from the work of Ana Belén Montes, a former defense intelligence analyst who shaped U.S. intelligence assessments to portray Raúl as a possible liberalizing force in Cuba. Montes was convicted in 2002 for committing espionage for the Cuban government. The reality is that many in Cuba’s military still despise Raúl for orchestrating the 1989 show trial and execution of war hero General Arnaldo Ochoa Sánchez.<sup>10</sup> Any support Raúl enjoys among Cuban military leaders is based on a perception that he can save their skins by reaching a modus vivendi with the United States, but this would depend more on U.S. forbearance than on Raúl’s stature or talent.

Indeed, it would be a tragic irony if the United States were to move to accept Raúl’s offer of “dialogue.” If he wants to arrange a DC-10 to carry him and his “achievements of the revolution” into exile, that is a conversation he should have with his friends in Madrid. But pretending to discuss Cuba’s future with a thuggish junta would confer undeserved legitimacy on Castro’s political heirs and sully U.S. credibility with the very democrats on the island who should—and will—be running Cuba.

In these days of “re-Baathification,” the last thing we need is a U.S. policy taken with the idea that dealing with Raúl is necessary to avoid a blood bath or migration crisis that would impact U.S. shores. Let me be very clear: if there is widespread violence, the blood will be on the hands of the regime that holds all the guns. Such an eventuality—an illegitimate dictatorship using deadly force to keep its grip on power—should invite global recrimination and, if necessary, international intervention.

As for a migration crisis, for the first time Cubans do not have to flee their island to find a future. We should be communicating to the island that Cuba needs its best people now more than ever.

### **Myth: Raúl Castro May Be Willing and Able to Liberalize the Cuban Economy**

The image of Raúl as a “reformer” is a ruse of the Castro regime, and it is old news. For more than a decade a debate has been raging among Cuba-watchers over the notion that Raúl was sympathetic to the “China model,” under which a socialist dictatorship might tolerate an entrepreneurial opening. The regime’s apologists in Washington’s think-tank community have been peddling the line that once his older brother is gone, Raúl will be capable of managing a stable transition that will bring about gradual economic and, naturally, political change.

Sorry to say, Raúl is no repressed reformer. He has been an orthodox communist and Fidel’s ideological disciplinarian from the outset of the armed struggle over fifty years ago. Raúl engineered the infamous crack-down on state-sponsored “independent” economists in the late 1990s. And as for the hyped economic opening the regime indulged in after losing its \$5–7 billion annual Soviet subsidy, Raúl’s role was to restrict it, co-opt it, and, recently, reverse it.

First, nothing approaching the entrepreneurial experiment that Vietnam or the People’s Republic of China are enjoying has ever been tolerated in Cuba. Foreign investors doing business in Cuba today have accepted the Cuban state as their majority partner, which hires, fires, and even collects the meager salary of every Cuban worker.

Second, the Cuban military that Raúl leads has engaged in dozens of moneymaking joint ventures with foreign companies. Raúl’s task was to control the outsider’s influence and capture any of the profits to put them at the service of the police state which he directs. Today, the military manages most of Cuba’s tourist hotel rooms, and foreign investors have been rendered less important than ever as Venezuelan president Hugo Chávez provides \$2 billion annually to his Cuban partners in the form of oil subsidies—almost half of the \$4–6 billion that the USSR previously supplied.<sup>11</sup>

Third, Raúl has used these ventures to generate employment and economic security for his cronies and

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the rank-and-file military. It is naïve to expect him to ask these comrades to share their largesse by opening the economy in the midst of a precarious transition in which he is desperate to secure their loyalty.

Raúl has neither the heart nor the head to manage a transition to democracy or economic freedom. True friends of the Cuban people should reject the notion of incremental change managed by Castro's cronies.

### **Myth: U.S. Business Has Lost Out Because of Cuban Isolation**

In the 1990s, Fidel Castro enticed European, Canadian, and some Latin American investors to the island by reserving "sweetheart" deals for companies willing to partner with the regime, pay the government for Cuban labor, and not make too many value judgments about the Stalinist police state all around them. By now, many foreign investors have been swindled or disappointed, and Raúl's military has gone into the tourism business, scooping up many of the foreign-built and managed hotels and other enterprises. Still, there are some businesses that have a foothold on the island, and they expect to be the first to benefit from a resurgent Cuban economy.

But not so fast. Once Cubans reclaim their country, one might expect them to make some hard assessment of businesses that helped keep Castro's police state afloat. Will free Cubans be expected to honor the sanctity of contracts extended by a corrupt regime? One might just as well imagine such investors being pushed into the sea by Cubans angry about being exploited by unscrupulous capitalists walking arm-in-arm with ruthless communists.

Another finding of the December 2006 Gallup poll was that Cubans regard the United States as more of an "ideal" commercial partner than they do communist China and socialist Venezuela. Such positive attitudes toward the United States are remarkable considering the hail of anti-American propaganda under which Cubans have been living for nearly fifty years.

It is fair to predict that once Cubans are making decisions about their own economic future, they will look with special favor upon the one country that did not feast on the Cuban carcass. Just as Castroism is hemorrhaging power, U.S. business should make a conscious decision to condition engagement on respect for the rule of law, fair treatment of Cuban workers, and an even playing field

with other foreign investors. Any venture that helps resuscitate a dying regime is bad business and could wreck the reputation of U.S. businesses reentering the Cuban market. American business cannot go wrong by betting on the good will and enterprise of free Cubans.

### **Myth: The Passions of the Cuban Exile Community Are Going to Handcuff U.S. Policy during the Transition**

The Cuban exile community will play the decisive, constructive role in the democratic transition and economic reconstruction of Cuba. Today, the community is an important channel for communicating with the island and for understanding what is happening on every street corner. They understand better than most the reality of the island and the damage done by the Castro regime, which has systematically sown cynicism and self-loathing into the Cuban people as a means of stifling dissent or activism. It will take the faith and confidence of familial ties to leach out the toxins of repression and doubt and to change the hearts and minds of loved ones on the island.

The exile community also has the cultural affinity and capital that make it a natural reservoir of investment and entrepreneurial know-how. While the vast majority will choose to stay in the United States, some may become missionaries and travel to Cuba to help orient people on the opportunities and responsibilities in a free Cuba. That said, Cuban-Americans can be expected to respect the pride and nationalism of those who remain on the island.

### **What Can the United States Do to Help?**

The United States should expand its pro-democracy programs to reaffirm its abiding commitment to genuine change. President George W. Bush has been unwavering in his support for the cause of freedom in Cuba, and U.S. policy is being made by stalwarts.<sup>12</sup> They should be empowered to be creative and audacious at this critical stage. Any hint that the United States will accept a succession from one dictator to another would hobble the transition and demoralize courageous democrats on the island.

The U.S. government should also take steps to make Radio and Television Martí more effective in delivering messages to the island. For example, it is critical that

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airborne transmissions be sustained during the coming weeks and months. The Cuban exile community should be enlisted to channel messages to the island and to garner up-to-date information on attitudes and conditions in this delicate stage.

President Bush should make a specific pledge of robust aid to a transition. Although it is more important than ever to preserve the economic sanctions and use them as leverage to bring about broad, deep, and irreversible reforms, the United States should use the promise of aid, trade, and normal political relations as incentives to leverage change. The United States and other friendly nations should organize emergency feeding programs and high-impact social projects to take advantage of any opening in the days ahead. Programs should be put in place now to train new Cuban policy-makers in public administration, anticorruption, and pro-democracy programs.

In recent years, one of the most compelling arguments for maintaining U.S. sanctions on Cuba has been to preserve normal economic and political relations as a lever to use with a transition government. The forces of the status quo are strong, and it is essential to offer an incentive to the Cuban people to help ensure that reforms will be deep and broad enough to put Cuba on the irreversible course to genuine freedom. Making unilateral concessions to a moribund regime that has no legitimate claim to power would squander U.S. influence and credibility.

Instead, the U.S. government should offer the promise of normal economic relations as an incentive to those forces in Cuba committed to essential change. Contrary to some misconceptions, U.S. policy does not impose unreasonable demands; it simply asks the government to commit to democratic elections, release political prisoners, and dismantle the police-state apparatus. Indeed, U.S. law authorizes the president to provide economic assistance to Cuba if he believes it will advance a democratic transition.

While there will be some argument for allowing Cuban families to travel to the island once a genuine transition is under way, the windfall of tourism income should be reserved for a time when elections are scheduled and normal commerce will benefit a newly elected government. More normal contact can resume just as soon as there is a

transition team in place in Havana committed to realizing the legitimate aspirations of the Cuban people for political and economic freedoms. Full diplomatic relations should be restored only when a democratically elected leader is in power.

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### **Fact: Cuba Should Be Cuban**

The message to the Cuban people should be that their future is Cuba and that their future is now. They must hear a strong, clear message that they deserve better than a recycled dictatorship, and that they can start to reclaim their future by taking back their streets from the secret police and regime thugs. Cuba's security forces should be challenged to consider their responsibility to the Cuban nation rather than a dying regime, and they should be made to ponder their personal responsibility for any abuses they commit against their people. The United States and other nations should fund credible human rights organizations that can be ready to inspect Cuban prisons and to establish monitors on the island to detect and chronicle abuses.

U.S. diplomacy must be creative and active. Our message to the Americas—particularly at the Organization of American States—should be that we must stand together to promote a genuine democratic transition and to act against bloody repression by an illegitimate regime. Unfortunately, the vast majority of Latin leaders have been remarkably silent on this historic theme, but they may be called upon to play an indispensable role in facilitating the island's post-Castro development. For the time being, a consortium of Eastern European democratic groups and other credible international organizations may be more willing and able to prepare now to deploy a team that can help establish the conditions for free and fair elections.

Finally, we should ask Castro's friends in Madrid to offer his cronies asylum to prevent bloodshed. We should also advise those in Caracas not to interfere with the aspirations of the Cuban people.

Cuba should be run by Cubans, for the good of Cubans, under rules set by Cubans. Cubans should never have been forced to live under a communist constitution written to please Soviet masters, and they should not be

expected to “hold things together” for the convenience of even well-meaning foreigners.

History will judge harshly those who failed to seize this moment to bring genuine democracy to Cuba. The Cuban people must rise to the challenge by overcoming their fears and claiming their future. Before they can build that future they must bring down the vestiges of the decrepit Castro regime. The responsibility is theirs, but their friends can help with a series of bold and constructive measures.

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## Notes

1. Foster Klug, “Poll: 1 in 4 Cubans OK with Freedoms,” Associated Press, December 14, 2006. Gallup’s website headlined these findings on its own website, [www.gallup.com](http://www.gallup.com), under the headline “Just One in Four Urban Cubans Satisfied with Personal Freedoms.”

2. U.S. Department of State, Bureau of Inter-American Affairs, *Zenith and Eclipse: A Comparative Look at Socio-Economic Conditions in Pre-Castro and Present Day Cuba*, (Washington, DC: February 9, 1998, revised June 2002), available at [www.state.gov/p/wha/ci/14776.htm](http://www.state.gov/p/wha/ci/14776.htm).

3. United Nations Department of Economic and Social Affairs, *Statistical Yearbook* (New York: 1961).

4. Castro kept many of the socioeconomic rights of the 1940 constitution in his Fundamental Law of 1959 and even in the most recent Cuban constitution (1992), although his disregard for the rule of law has diluted the enforcement of these rights. See Aldo M. Leiva, “Cuban Labor Law: Issues and Challenges,” *Cuba in Transition: Volume 10* (papers and proceedings of the tenth annual meeting of the Association for the Study of the Cuban Economy [ASCE], Miami, Florida, August 3–5, 2000).

5. Ernesto Hernández-Catá, “Output and Productivity in Cuba: Collapse, Recovery, and Muddling through to the Crossroads,” *Cuba in Transition: Volume 13* (papers and proceedings of the thirteenth annual meeting of ASCE, Coral Gables, Florida, August 7–9, 2003); and Oficina Nacional de Estadísticas (Cuba), *Anuario Estadístico de Cuba 2005* (Havana: 2006).

6. Manuel Orozco, “Remittances to Latin America and the Caribbean: Issues and Perspectives on Development” (report commissioned by the Organization of American States, Washington, DC: September 2004).

7. When compared to Chile, Costa Rica, and Mexico (the three most appropriate “sister” countries in the region), pre-Castro

Cuba was on par with or superior to the other countries in terms of infant mortality, energy production, primary students per capita, and number of radio receivers—but the revolution stunted Cuba’s progress. Chile and Costa Rica made bigger improvements in infant mortality and were almost on par with Cuba in 1990. All three “sister” countries made greater strides in life expectancy than Cuba from 1960–90. The past four decades have been a period of development for all of Latin America, but Cuba has been running in place under Castro. For more information, see Jorge Luis Romeu, “More on the Statistical Comparison of Cuban Socioeconomic Development,” *Cuba in Transition: Volume 5* (papers and proceedings of the fifth annual meeting of ASCE, University of Miami, August 10–12, 1995).

8. Of Raúl Castro, Cuba analyst Brian Latell wrote last July, “Since the 1950s he has been feared and hated by many Cubans, and for good reason, because at different times he was the regime’s principal executioner, its foremost Stalinist, a merciless hardliner on social and cultural matters, and a draconian enforcer of Fidel’s whims. Raúl is a plodding, maladroit public speaker, and has never been able to sway a crowd or inspire an audience with his own uplifting visions.” (“The Raulista Succession: Intrinsically Unstable?” *The Latell Report* [Coral Gables, FL: Cuba Transition Project, July 1, 2006], available through <http://ctp.iccas.miami.edu>.)

9. “Raúl Castro is firmly in control of Cuba and in a position to keep the island stable at least for the short term after his brother Fidel dies, a top U.S. military intelligence official told a Senate panel Thursday. Lt. Gen. Michael D. Maples, the U.S. Army director of the Defense Intelligence Agency, also said that Raúl, who has served as minister of defense since the early 1960s, enjoyed ‘widespread respect and support among Cuban military leaders who will be crucial in a permanent government succession.’” (Pablo Bachelet, “Raúl Castro’s Grip Is Firm, Senate Panel Is Told,” *Miami Herald*, January 12, 2007.)

10. Fidel and Raúl Castro considered Division General Arnaldo Ochoa Sánchez, the respected leader of Cuba’s Angola expedition, as a threat to their monopoly on power. When U.S. law enforcement obtained eyewitness testimony implicating the Castro regime in the smuggling of cocaine into the United States, the Castros assigned the blame to Ochoa and senior operatives in Cuban intelligence, and had them executed after a televised tribunal.

11. Frances Robles and Steven Dudley, “Chávez May Be Buying Cuba’s Future with Oil,” *Miami Herald*, August 30, 2006.

12. Today, U.S. policy toward Cuba is directed by Cuba transition coordinator Caleb McCarry, National Security Council senior director Daniel W. Fisk, and Deputy Assistant Secretary of State Kirsten Madison.