

U.S. Says It Is Prepared for Transition in Cuba

The New York Times
August 2, 2006

After waiting nearly half a century for [Fidel Castro](#) to relinquish power, Washington is warily monitoring the provisional transition in Havana, confident it has plans in place to assist pro-democracy groups in [Cuba](#) and to head off any mass exodus from the island.

As the 10th administration to square off against Mr. Castro, the Bush administration has made no secret of its contempt for the Cuban leader, establishing the Commission for Assistance to a Free Cuba in 2003 and then ratcheting up the pressure last year by creating the Office of Cuban Transition within the State Department.

The White House made it clear yesterday that it did not see Mr. Castro's brother Raúl, 75, to whom he handed off much of his power, as very likely to improve conditions on the island or relations with the United States. There were no plans to negotiate with him.

"The one thing that this president has talked about from the very beginning is his hope for the Cuban people finally to enjoy the fruits of freedom and democracy," the White House spokesman, Tony Snow, told reporters during a briefing. "And for the dictator, Fidel Castro, to hand off power to his brother, who's been the prison keeper, is not a change in that status."

A plan announced by the State Department two weeks ago provides \$80 million over two years to help with a post-Castro transition. The United States would also send special monitors and advisers to Cuba in the weeks after a full transition began.

Sean McCormack, the State Department spokesman, said no additional staff had yet been sent to Cuba.

Concerned about the possibility of a repeat of the Mariel boatlift in 1980, when more than 125,000 people fled the island, Senator Mel Martinez, Republican of Florida, who was born in Cuba and came to the United States after Mr. Castro seized power in 1959, told

reporters in Washington that the administration was prepared to prevent “mass migration or mass boat traffic in either direction of the Florida straits,” after a shift in power in Cuba.

Mr. Martinez said he was briefed on the plans by military officials two weeks ago. He said he was confident that the Navy and the Coast Guard would be able to interdict vessels in the open waters between the countries and to prevent Cuban-Americans from entering Cuban waters while the changes were taking shape in Havana.

With antagonism high between the United States and Cuba for most of the last 50 years, there have been many previous reports of Mr. Castro’s demise, only for him to eventually recover and resume his verbal bashing of the United States and the economic embargo that has been in place for 45 years.

Whether or not Mr. Castro is able to recuperate from this most recent surgery, there are indications that he is unlikely to ever lead Cuba with the same intense involvement as before.

“At a minimum, from now forward, Raúl is going to be a senior partner,” said Brian Latell, a former Cuba analyst at the [C.I.A.](#) and the author of “After Fidel.”

“Raúl will be calling a lot of the shots,” he said, “but with a great deal of respect and deference for Fidel.”

On Monday evening in Havana, a statement from Mr. Castro read on Cuban television said the leader, who will be 80 on Aug. 13, had undergone complicated intestinal surgery and would need several weeks to recuperate.

During his recovery, Mr. Castro said he would temporarily appoint Raúl president, first secretary of the Cuban Communist Party and commander in chief of the armed forces.

Since the earliest days of the revolution, Raúl Castro has been his elder brother’s closest confidant, and has long been his designated successor. But earlier this summer, Raúl made clear in speeches that he would not rule in the same manner as his brother, who has been

in charge of all important decisions and is known to micromanage events.

Rather, he said he would lead as part of a collective, which was outlined Monday.

Officials aligned with Raúl Castro were appointed to the national programs of health and education. Carlos Lage Dávila, a leading member of Fidel Castro's government, will head the national energy program, which will keep him in close contact with Venezuela, Cuba's closest ally, and its leader, [Hugo Chávez](#).

It was Venezuela that issued an update yesterday afternoon on Mr. Castro's health, saying he was "progressing positively."

The Bush administration said it viewed attempts by Venezuela or other countries to influence the transition in Cuba as unwarranted intervention. "The president is worried about people in the neighborhood who seek to destabilize neighbors using economic or other means," Mr. Snow said.

While most administration officials refrained from speculating on the condition of Mr. Castro, Senator Martinez said he was certain the Cuban leader was already dead, although he offered no details.

"I frankly don't believe that he will be able to be back and govern again," Mr. Martinez said. "It's beginning to be a moment of opportunity for there to be different voices and different thoughts."