

U.S. isolation policy leaves few options

Critics said U.S. policy gives the Bush administration few options in Cuba with leader Fidel Castro temporarily out of power.

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WASHINGTON - Although the Bush administration has been planning for years for a post-Fidel Castro Cuba, his decision to temporarily surrender power sparked some criticisms Tuesday that U.S. policies allow little leeway for U.S. reactions.

President Bush has twice convened the Commission for Assistance to a Free Cuba, a multiagency effort that sets the broad outlines of Cuba policy. It issued its first report in 2004 and a follow-up was unveiled last month, recommending \$80 million to support Cuba's opposition and help break Cuba's censorship of the media and the Internet and deploying U.S. aid promptly once a transition government is in place.

At an afternoon briefing at the White House, spokesman Tony Snow said Castro's decision to turn over power to his brother while he recuperates from surgery won't mean any changes in the U.S.-Cuba relationship, for the moment.

"There are no plans to reach out," Snow said. He said Bush is committed to winning democracy in Cuba and called Castro's brother his "prison keeper."

Supporters of U.S. policy on Cuba said the administration needed to stay the course.

"Our community will remain focused on its 'pro-democracy' agenda until a genuine transition -- not simply a succession of absolute power -- takes place," said Mauricio Claver-Carone, who heads a U.S.-Cuba Democracy Political Action Committee.

Addressing U.S. concerns that political changes in Cuba could unleash waves of people trying to escape the island aboard flimsy watercraft, Snow also cautioned people against leaving the island.

"We encourage people not to get into the water and not to engage in those activities," he said, in a caution echoed by Florida Republican Sen. Mel Martinez.

"I think it would be a tremendous loss of life plus a disorderly thing that at this moment in history the United States just cannot tolerate," he said.

But other Cuba analysts say the U.S. policy of aggressively isolating Castro through economic sanctions means Washington will be forced to play a secondary role in a post-Castro period.

Nicholas Robins, a visiting scholar at Duke Center for Latin American and Caribbean Studies and author of *The Culture of Conflict in Modern Cuba*, said Cuban exiles -- many of whom have long advocated isolation -- have been allowed too much influence over U.S. policy and that more open policies would make Castro's eventual death less crucial.

"It shouldn't matter so much to us what happens to Castro, our policy should be determined not by Castro but by American interests," he said in a telephone interview.

Under the 1996 Helms-Burton Act, the U.S. government cannot lift many of the sanctions against Cuba without congressional approval until Havana declares its intention to hold free elections and release political prisoners, among other conditions.

"Our strategy is to enter the game in the ninth inning and to tell the Cubans they are on their own until then," said Phil Peters, a Cuba expert with the conservative Lexington Institute, an Arlington, Va., think tank.

A State Department official, speaking on condition of anonymity because of department rules, said the Bush administration was reluctant to comment in greater detail on Castro's surrender of power because the facts were still unclear.

"We're a little nervous about getting out in front here," the official said. "If we express joy at the current situation and it turns out that [Castro's] fine, or whatever it is, if we simply have the facts wrong, we'd look like idiots."

But the official noted that "our plan for what we'd like to see happen after Castro's demise is well-known," referring to the two transition commission reports.

Asked if Helms-Burton tied U.S. hands, the official said, "what we really want to do here is take our lead from the Cuban people."

"If the Cuban people decide they want a different form of government and they start acting toward that, they will have the full support of the United States," he said.

Martinez said Congress could quickly change Helms-Burton "if we thought it would advance a transition in Cuba."

The Bush policy is to empower Cubans with information and support, creating conditions that helped topple governments in Eastern Europe when the Berlin Wall collapsed in 1989.