

EDITORIAL

Beginning of the End in Cuba

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Cuba is preparing, Miami is celebrating, and Washington is dusting off its plans. News from Havana speaks only of a temporary transfer of power to 75-year-old Raúl Castro while his 79-year-old brother, Fidel, recuperates from gastrointestinal surgery. But a historic passage of power has plainly begun.

America's overriding interest is in a peaceful transition to the democratic and economically dynamic society that Cubans have dreamed of for decades. Given Cuba's educated population, the energy and skills of its people, and its advantageous location, that is not at all a utopian fantasy. But it may not happen immediately. Washington should be planning to establish contacts with Fidel and Raúl Castro's successors even if they have roots in the dictatorship, and attempt to play the most constructive role it can in the island's evolution. An early easing of the economic embargo could strengthen Cuba's battered middle class and help it play a more active role in the coming political transition.

The United States needs to plan now to deal with possible huge flows of temporary refugees if government control in Havana should become destabilized. It should prepare for extending special temporary refugee status for those fleeing political uncertainty. And it must certainly discourage Cuban-Americans from prematurely rushing home to claim property or political office.

All this preparation could be complicated by the backward-looking fantasies of some politically active members of Miami's Cuban-American community. The refugees are certainly entitled to their say, and they will be bound to get a hearing, given their role as swing votes in a swing state that also happens to be governed by the president's brother. But the challenge for the Bush administration will be to make sure other voices are heard and heeded as well. Washington's post-Castro policy must not become a pawn of Miami refugee politics.

Ten successive American presidents have proclaimed their fervent desire for a Cuba without Fidel Castro. If he can transcend the ideological fixations of the exile community, President Bush could become the first of them with a real chance to help Cubans build a better, post-Castro future.