

THE OPPENHEIMER REPORT

U.S. should lay low on Cuba

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President Bush must have a clear plan to react to ailing Cuban dictator Fidel Castro's surprise decision last week to cede power to his brother, Raúl. Here are five key recommendations:

- First, lay low. Whatever you say, don't make aggressive statements that would help the Cuban regime perpetuate the myth that Cuba is facing an imminent U.S. invasion and that Cuban exiles are intent on descending on Havana to reclaim their properties and evict Cubans from their homes.

It may sound funny, but the most effective means of speeding up a transition to democracy on the island may be for the United States to say little or nothing. If 75-year-old Raúl remains in power, his reign won't last decades. And Cuba is not going to have the relevancy it now has in Latin America and Europe. Many governments that supported Cuba as a way to show their independence from the United States or to please their domestic leftist constituencies will no longer feel that attached to Cuba.

NO LOYALTY

With Fidel gone, much of their loyalty will be gone, and so will their tolerance with the government's refusal to repay its debts. Even with Venezuela's massive financial help, Cuba will need to open up to the world. Washington should wait for that moment, knowing that aggressive words will only help feed the Cuban regime's propaganda machine and thus delay change.

As leading Cuban dissident Oswaldo Payá told me in a telephone interview from Havana last week, "The U.S. message should be that there is no such thing as a U.S. threat, that there is no intention to intervene."

- Second, don't rule out contacts with the new Cuban authorities. True, the 1992 Torricelli Act and the 1996 Helms-Burton law prohibit the U.S. president from normalizing political, economic or commercial relations with a Cuban government headed by either Fidel or Raúl. "Bush's hands are handcuffed by Congress, and his legs are shackled," says John S. Kavulich II, a senior policy analyst with the New York-based U.S.-Cuba Trade and Economic Council.

Still, Bush has some room to maneuver. After all, the Bush administration has held various meetings with the Castro regime on immigration and hurricane relief issues, among others. If the Bush administration held meetings with Fidel's regime, it makes more sense to hold them with a care-taker government that may end up being a transition regime.

CUBAN FUND

- Third, have some carrots handy. Remember that old saying from the 1910-17 Mexican Revolution: "No general can resist a \$50,000 cannonade." Speed up preparations for a big Cuban Development Fund for when there are clear signs of a political opening.

In the meantime, prepare a step-by-step conditional engagement policy. The Cuba Study Group, a group of 20 Miami business leaders, offers two ideas worth considering: If Raúl, who is known to admire the Chinese development model, allows Cubans on the island to open small businesses and hire workers, allow the nearly \$1 billion in annual Cuban-American remittances to Cuba to be used as capital investments in these new companies or as loans to them. Likewise, if Cuba allows its citizens freedom to travel abroad, ease restrictions on Cuban Americans to travel to the island.

- Fourth, start working Congress. Even Florida's Sen. Mel Martinez, a key legislator on Cuban issues who does not support negotiating with Raúl, says that "when and if there is a moment of opportunity, our government can have the right flexibility, and we could act legislatively or executively."

TEAM UP

- Fifth, don't go it alone. This is a time when the United States should team up with European and Latin American governments to support an opening on the island.

Bush has a golden opportunity with Spain, one of the most influential countries in Cuba. Spanish socialist President José Luis Rodríguez Zapatero is eager to build bridges with Bush, who has never granted him a meeting, and Spanish officials have repeatedly said they want to cooperate with the Bush administration on Latin America. Cooperation on Cuba offers a key chance to rebuild U.S.-Spanish ties.

But above all, whatever you do, frame it positively. And, even better, let other countries do the talking.