

# Bush seeks change in Cuba; strategy unclear

**Besides urging Cubans to push for change, it is not clear what other options the Bush administration is considering to prod change in Cuba.**

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**WASHINGTON** - The question has long hung darkly over U.S. policy on Cuba: If Fidel Castro's rule starts to wobble, does Washington try to push it over the edge, or help it survive in order to avert chaos 90 miles from South Florida?

Now, two weeks after the Cuban leader temporarily ceded power amid a health crisis, the Cuban system shows little instability. And it remains unclear what President Bush is prepared to do, beyond urging Cubans on the island to push for change.

"This is a matter for Cubans to resolve," Caleb McCarry, the State Department's Cuba Transition Coordinator told reporters. "It is their nation, they must lead the way forward."

But others with close ties to the administration insist it is waiting for an opening and is prepared to take advantage -- to prod the country into democracy, even one with problems.

"I know that President Bush does not believe that a stable dictatorship is better than an unstable democracy," said U.S. Rep. Ileana Ros-Lehtinen, R-Miami, a vociferous critic of the Castro regime. "He does not believe in the status quo just because it's more manageable . . . when you know who the players are."

Ros-Lehtinen said she believes the U.S. government -- at the appropriate time, "will take a forceful stand in order to tip Cuba into democratic side," but added that "no one is talking military action.

"But no one is saying that we will ignore the situation and just hope for the best," she said.

Others are not so convinced. They note U.S. laws on the trade embargo against Cuba largely tie Washington's hands in the face of less than a radical move toward democracy on the island.

"They are left without a position," said Wayne Smith, a former head of the U.S. diplomatic mission in Havana and a frequent critic of U.S. policy on Cuba. ``They called for a democracy, yet they have no means of bringing that about. All they can do is issue calls for the Cuban people to work for democracy."

Others note there are sections of the U.S. government that are uninterested in engaging Cuba, particularly at a time when Washington is preoccupied with the war in Iraq, turmoil in the Middle East and the threat of terrorism.

"The goal of this administration, of the president is unquestionably to do everything possible to . . . work to see change," said Mauricio Claver-Carone, who heads an anti-Castro lobbying group, the U.S.-Cuba Democracy Political Action Committee. ``At the same time, there are people within the bureaucracy and there are career people who will always put stability before change."

Among those sectors is the Pentagon, where senior officials have long been known to be arguing for permission for military-to-military contacts with Cuba in order to at least prevent any misunderstanding in case of an emergency. The requests have been denied, on the argument that such contacts might serve to support a post-Castro military rule perhaps led by his brother, temporary president and Defense Minister Raúl Castro.

Observers also suggest the government is more interested in preventing a repeat of the 1980 Mariel boatlift and 1994 *balsero* crisis that sent tens of thousands of Cubans streaming toward U.S. shores.

"U.S. policy is status quo," said Joe Garcia, a former executive director of the Cuban American National Foundation and a director with the New Democrat Network. ``The question is do we want a crisis here, and what political interest could it be to destabilize the Cuban government?"

Former Assistant Secretary of State Otto Reich urges patience.

"I worked with President Bush for three and a half years," Reich said. ``He wants freedom for Cuba and he's not going to trade stability for freedom."

Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice on Sunday flatly ruled out any type of military intervention, telling Meet the Press that ``the notion that, somehow, the United States is going to invade Cuba because there are troubles in Cuba, is simply far-fetched, and it's simply not true.

"We are not going to do anything to stoke a sense of crisis or a sense of instability in Cuba," Rice said. "This is a transitional period for the Cuban people. We are going to stand with them for the proposition that there should not simply be the return from -- or the end of one dictatorship and the imposition of another dictatorship.

"But our role," she said, "will be to help the Cuban people, when the time comes, to have a peaceful and stable democratic transition."

Her deputies at the state department Friday declined to discuss what steps they'd consider should the Cuban government start to wobble.

And in Miami, Francisco "Pepe" Hernandez, president of the Cuban American National Foundation, said his group had hoped for a more forceful reaction.

"We got the impression [the administration] would recognize the opportunity and react positively . . . but obviously from the messages we have seen right now they are not going to take advantage of those opportunities," Hernandez said. "They're telling us, 'Stay back, don't interfere.' This is what they are telling the exile community in Miami: 'Don't rock the boat right now,'" he added.

Hernandez said he's sympathetic, if disappointed, by the apparent U.S. stand.

"It would be really very difficult for us to deal with a situation in Cuba now where we have to commit resources of any kind," he said. "The only thing we can say is how unlucky we have been. Every time, through these 50 years, . . . every time, some other interest interferes with the freedom of Cuba."