

U.S. plan ineffective by design

OUR OPINION: REVAMP CUBA PROGRAMS AND LIFT TRAVEL, REMITTANCE RESTRICTIONS

Opinion
The Miami Herald
Nov. 19, 2006

U.S. government programs to promote democracy in Cuba have squandered too much money with too little oversight or results. The programs need to be retooled to be more strategic and effective. More important, lifting U.S. restrictions on travel and remittances to Cuba would do far more to promote democracy in Cuba than any U.S. aid program. Cuban Americans and private U.S. organizations should be free to directly support Cuba's civil society.

With visits and material support, exiles and pro-democracy groups will reduce the fear of change and demonstrate the benefits of free markets among Cubans on the island. Such contacts with the outside world show goodwill and break the regime's information blockade. These are the best ways to increase the chances of a peaceful transition to democracy.

Promoting democracy in Cuba should be a U.S. priority. Unfortunately, the U.S. government's execution has faltered: The bulk of \$70 million-plus spent in 10 years has ended up in Miami and Washington, D.C., paying academics, shippers and for trips to international conferences. Only a fraction actually helped democracy activists in Cuba. Those are the findings of last week's Miami Herald investigative series *Promoting Democracy in Cuba*.

Spread the money

Worse, it appears these programs were designed to be ineffective. Since the 1980s, no administration has wanted to risk another Mariel boatlift by destabilizing Cuba. The Clinton and current Bush administrations, under which these Cuba-democracy programs grew, were no different. Better to spread the money among vote-rich Cuban constituencies than to rock the boat by sending cash directly to dissidents. Some of the projects and groups funded by the U.S. Agency for International Development and other U.S. agencies are clearly worthwhile. CubaNet (www.CubaNet.org), for example, posts news and opinion items phoned in by independent journalists from Cuba. The website distributes nongovernmental news from Cuba and publishes outside news to those in Cuba. Thus, CubaNet breaks the regime's information blockade and promotes a free press.

Other recipients have not been as productive. With USAID funds, Miami-based Acción Democrática Cubana bought Nintendo Game Boys, leather jackets, cashmere sweaters and Godiva chocolates -- all sent to Cuba, says the group's executive director.

Some problems result from USAID's lax management and oversight, as described by a Government Accountability Office report released last week. USAID doesn't effectively monitor whether the goods and services it funds actually promote democracy in Cuba. The GAO referred three USAID-funded agencies for further scrutiny.

USAID also has had dubious selection criteria: 95 percent, or \$62 million, of awards from 1996 to 2005 were granted without competitive bidding to "unsolicited proposals." In one case of apparent competitive bidding, USAID gave \$750,000 to the Creighton University law school to study property restitution in Cuba -- although the school had no expertise in Cuba studies. Coincidentally, Adolfo Franco, director of USAID Caribbean programs, received his degree from Creighton's law school.

The greatest difficulty is Cuba's totalitarian regime. The regime blocks mailings, prevents Cuban students from using U.S. scholarships and makes it tough for independent journalists to complete correspondence courses offered by Florida International University. Yet USAID prohibits using its funds to send cash to anyone on the island when dissidents can often, and more cost-effectively, find what they need on the black market.

A peaceful transition

The \$80 million that President Bush wants for Cuba-democracy programs over the next two years is a small price to pay for promoting change in Cuba, but the programs must be completely revamped. Any aid should strengthen Cuba's democrats and promote a peaceful transition. The programs should be strategic, accountable, competitively bid and critically evaluated.

Lifting limits on travel and remittances would give more money and aid to dissidents and ordinary Cubans, helping to break dependence on the dictatorship. Whatever money trickles into regime coffers will be minimal compared to what Cubans suffer and how much isolation strengthens the regime.

