

# A party without Fidel Castro

**Fidel Castro failed to appear at the main ceremony marking his 80th birthday, but brother Raúl showed he's the new man in charge.**

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In a clear signal that Cuba's post-Fidel Castro era has begun, the ailing leader failed to appear at a massive military parade in his honor Saturday while his brother and designated successor delivered an inaugural speech of sorts.

Without explaining his brother's absence, Raúl Castro reiterated his willingness to negotiate an end to the almost 50 years of animosity between Washington and Havana -- but on his own terms.

"We want to reaffirm our disposition to resolve at the negotiating table the prolonged dispute between the United States and Cuba, if and when they accept our country's condition that it will not tolerate any shadows over its independence," Raúl Castro said.

Many Cuba watchers had expected Fidel Castro to make his first public appearance at the parade, after he had surgery in July and "temporarily" surrendered the presidency to his younger brother. At that time, Castro asked that celebrations for his 80th birthday on Aug. 13 be postponed until Saturday.

But his absence was certain to fuel U.S. reports that he suffers from terminal cancer and likely will not live past 2007. The Cuban government has refused to detail his ailment, only repeating incessantly that he is "recuperating."

Cuba's media said 300,000 soldiers, students and workers marched along the Plaza of the Revolution as MiG jets soared overhead, tanks rolled, and the nation's elite perched on bleachers to watch.

Many of the marchers chanted "We love you, Fidel" and "Viva Raúl," and some carried signs praising the revolution, launched Dec. 2, 1956, when the yacht Granma landed in eastern Cuba carrying the Castro brothers and 80 other fighters.

But in other parts of Havana, the capital seemed largely quiet and almost lifeless, with only a dampened sense of the celebrations of Castro's birthday or the revolution.

Some Havana residents interviewed by The Miami Herald on Saturday seemed to accept that Castro is on his last legs, yet -- at least in public and before strangers -- insisted that his ideology would survive his death.

"His death will not change anything. It will not mean they can come in and take over," said 83-year-old Sergio, referring to Cuban exiles abroad.

A foreign visitor who was in Cuba just days after Castro's ailment was revealed this summer reported that on Saturday there appeared to be less concern than in August, when there was much street talk about a possible U.S. attack.

"His absence is felt, but one day we all have to go. The system will outlive the man," said Maximiliano, 60, an engineer. The surnames of Sergio and Maximiliano were withheld by The Miami Herald.

## **RAUL CASTRO SPEAKS**

Leading the military display was Raúl Castro, still referred to by the Cuban media as defense minister rather than acting president. After a brief introduction, he gave the only address of the parade.

It was the second time in Raúl Castro's rare recent public statements that he mentioned a willingness to work with Washington. But his calls are likely to fall flat for the time being since the Bush administration's policy is to push for democracy in Cuba -- and oppose the kind of succession from one Castro to another that Saturday's speech signaled.

"The absence of Fidel at this parade means that Dec. 2 marks the start of the post-Fidel era," said National War College professor Frank Mora. "The eulogies have begun, history and legacy will inform everything, but the message is clear . . . a new era and model of governance has begun."

## **LEADERS ATTEND**

Raúl Castro led the parade aboard a Soviet-era military vehicle, then later went up on the podium to join dozens of special guests, among them Presidents Evo

Morales of Bolivia and René Prével of Haiti and Nicaraguan President-elect Daniel Ortega.

"We are convinced that the way out of the distressing conflicts that humanity faces is not through war but through political solutions," Raúl Castro said.

The Bush administration reacted to the speech by reiterating its previous position: The communist government must first initiate a democratic opening -- an option long rejected by the Cubans as interference in their internal affairs.

"The dialogue that needs to take place is one between the Cuban regime and the Cuban people about the democratic future of their island," said State Department spokeswoman Janelle Hironimus, reading from a prepared statement. "As we have repeatedly stated, any deepening of our engagement with Cuba depends on that dialogue and the Cuban regime's willingness to take concrete steps toward a political opening and a transition toward democracy."

Assistant Secretary of State for the Western Hemisphere Thomas Shannon specified in August some of the U.S. conditions: freeing political prisoners, respecting human rights, permitting the creation of independent organizations such as political parties and trade unions, and "creating a pathway" toward elections.

Frank Calzon, a Cuban-American activist who heads the Washington-based Center for a Free Cuba, said he welcomed Raúl Castro's talk of negotiations -- "talking is better than repressing people" -- but also suggested that he should be talking to other Cubans, including Catholic Church leaders.

The olive branch that Raúl Castro extended toward Washington was not without barbs, however.

"After almost half a century, we are willing to wait patiently for the moment when common sense prevails in the behavior of the circles of power in Washington," he said.

'Three years and seven months after the euphoric and hasty declaration of 'mission accomplished' in Iraq by President Bush aboard an aircraft carrier, the cadavers of young American soldiers continue to arrive in the United States," he added. "The government of the United States finds itself at a crossroads with no way out."

Underlining the importance of Raúl Castro's speech, the Cuban government swiftly posted translations in English, French, Italian, Portuguese, German, Arabic and Russian on its website.

## **DIFFERENT APPROACH**

Many observers say Raúl Castro would be a more pragmatic leader, committed to communist rule but open to reforms away from Cuba's centrally controlled economy. The Revolutionary Armed Forces that Raúl Castro leads now runs most of the island's commercial enterprises, such as its tourist industry.

Since Fidel Castro announced plans for Saturday's event four months ago, he has appeared only in sporadic videos and photographs that showed him shrunken and weak, sometimes in pajamas or a loose-fitting track suit.

But those weren't the images shown Saturday on Cuban television, which broadcast hours of historic clips of a younger, stronger, triumphant Castro.