

# Polar opposites unite against Cuba policy

**U.S. Reps. Bill Delahunt and Jeff Flake are an odd couple who disagree on just about everything -- except changing U.S. policy on Cuba.**

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**WASHINGTON** - It's hard to find common ground between Reps. Jeff Flake and Bill Delahunt -- except on how the United States should deal with Fidel Castro's regime.

The Republican Flake, 44, a Mormon with beach-boy looks, represents Mesa, a solidly Republican Phoenix suburb. An ardent backer of free trade and small government, Flake was first elected in 2000, when he beat three other Republicans in a primary by campaigning as the most conservative of the lot.

The silver-haired Delahunt, 65, is Catholic and an unabashed liberal. A Democrat, he represents Massachusetts' sprawling South Shore district, which includes the hyper-rich islands of Martha's Vineyard and Nantucket.

Flake says he and Delahunt are the "ideological bookends" of the Republican and Democratic parties.

But they share a passionate rejection of U.S. policy toward Cuba, and their dogged persistence has made them de facto leaders of the congressional camp opposed to U.S. sanctions on Cuba.

And now the unlikely duo is stepping up their crusade to ease the sanctions through a host of amendments, bills and hearings. They have tried this before, but the context is vastly different now: Democrats control Congress, President Bush is on the defensive and Castro is gravely ill.

Dan Erikson, a Cuba analyst with the Inter-American Dialogue think tank in Washington, D.C., says that under a Republican Congress, Flake and Delahunt were confined to the "role of provocateurs," with little practical impact. Now, he says, the obstacles to lifting sanctions "are dramatically reduced."

Delahunt and Flake argue that after more than four decades, the sanctions have failed to bring down communist rule on the island, and have reduced U.S. influence there and angered allies. They want the Bush administration to open talks with Havana, and are in a position to push their views.

## **SUBCOMMITTEE ROLES**

As of Jan. 23, Delahunt chairs the powerful International Organizations, Human Rights and Oversight Subcommittee of the House Committee on Foreign Affairs. He has pledged to investigate U.S. aid to promote democracy in Cuba.

Flake, who sits on the same subcommittee, plans to offer legislation that would allow U.S. oil companies to provide services and supplies for exploration in Cuba waters. He has also offered legislation -- with influential New York Democratic Rep. Charles Rangel -- to lift the ban on U.S. citizens and residents making tourist trips to Cuba and wants to make it easier for the Cuban government to pay for U.S. imports.

Delahunt introduced a bill that would lift restrictions on Cuban-American visits to the island -- limited now to once every three years. The Massachusetts lawmaker says he believes all U.S. citizens should be allowed to travel to Cuba, but he has settled on this "modest" proposal because he "understands how passionate" Cuban Americans are about Castro. At any rate, he says, the mood in Miami is shifting on sanctions, and he thinks his proposal will be well received.

Critics say Delahunt and Flake are pandering to a ruthless dictator, and that negotiating with Castro's designated successor, his brother Raúl, would only lend legitimacy to his rule.

"Recognizing Raúl Castro as the de facto leader would be an act of infamy," said Roger Noriega, a former assistant secretary of state for Western Hemisphere affairs. 'Raúl's hold on the military is shaky, and it is based almost entirely on his perception that he can `do business' with the gringos and keep the ball in the air for the regime's cronies."

Flake and Delahunt "don't realize that any perception of weakness from the Democratic Congress . . . only makes Raúl look for ways to simply hang on to power until the '08 elections in the hope that a Democratic president wins, and together with a Democratic Congress comes to [Cuba's] financial rescue," said Mauricio Claver-Carone, a Washington lobbyist for the U.S.-Cuba Democracy Political Action Committee.

Flake's and Delahunt's passion for Cuba seems odd. Their districts don't have commercial stakes in Cuba or large populations of Cuban Americans.

### **PERSONAL EXPERIENCES**

As it turns out, their involvement is more personal, going back many years.

Flake first became intrigued by Fidel Castro when he did missionary work in Southern Africa, where Cuba had active military involvement. As executive director of a democracy promotion group in the late 1980s, he dealt with Namibian independence leaders who spurned communism but revered Castro for his support of their cause.

"They loved the man," he told The Miami Herald.

He does not share their reverence, he says, and on his five trips to Cuba since getting elected, he has met with many Cuban officials but, when offered, declined to see Castro.

Flake, who hopes to move up to the Senate someday, seems to relish his role as a maverick. He has opposed his party's hard-line stance on immigration and criticizes his colleagues for allowing government spending programs to balloon out of control. For this, his office says, he was dumped in mid-January from his seat on the House Judiciary Committee.

Delahunt first went to Cuba in 1988 as a Massachusetts district attorney. A human rights group took him to visit jailed dissidents and push for their release. It happened a year later.

Ever since then, he has been "fascinated" by the U.S.-Cuba relationship, Delahunt told The Miami Herald. He has met with Castro so often he has lost count.

"About 10 times," he ventured.

Delahunt bristles at the notion that he is insensitive to the plight of political prisoners in Cuba. He considers himself a friend of dissident leaders like Oscar Espinosa Chepe, and he worked behind the scenes to try to secure their release from prison.

But, Delahunt adds, if human rights were the only guidepost for foreign policy, ``we would not be importing oil from Saudi Arabia."

Flake and Delahunt led a 10-member congressional delegation to Cuba last month. Media hype was high given speculation that Castro was dying. They reported back that all is quiet on the island.

"What was surprising," Delahunt said recently, ``was that there was nothing surprising."

Flake says the post-Fidel Castro transition is under way and the U.S. government should therefore begin a debate on ``where our policy goes from here."

He says the Cuba policy contradicts Republican principles that more trade and engagement help the cause of democracy. He criticizes U.S. financial aid for Cuba democracy efforts as a "jobs program" for South Florida, and Radio and TV Martí broadcasts as "over the top" and ``beneath us."

Flake says that, in the end, events in Cuba will drive what happens in Washington.

Castro's demise, he said, will make it "easier to make bigger steps" in Washington to change policy.