

# Bush calls for democracy in Cuba

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WASHINGTON --

President Bush, in unusually candid comments on Cuba, made it clear Thursday that he would favor democracy over stability on the island if faced with a choice.

In his comments at the Naval War College in Newport, R.I., Bush seemed to step back from the position that his administration would aggressively seek to end the communist system in Cuba. Now, Bush suggested a more passive approach, one where the administration was waiting for Fidel Castro's death.

"I strongly believe the people of Cuba ought to live in a free society," he said. "It's in our interests that Cuba become free, and it's in the interest of the Cuban people that they don't have to live under an antiquated form of government that has just been repressive."

"You'll see an interesting debate," he said. "Some will say all that matters is stability -- which in my judgment will just simply reinforce the followers of the current regime. I think we ought to be pressing hard for democracy."

His comments are significant because many in the administration -- especially in the Department of Defense -- privately believe the Bush administration should talk with the Cuban government on a range of issues, such as drug trafficking and migration.

Many governments -- from Brazil, Spain and Mexico, to Canada -- have asked the United States to open talks with the new government of Raúl Castro. Fidel Castro fell sick last summer, yielding power to his younger brother, Raúl, and has not appeared in public since.

A dialogue would also enable the United States to establish ties with a leadership that is emerging for a post-Fidel Castro era.

Phil Peters, a Cuba analyst with the Arlington-based Lexington Institute, said Bush's comments struck him as a "change in the way they talk about Cuba."

Before, said Peters, officials spoke menacingly of "accelerating" the fall of the dictatorship. Now, the position seems to be one of awaiting Castro's death, and then pushing democracy.

"All the swagger is gone," said Peters, a proponent of more engagement with Havana.

"One day the good Lord will take Fidel Castro away," Bush said. "Then the question is, what will be the approach of the U.S. government? My attitude is, is that we need to use the opportunity to call the world together to promote democracy as the alternative to the form of government they have been living with."

Bush over the years has tightened trade and travel sanctions as well as frozen all senior-level contacts between his administration and Havana.

His stance has triggered some private grumbling in the administration that this was not promoting the U.S. national interest of averting a flood of migrants from Cuba.

Bush seemed to address this concern when he said "we're working very closely with the Navy and Coast Guard" to make sure there were no "issues" between the United States and Cuba "should there be a -- or when there is a transition."

The Coast Guard and other agencies have held exercises to prepare for any future flood of migrants, and the Department of Defense is upgrading the Guantánamo Naval Base to receive thousands of Cuban migrants.

