

THE OPPENHEIMER REPORT

Bush tactics are playing into Castro's hands

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Should President Bush be making major policy speeches on Cuba, as he did Wednesday? Or does that backfire, giving Cuba's dictatorship much-needed ammunition to claim it's a victim of U.S. aggression?

Before I tell you my answer to the riddle that has torn U.S. policy analysts and Cuban exiles for decades, let's take a quick look at what hard-liners, moderates and appeasers have to say about it.

Hard-liners say it's the United States' obligation as the world's biggest democracy to try to bring democracy to Cuba. The 2004 report from Bush's Commission for Assistance to a Free Cuba and the president's speech Wednesday are steps in the right direction, they say.

Washington cannot accept a succession from ailing leader Fidel Castro to his brother Raúl. Just as the United States imposed economic sanctions on South Africa to help end that country's apartheid regime, it's the United States' duty to put economic and political pressure on the Cuban gerontocracy to open up that country's political system, hard-liners say.

And whatever one might think about the U.S. economic embargo on Cuba, lifting it now would provide a major propaganda victory to a dying regime, the hard-line argument goes.

Moderates say the situation on the island has changed since Fidel Castro transferred Cuba's day-to-day leadership to the younger Raúl last year.

LOOSEN THE BAN

The White House should use the opportunity to help accelerate changes in Cuba, they say. For instance, Washington should open up the U.S. travel ban to Cuba, which in addition to denying Americans their basic right to travel anywhere, is keeping Cubans on the island isolated and uninformed, moderates say.

Furthermore, Washington should put the Castro regime on the defensive by offering a gradual lifting of the U.S. trade embargo in exchange for Cuba's steps to open up its political system, they say.

Why not unilaterally lift 25 percent of the U.S. embargo and invite Cuba to make a move on the freedom of expression front, they say. Granted, Cuba will most likely not take the

bait, but Washington would no longer be seen by many as the main culprit in the Cuban drama, they say.

Appeasers, finally, think that the United States should lift the travel and economic embargoes at once, and unconditionally.

The United States conducts brisk business with other communist dictatorships such as China and Vietnam, they say. Furthermore, the sanctions on Cuba have not worked and are becoming increasingly meaningless at a time when Venezuela is pumping more than \$2 billion a year into the island, appeasers say.

DO SOMETHING BOLD

U.S. economic sanctions only help give Cuba an excuse to delay a political opening. Let's do away with all sanctions, and the sheer impact of U.S. tourists and trade will bring about change on the island, the let's-lift-all-sanctions camp argues.

My opinion: The decades-old shouting match between Washington and Havana only helps distract world attention from the real conflict, which is the one going on between the Cuban dictatorship and the Cuban people.

As leading Cuban dissident Oswaldo Payá told me in a telephone interview from Havana hours before Bush's speech, "We are not going to tell the Cuban government or Bush to shut up, but what we are saying is that it's time for both of them to listen to the Cuban people."

Bush -- and whoever succeeds him -- should de-couple U.S. rhetoric on Cuba: step up the defense of human rights, while setting aside U.S. "programs" and "commissions" for Cuba's transition that smack of U.S. interventionism.

The defense of universal human rights is an international obligation, which the United States and all other countries should be proud to uphold in Cuba. Creating programs and commissions for Cuba's transition smacks of meddling in Cuba's internal affairs.

Bush deserves praise for having spoken out in support of fundamental freedoms in Cuba when much of the rest of the world is scandalously looking the other way. But he plays into Castro's hands when he announces U.S. plans for Cuba's transition. It's time to do more of the first and less of the latter.