

Bush's speech at Castro's grave

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President Bush summoned just about everyone to the State Department. He wanted to issue an important statement to the Cubans on the island. The ceremony on Wednesday had a feeling of urgency. He was flanked by Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice, Senator Mel Martinez of Florida, the Cuban-American members of Congress and other notables. His was not an election-year message directed at Florida voters. Those are made while clad in a guayabera and delivered as in a rally. This was something a lot more serious.

Bush talked to all Cubans, but especially to the ruling clique. The Americans have vital and precise information: A huge majority in the apparatus of power wants major changes. A hundred reports have been issued about the debates conducted in Cuba over the problems affecting the country, and the results are almost unanimous: Practically nobody wants to keep the current regime. They begin, timidly, by asking for economic changes and, before you know it, they're demanding political changes and individual freedoms.

Life beyond communism

That makes sense. How can anyone believe in the virtues of the single party and collectivism after half a century of failures and misery? A huge majority of citizens wants the restoration of property rights, democracy and pluralism. Among the intellectuals, artists and students, the clamor is almost unanimous. The only person who remains convinced of the virtues of communism is Fidel Castro, and his death, preceded by senile dementia, cannot be far off.

Not even Raúl, who was a communist before Fidel, believes in that mumbo-jumbo. That's why Bush didn't mention him in his speech. He wanted to leave all options open. That's why he addressed the armed forces and the security corps. Those who welcome the wishes of society and initiate or facilitate the transition to democracy will have all the support they need from the United States. There is life beyond communism.

There is another key element in Bush's speech. He prefers freedom to stability. He does not admit the cynical argument (defended by some U.S. military officers) that it is preferable to have a tyranny on the island, keeping things quiet to prevent a massive exodus of Cubans, rather than run the risk of a possibly turbulent transition to democracy. That's called learning from history.

Throughout the 20th century, the United States sided with repugnant dictatorships while seeking stability and ended up the loser. Upon that twisted reasoning lay the censurable links with Somoza, Trujillo, Batista and Pinochet. The left condemned Washington for that stance. Now, Bush stands on the ethical side of the conflict with Castro's dictatorship, and the left, mindless of its own contradictions or its lack of democratic values, continues to condemn him.

In turn, Bush and his advisors realize that the interests of the United States can be guaranteed only if a democratic regime with an efficient economic system is installed in Cuba. Prolonging the dictatorship, even if it is an imitation of the Chinese model, only extends the problem; it does not resolve it. Better to have a country shaken by a tumultuous change -- as happened in Eastern Europe -- than allow in Cuba what happened in Russia. There, there were no mass conflicts, but an anti-American mob of mafiosi and policemen took over the Kremlin.

What the United States prefers is to see a future Cuba that resembles the Czech Republic or Hungary, not Russia or China. Fortunately, that's exactly what almost all Cubans want.

How will Cuba pay for its needs during the change? Bush also described that: Washington will create an international fund for that purpose. When the time comes, there will be no shortage of funds, advice and support. The idea was put forward two years ago at Princeton University by former Uruguayan President Luis Alberto Lacalle. He even gave it a name: the José Martí Fund.

Petrodollars or starvation

The idea was picked up by FAES, a think tank presided by former Spanish Prime Minister José María Aznar, who incorporated it into a document called "Latin America: An agenda for freedom," coordinated by deputy Miguel Angel Cortés. Then, hand-carried by Aznar, the idea entered the White House. The Cubans will not find serious economic obstacles when they transform the dictatorship into a democracy and pass from collectivism to the market and private property.

That part of the message is very important. Fidel Castro is dying, but he's trying to bequeath to the Cubans a replacement caudillo: Hugo Chávez. And the way to persuade them to accept Chávez is by not giving them any other option: Either they accept the Venezuelan's leadership, with his petrodollars and multimillion-dollar subsidies (about \$3 billion per year), or they starve to death.

But that blackmail is over. There is a way to emerge from the abyss in which *El Comandante* will leave Cuba. Chávez, whom Cubans detest, can go somewhere else to spout his delirious 21st-century socialism. The Cubans lived their 20th-century version intensely and learned their lesson forever.