

CAMPAIGN 2008 | BROTHERS TO RESCUE

Candidates target Castros for indictment

Some GOP presidential candidates are calling for the Castro brothers to be indicted for the 1996 shoot-down of two Brothers to the Rescue planes.

The Miami Herald
Dec. 11, 2007

The frustration of Miami exiles over the Cuban government's downing of two Brothers to the Rescue planes more than a decade ago has now filtered into the presidential race, with top GOP candidates calling for the indictment of Fidel and Raúl Castro.

While stumping through South Florida, three Republican candidates have brought up the Brothers tragedy, and at least two have pledged to hold the Castro brothers responsible for the 1996 shoot-down by Cuban MiGs that killed four Miami-based fliers.

The candidates' interest in the shoot-down may be an indication of the advice they're receiving from key Cuban-American leaders. Among Sen. John McCain's supporters are U.S. Reps. Mario and Lincoln Díaz-Balart and Ileana Ros-Lehtinen, all of Miami. In the past, she has brought up the possibility of indictments with President Bush.

"I talked to McCain about this specific recommendation, and he said yes, that as president he would . . . ask the Justice Department to begin a legal inquiry into the illegal shoot-down," Ros-Lehtinen said Monday.

Leading former Massachusetts Gov. Mitt Romney's Florida campaign is Al Cárdenas, a former state GOP party chief who, during a Radio Mambí campaign stop Monday, praised his candidate's tough-on-Cuba approach.

Advising former Arkansas Gov. Mike Huckabee are Florida Rep. David Rivera and House Speaker Marco Rubio, who announced his support on Monday. Huckabee, who once was against the Cuba embargo, called for indictments Monday at a news conference in Westchester.

"He will push for the indictments of the Castro brothers for ordering the murder of those Brothers to the Rescue fliers," Rivera said.

The talk of the Castro indictment surfaced nationally during Sunday's Spanish-language Republican debate hosted by the University of Miami and aired by the Univisión network. Without prompting, McCain and Romney spoke about the Brothers shoot-down.

"And if I were president . . . I would order an investigation of the shoot-down of those brave Cubans who were killed under the orders of Raúl and Fidel Castro and, if necessary, indict them," McCain said.

Romney also had harsh words: ``Brothers to the Rescue. They shoot a small aircraft out of the sky . . . These Castro brothers are cowards."

SUPPORT WELCOMED

Relatives of those killed, who have for years pushed for indictments, welcomed the support. It comes just before the Jan. 25 release in Miami of a documentary about the incident, titled *Shoot Down*.

"I can tell you that I would take a stronger look at any candidates who took the position to indict Raúl Castro," said Maggie Khuly, sister of Armando Alejandro Jr., one of the fliers who died.

Said José Basulto, the head of Brothers to the Rescue, a Cuban exile activist group: ``For me, the shoot-down has become a case of justice delayed, justice denied. To hear that Republican hopefuls are talking about it gives me hope."

An indictment, Basulto agrees, would be largely symbolic, but it would serve to sully the Cuban leaders' reputation at a time when a growing number of leftist leaders in Latin America look to Cuba for advice.

"I don't think they will be brought here for trial, but just the fact that they're indicted by a U.S. court will cause havoc inside Cuba," he said.

Gayle Osterberg, spokeswoman for Rogues Harbor Studios -- a production company founded by Alejandro's niece Cristina Khuly and her husband, Douglas Eger, to produce the documentary -- praised the candidates' attention to a defining moment in U.S.-Cuba history, one that attracted the attention of the United Nations.

"The shoot-down is among the most pivotal events in U.S.-Cuba relations, and these questions certainly warrant discussion," Osterberg said of the candidates' interests.

WON'T GET VOTES

One expert dismissed the notion that tapping into the Brothers tragedy would solidify support from Cuban-American voters.

"It's not necessary to get votes," said Jaime Suchlicki, director of the Institute for Cuban and Cuban-American Affairs at UM. ``Remember that this kind of stance only works with a certain section of the Cuban community.

"But it is good policy for any candidate to stand up for justice. There were three American citizens killed here. Will an indictment bring down the Cuban government? I don't believe so, but it will go a long way to exposing the terrorist acts of its regime," Suchlicki said.

The Brothers to the Rescue tragedy played out on a sunny day, Feb. 24, 1996. The group had enjoyed great success patrolling the Florida Straits in search of Cuban rafters. But in 1994, when the Clinton administration struck a deal with Havana, Cubans intercepted at sea would be returned to the communist island under the U.S. "wet foot/dry foot" policy.

The group began to drop antigovernment leaflets over Havana. Cuban officials warned Washington to stop the flights.

The documentary shows the events of that day, as three Cessnas flew over Caribbean waters. Unaware of the approaching MiGs, two of the Brothers planes were blown out of the sky.

"We got them!" a cockpit transmission from Cuba later showed one pilot boasting.

Killed were Alejandro, Mario de la Peña, Carlos Costa and Pablo Morales, a Cuban exile who was not a U.S. citizen. The tragedy led to a Cuban spy ring bust in Miami.

In recent years, taped evidence has indicated that Raúl Castro gave the pilots the order to fire at the planes -- as instructed by his brother, Fidel.