

# Castro's at the edge; let's push

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**P**RESIDENT Clinton's policy toward Cuba is misguided, presumably because of his quest for Cuban-American votes, which, so far, has proven futile. Even if he stays his course on Cuba, it is unlikely that Cuban Americans will deliver Florida to the Democrats in 1996.

Domestic considerations also underlie the administration's recent miscalculation. For humanitarian reasons granting entry to Guantanamo refugee children and their parents is welcome, but it is not sound foreign policy. The administration's turnabout aimed to defuse the threat of hostile demonstrations by Cuban Americans during the Summit of the Americas. It violates the spirit of the recent immigration agreement with Cuba and sends the wrong signal to Fidel Castro and the Cuban people. If it suits his purposes, Castro can now unleash another flow of refugees upon the United States; the hundreds of thousands of Cubans desperate to flee the island might also reasonably conclude that taking their children along on the treacherous sea passage increases their chances of ending up in Miami.

Perhaps if President Clinton and his advisers fully understood the nature of Castro's present quandary, they might formulate a policy that better advances a peaceful transition to democracy.

Politically, Fidel Castro is finished. Even if the Clinton administration were to lift the embargo, Castro would not be able to reconstitute his rule. A majority of the Cuban people opposes his government and considers him an arrogant, self-possessed dictator.

Fidel the revolutionary is no more; Castro the *caudillo* is all that remains. He once derived authority from his compelling vision of social justice and national independence. Now he is but a caricature of his old self. Making the

dollar legal tender last year and reopening peasant markets in October were personal defeats — a *de facto* admission of political bankruptcy. More dramatic, Fidel the quintessential nationalist is now the consummate *Plattista*, blaming his government's predicament on the U.S. embargo and demanding its end before changing his ways. (The term *Plattista* stems from the U.S.-imposed Platt amendment to the 1901 Cuban Constitution which sanctioned U.S. intervention in the affairs of the young republic. It is an epithet nationalists levy against Cubans who look to Washington for solutions.)

The Clinton administration is too *Fidelista*, too swayed by the image of a conniving, masterful Fidel. It clings to the notion that further tightening the economic vise will finally force Castro to capitulate, a policy that patently fails to consider Castro's diminished leadership and the disarray of Cuban society. A new strategy requires a more nuanced understanding of Cuba's political reality.

Advocates of spiraling economic sanctions are myopic. These measures miss their mark; they assume a deterministic relationship between economics and politics that seriously misjudges the Cuban government's dilemma. Castro has learned to thrive in the face of U.S. hostility, whereas sudden openness would prove his undoing. Lifting the embargo unilaterally is not the only — though it would be the boldest — course. Rescinding the bans on travel and the sale of food and medicine would do for a start. U.S. sanctions are not the principal cause of the island's economic crisis, so why not ease them.

Precisely because of the political crisis the Cuban government finds itself in, the Clinton administration should promote people-to-people contacts, freeing U.S. policy from being always centered on Castro. Two of the measures taken in August to gain the support of the Cuban American National Foundation for eliminating the right of Cuban refugees to automatic asylum turned out to be particularly ill-advised: prohibiting dollar remittances to Cuba and curtailing travel to the island by Cuban Americans.

The Clinton administration should break loose from the *Fidelista* stranglehold. If it responded more imaginatively to the political crisis that Fidel Castro is facing, it would hasten the peaceful birth of democracy in Cuba.



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