

Freezerbox: Our Men in Havana

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POLITICS | 5.24.2002

The devil you know being better than the devil you don't, I was pleased to learn this week that Cuba still ranks high on our list of public enemies. I had been afraid, amid all the talk of Islamists, Central Asia and suicide fanatics, that our Cold War-era foes had tumbled down a few pegs on the scale of villainy, and the idea had troubled me. In these new and uncertain times, familiarity is always somewhat comforting. It is nice to see, frankly, that the new pariah is just the old one all over again. What I'm referring to, of course, is the latest round in Cuba-as-all-purpose-punching-bag, a venerable and bipartisan foreign policy that's been embraced by our last nine Presidents. The Bush White House has signed on in the last few weeks, and unleashed a new barrage of vitriol at our tiny neighbor to the south. The assault culminated on Cuban Independence Day, when the President, speaking in Miami, railed against the island nation's absence of democracy. He rejected the idea of lifting economic sanctions, and said that trade liberalization, in the absence of democracy, would be meaningless. He also accused the Cuban government of having imported "nuclear ballistic missiles," and of having "exported its military forces to encourage civil war abroad." He concluded with a flourish: "Cuba's independence was achieved a century ago. It was hijacked nearly half a century ago. Yet the independent spirit of the Cuban people has never faltered.... The United States is proud to stand with all Cubans, and all Cuban Americans, who love freedom. And we will continue to stand with you until liberty returns to the land you love so well. Viva Cuba libre!" Rousing stuff. Let's set aside, for a moment, the primary purpose of the President's speech, which was to get his brother Jeb re-elected governor of Florida in November. And while we're at

it, let's get something straight about the lone communist state in our hemisphere. On one count, Bush is right. Cuba is, in fact, a dictatorship, and I have little patience for those who romanticize it. To those pie-eyed leftists who insist that democracy will come to Cuba at the proper time, I say only that it has been forty years, and many Cubans who fought under Castro for freedom have died of old age without seeing it. For those who point out that Cuba is remarkably egalitarian, I say only that egalitarianism becomes less attractive when it means everyone has nothing. There is no freedom in poverty: poverty is capability deprivation. To be poor is to be immobile, to be without options, and to be robbed of choice. Having issued that disclaimer, however, I feel compelled to respond to some of our President's more ridiculous perversions of fact. His fulminations in Miami capped a week of dark insinuations about the Cuban state, most of them centered on the idea that Cuba was manufacturing biological weapons and selling them to other "rogue" nations. The administration produced no evidence to support this claim, probably because none existed, but making the charge nevertheless fueled the perception that Cuba is an enthusiastic fomenter of international mischief. The US has long designated it a state sponsor of terrorism, and virtually every opportunity portrays it as a destabilizing force in the Western hemisphere. It is hard to know where to start with all this. I suspect a good place might be the designation of Cuba as a "terrorist" state. For anyone unfamiliar with the history of such designations, this is probably a damning indictment indeed. But the United States has a checkered past when it comes to choosing its villains, and the terrorist label has been attached to many people who don't deserve it, and left off countless more who certainly do. In 1988, for instance, Nelson Mandela's African National Congress was deemed "one of the most notorious" terrorist organizations in operation. In that same year, however, neither Renamo nor Unita, which terrorized Mozambique and Angola, respectively, were on the list, probably because both were being supported by the United

States, and by the apartheid government of South Africa that ANC was trying to overthrow. For a more recent example of the list's haphazard criterion, consider that until September 11, Afghanistan wasn't on it, although the State Department knew Osama bin Laden had a stronghold there. As for the charges against Cuba, the United States, when asked to justify its terrorist designation, usually claims that Castro's government is harboring Basque separatists. This is without question a serious charge. Basque militants have tormented Spain for decades, and their terrorist army ETA has a long and blood-soaked history. But there is little evidence that Cuba is complicit in its crimes. The country is indeed home to Basque separatists, but they are not on the run from Spain. They came to Cuba as part of an agreement between the Basques, Castro and the Spanish government, as part of an effort to reduce tension and militancy back in Europe. None of the expatriates are suspected ETA members. Spain has never tried to extradite any of them, has never complained that they are mounting terror operations from Cuba, and--most damningly--does not consider Cuba a sponsor of terrorism. In fact, when two known ETA members sought asylum in Cuba, Castro's government not only turned them down, but also promptly informed Spanish authorities. Let's say, however, for the sake of discussion, that Cuba is harboring known terrorists. Does this merit sanctions and isolation? When Saudi Arabia gave asylum to Idi Amin, nary a call went up in US government circles to ostracize the oil kingdom. For that matter, Emmanuel Constant, a Haitian militia commander who murdered scores of people, and who is known in his homeland as "The Devil," resides with impunity in New York. The U.S. State Department, citing his ties to American intelligence agencies, refuses to turn him over to Haiti. Should we put Saudi Arabia on our list of terrorist nations? Should we put New York there?

We could go on ad nauseum in this line of thinking. But let us not wander too far from Bush's speech. Specifically, let's

discuss the charge that Fidel Castro hijacked Cuban democracy. Fidel Castro certainly didn't help Cuban democracy, but he didn't hijack it either, because there was nothing there to hijack. Cuba was ruled by Spain until 1898, when the United States, at the end of the Spanish-American War, forced the Spanish to give up the Philippines, Guam, Puerto Rico, and Cuba. The first three were made into U.S. colonies. Cuba was given its independence, but was also forced to swallow the Platt Amendment, which said the US Navy could keep a base in Cuba forever, that the US Marines could intervene in Cuba whenever America believed it necessary, and that Washington would largely determine Cuban policy. The United States took full advantage of these terms. A navy base was established in Guantamo Bay that exists there still (Ironically, it is where most of the prisoners from the Afghanistan campaign are being held; the vast majority of any terrorists in Cuba have been sent there by the United States). Between 1898 and 1934 the Marines invaded Cuba four times. And up until Castro's revolution, Cuba was ruled by the Batista regime, a wholly corrupt dictatorship that pandered to the interests of American corporations--particularly sugar companies--and to American organized crime. After the revolution came the Bay of Pigs, when the United States trained an army of Cuban exiles and sent it to overthrow Castro. The mission was a disaster, and led directly to Cuba's aforementioned importation of nuclear weapons (one of the conditions for the removal of Soviet missiles was a pledge not to invade Cuba again). But even after the Missile Crisis, when the world came as close as it has ever been to nuclear war, attempts to undermine Havana continued, ranging from the sinister to the absurd. Miami became a crossroads of anti-Castro activity, a staging ground for operations and a junction of intelligence agents, mobsters and hard-line Cuban exiles. Armies continued to train in the Everglades and launch sporadic assaults against the island, and organized crime figures were recruited to kill Castro in gangland-style hits. The CIA even toyed briefly with a plot to

lace one of Castro's cigars with LSD. A new low was reached in 1976, when Orlando Bosch and Luis Posada Carriles, both Cuban exiles and the latter a CIA-trained veteran of the Bay of Pigs, blew up a Cuban passenger plane over Barbados, killing 73 people. Both men lived in Venezuela at the time, and both were imprisoned in that country for destroying the jetliner. Both had also lived in the United States before the bombing, although neither could be called an exemplary citizen. Bosch could charitably be described as a maniac: he had lived in Miami in the 1960s, and spent his time there intimidating Castro sympathizers, distributing reactionary propaganda, and working with future Watergate burglar Frank Sturgis to orchestrate an air campaign against Cuba. According to Bosch's own testimony before Congress, during this campaign American mercenary pilots flew at least 11 missions out of Florida and dropped bombs on the island (Sturgis, incidentally, was known in Miami as a man with extensive contacts in the CIA). Bosch regularly threatened representatives of any country that traded with Cuba, and in 1968 he was arrested for firing a bazooka at a Polish freighter that had docked in Miami after leaving Havana. After his release from Venezuelan prison, Bosch returned illegally to the United States, and was quickly arrested. He requested asylum, but in 1989 the Justice Department denied his petition, on grounds that he was "resolute and unwavering in his advocacy of terrorist violence." Granting him citizenship, the DOJ said, would harm America's ability to "urge credibly other nations to refuse aid and shelter to terrorists, whose target we often become." This seemed a reasonable position. But Florida Senator Connie Mack, Florida Representative Ileana Ros-Lehtinen, and none other than Jeb Bush (Lehtinen's campaign manager) all lobbied for Bosch's release. The first George Bush chose his son over his Justice Department, and Bosch was set free. In 1992 Bush followed up by granting Bosch an administrative pardon. He continues to live in the United States, and remains unrepentant about the airliner. He told a reporter

who asked him about it: "You have to fight violence with violence. At times you cannot avoid hurting innocent people." As for Posada, he bribed his way out of prison in Venezuela in 1985 and immediately joined the CIA's contra war against the Nicaraguan government. He rose quickly within the contra ranks, partly because of his close friendship with Felix Rodriguez, another Bay of Pigs veteran who was Vice-President George Bush's liaison to the contras (Rodriguez had made a name for himself in the 1960s, when he was the CIA agent in charge of hunting down and killing Che Guevara. He was present for Che's execution, and took Guevara's wallet and watch back to America to prove he was dead. He was also present for the cutting off of Che's hands, which were presented as a gift to the dictator of Bolivia.) When the Nicaraguan conflict ended, Posada became involved in efforts to destabilize Costa Rica's government, and then in 1997 organized a string of bomb attacks on Havana hotels, one of which killed an Italian tourist. He is unabashed about his participation in these attacks, and untroubled by the loss of life. "It is sad that someone is dead," he told the New York Times, "but we can't stop. That Italian was sitting in the wrong place at the wrong time. I sleep like a baby." Posada is currently in prison in Panama, for plotting to kill Castro at a conference there last year. Within the Miami Cuban exile community, these men are heroes--Bosch has a street named after him. And it was to this community, and to these neighborhoods, that President Bush traveled to denounce Cuba as a terrorist regime. But the Miami exiles have terrorized Cuba far more than Cuba has ever terrorized the United States. And it is the height of hypocrisy to state that Cuba "exports civil war": few nations in the history of the world have exported war with the aplomb of the United States. In both 1999 and 2000 America sold over \$12 billion of weapons to foreign governments, and since 1991 it has been the number one source of arms for the Middle East, contributing in a direct and visceral way to the world's worst cycles of terrorism. This is to say nothing, of course, of America's

countless interventions and military adventures. Cuban soldiers, those "exporters of war," have not tread on half the soil of the US military. It is we who have a base on Cuba, after all, not the other way around. Our obsession with Cuba is bizarre. We insist that democracy and free elections must trump all else on that island, including business. This is an admirable stance, but it is also one to which we hold no other nation. The human rights abuses that exist in Cuba pale next to those in China, but our trade with China grows every day. China was granted its trade status, in fact, using precisely the opposite logic that governs our relations with Cuba. We were told, in China's case, that market reforms would be a crucial first step toward democratization. In Cuba we are told they will be meaningless. But China is different, the anti-Castroites howl. It is in Asia, not our backyard. It is large, and nuclear-armed. It was a Clinton-era decision, and Bush is here now. Fine. Six weeks ago, Bush welcomed the overthrow of Venezuelan President Hugo Chavez--a man who had twice been elected by the largest margins in Venezuela's history. We embraced his replacement, a Chamber of Commerce official who promised not to hold elections for a year, and promised as well to institute a friendly business climate. Ari Fleischer, Bush's spokesman, explained the Administration's position by saying that while Chavez had been "democratically elected," everyone had to realize that "legitimacy is something that is conferred not just by a majority of the voters." What Fleischer meant, of course, is that legitimacy is conferred by the United States. We decide when democracy is important, and when it is not. We decide who is a terrorist and who is a hero, and who is a leader and who is a fraud. And so we slap sanctions on a country that poses no threat to us, and invent new reasons to hate it, because we can't admit that its true crime is its refusal to approach us on bended knee. The sad truth about Cuba is that it has never been free, and the sad truth about America is that it has never cared. Our politicians travel to Florida and pander to murderers and thugs, and at the end

of the day look out over the world at all the people who distrust the United States, and wonder whatever could have gone wrong, whatever could have turned so many souls away from the love of freedom. Empires thrive on the absence of context; such are the questions that befuddle them.

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