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Center for International Policy

## **New Cuba Commission Report: Formula for Continued Failure**

By Wayne S. Smith

In May of 2004, the Bush Administration's Commission for Assistance to a Free Cuba issued an almost 500-page report that seemed to conclude the Castro government was virtually at the point of collapse. Just a few more nudges – a few more Radio Marti broadcasts, denials of a few more travel licenses, and support to a few more dissidents – and it would all be over. The United States, the report seemed to suggest, would then come in and show the Cubans how to operate their schools properly, make their trains run on time, and grow their crops more efficiently. It was envisaged as such a U.S.-run operation that in July of 2005, a U.S. transition coordinator was appointed. One skeptical observer noted at the time that in the case of Iraq, the Bush Administration had at least waited until it invaded and occupied the country before appointing a transition coordinator. Did his appointment in this case mean the U.S. intended to invade Cuba as well? And if not, what was the U.S. transition coordinator supposed to do from his office in the State Department building? Even today, that remains unclear.

Perhaps OAS Secretary General Jose Miguel Insulza's reaction to the idea of a U.S. transition coordinator for Cuba summed it up best. "But there is no transition," he said, "and it isn't your country."

Indeed, the transition plan put forward in 2004 had such a "made-in-the-USA" tone to it that it backfired in Cuba. Even Cubans who had their disagreements with the Castro government did not want to be told by the United States how they should run their country. Leading dissidents described the new approach as counterproductive. Elizardo Sanchez of the Commission for Human Rights and National Reconciliation, for example, noted that the U.S. policy announced in 2004, "has had an effect exactly the opposite of the one you should want."

Cuba's Catholic Bishops also disagreed with the U.S. approach, saying its measures "threaten both the present and the future of our nation."

Nor did many Cubans agree with the idea that they should give up free health care and education, and various other services provided by the government

**The New Report.** Now the Commission has issued a new report, at a ceremony on July 10 presided over by Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice, Commerce Secretary Gutierrez and Transition Coordinator Caleb McCarry. Interestingly, perhaps in response to charges that the first report was nothing but an American occupation plan, the new one stresses that its purpose is, rather, to offer assistance to Cubans on the island. Solutions must come from them, it insists. The United States simply stands ready and willing to support their initiatives. But having said that, the report then goes on with page after page

of recommended actions, from reorganizing the economy and the educational system to the holding of multiparty elections – always provided, of course, that Cubans on the island wish to initiate them!

And the basic premise, that the regime is on the verge of collapse, is as pronounced and as unrealistic in the new report as in the old. Two years have passed and rather than collapsing, the Cuban economy has shown strong signs of reinvigoration. Even the CIA gives it a growth rate of 8%. Cuba has new and vitally important economic relationships with Venezuela and China and indications of an important new oil field off the north coast, for which various nations are bidding for drilling sites. Things are looking up, not down.

There is no indication of that in the new report, however. Rather, it says: “Chronic malnutrition, polluted drinking water, and untreated chronic diseases continue to affect a significant percentage of the Cuban people.” And of course adds that: “Conditions will not improve as long as Fidel Castro remains in power.”

Never mind that UN indices consistently indicate Cuba’s population to be considerably healthier than those of most neighboring states, including the U.S. territory of Puerto Rico – one reason being that they have free health care. It is interesting to note also that life expectancy for Cubans is five years longer than for African-Americans!

**Funds Diverted for International Meddling.** Whatever the earnings produced by the Cuban economy, the report insists they are used not for the Cuban people, but for nefarious purposes. “The revenue ... does not go to benefit the Cuban people,” the report insists, “but is diverted to maintain the regime’s repressive security apparatus and fund Castro’s interventionist and destabilizing policies in other countries of the Hemisphere....The Castro regime’s international meddling is done at the expense of the needs of the Cuban people.”

First of all, if this were so, if funds had been so massively diverted, Cubans would no longer have free health care and education and other social-welfare programs would have long since collapsed. That they have not is evidence that the report’s allegations are false. Further, it provides no example of this “international meddling” to which such a huge share of the Cuban economy is supposedly being channeled. Cuban doctors have been sent to many other countries, including Guatemala and Haiti, in addition to Venezuela and Bolivia. They have been praised on every occasion for their excellent and selfless assistance. If this is the meddling to which the report refers, there should be more of it. If it is not, then the report should provide examples of the interventionist actions to which it has reference.

**Prevent Succession.** When Castro passes from the scene, he will, under the Cuban Constitution, be succeeded by the Vice President. At this point in time, that is Raul Castro. There will be many within that new leadership structure, and many within Cuban society, arguing for political and economic reforms – just as there will be other voices opposed..

The principal objective of the Bush Commission’s new plan, however, is to prevent the succession altogether, calling on Cuban citizens and the international community to reject the government that would replace Castro under the Cuban Constitution and to insist instead on an entirely new one. But neither the Cuban people nor the international community are likely to take so frontal a position against a successor regime. Change, rather, will have to come about slowly and as the result of an internal

process, not as the result of a formula imposed from abroad – and certainly not one imposed by the United States. As Oswaldo Paya, one of Cuba’s leading dissident leaders, stated a few weeks ago in anticipation of the publication of this second report: “We do not accept transition programs made outside of Cuba.”

**Measures to Block Succession.** The Bush administration’s objective, as stated in the new Commission report, is to see to it that “the Castro regime’s succession strategy does not succeed,” but the measures put forward to achieve that goal are as inadequate as were those put forward two years ago to bring an end to the Castro government.

**Expanded Broadcasting.** The new report, for example, calls for increased Radio and TV Marti broadcasting and an expansion of third-country broadcasting. But the broadcasting already conducted over the past two years, of the one kind or the other, hasn’t had any appreciable effect on public opinion. More of it isn’t likely to have any more.

**Support for Dissidents and Civil Society.** The report two years ago called for support to dissidents and representatives of “civil society” as a means of confronting the government. The new report calls for more of the same, and even for the establishment of an \$80 million fund to increase that support. But as in an earlier report we quoted one dissident on the island summing up the effect of that support: “The good news is that most of that money remains in Miami; the bad news is it makes our position more difficult even so.”

What he meant is that much of the money is given to organizations in Miami, some of it, supposedly, to pass on to groups in Cuba, but that little in fact gets through; it stays with those in Miami. Further, when the U.S. says its objective is to bring down the Cuban government, and then says that one of its means of accomplishing that is by providing funds to Cuban dissidents, it in effect places them in the position of being the paid agents of a foreign power seeking to overthrow their own. Inevitably, that puts them in an even more difficult position and severely limits their effectiveness.

That will be no less true now than in the past. The new fund, in short, is not likely to have any greater impact than did the old one, especially as, as noted above, many of the dissidents themselves do not agree with the U.S. action plan. It should be noted, for example, that one of Cuba’s leading dissidents, Oswaldo Paya, on July 1 of this year, published an opinion piece in *The Washington Post* emphasizing that Cubans wanted to preserve the right to free health care and education – something at odds with the recommendations in the original Commission report. Paya has also said he wants the U.S. embargo to end and for Americans to be allowed to travel to Cuba, a position that has enraged hard-line exiles in Miami.

**Curtail Travel.** Measures were introduced two years ago to sharply reduce the travel of Americans and especially Cuban-Americans, and to curtail remittances and parcel deliveries. Claiming that these measures have had great success, the new report calls for their strengthened implementation. But while the new restrictions on the travel of Americans and Cuban-Americans to the island have of course reduced revenues from that source, overall revenues from tourism have not fallen, since Canadians, Europeans and Latin Americans (especially Venezuelans) have continued to travel in even greater numbers.

Moreover, this is a problem with several dimensions. It had long been an article of faith, for example, that the best way to get the message of American democracy abroad

was through the travel of American citizens. Does reducing their travel to Cuba, then, not work at cross purposes with the broader objective of encouraging change in Cuba? And whether the pain caused to divided Cuban-American families is worth the few millions denied to the Cuban government is an open question.

**No Assistance to the Cuban Council of Churches.** New measures are called for even against Cuban churches, through a tightening of regulations for the export of humanitarian items to ensure that exports are not consigned to entities that are “regime administered or controlled organizations, such as the Cuban Council of Churches.” This follows on denial of visas to various members of the Cuban Council of Churches, which the Bush administration insists is controlled by the Cuban government. As an American religious leader countered heatedly: “In that they have to play by the rules laid down by the Cuban government, they are of course ‘controlled.’ But to suggest that the Cuban Council of Churches is simply an instrument of the government is absurd. They are legitimate religious leaders whose cooperation we highly value.”

Be that as it may, American churches will no longer be able to send the Cuban Council of Churches humanitarian assistance, a prohibition the U.S.-based Church World Service is already vigorously protesting.

**Effort to Monitor Nickel Exports.** Given that nickel exports are now such an important source of revenues for the Cuban government, the Commission report calls for the creation an inter-agency Cuban Nickel Targeting Task Force to strengthen measures to control imports of nickel-bearing substances or products (i.e., “we won’t buy your steel if there’s any chance it contains Cuban nickel!”), and for several other measures to discourage other countries from buying Cuban nickel. Such tactics have been tried in years past with very little success. They are not likely to have any greater success now. Indeed, they are more likely to cause a strong negative reaction in the international community.

**Reaction of the Cuban People to Efforts to Undermine Their Economy.** One must wonder also how the Bush administration expects the Cuban people to react to its call for measures which can only have the purpose of making their own lives more difficult? Are they supposed to be grateful to the United States should its policies result in new shortages and thus be ready to support its campaign against their own government? Not likely. On the contrary, fostering a siege mentality in Cuba can only work against any popular support for U.S. policy.

**The Secret Annex.** The measures to block the succession process that are discussed in this report – or, at least those that are openly discussed – aren’t likely to work. However, the report carries an annex which it is said must remain secret for “reasons of national security” and to maximize its chances of success. We can only guess what is in the annex. Given the history of U.S.-Cuban relations, however, there will inevitably be speculation that it contains new assassination plots against Castro (although this time against Raul) and new plans for exile raids if not direct U.S. military action. There is already virtually no support in the international community for U.S. policy toward Cuba. The uncertainty and suspicion resulting from this secret annex are likely to reduce it even further.

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