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Public Diplomacy for Cuba at Fidel Castro's Last Gasp

by Stephen Johnson

Fidel Castro is nothing if not a master thespian. His disappearance and purported power shift to his brother Raúl on July 31 is still a mystery. According to *Miami Herald* columnist Andrés Oppenheimer, it could be a cynical charade to smoke out disloyal underlings or a genuine health crisis, or perhaps the dictator died and the regime needs time to regroup.

In any case, the drama is akin to Fidel's speeches: lengthy, opaque, and leaving anxious Cubans wondering what will happen to them next. Perhaps they should stop worrying and take charge of their own lives. But for them to feel confident enough to do that, they will need plenty of encouragement from sympathetic democrats around the world.

That doesn't mean President George Bush should announce that the U.S. government will do the job for them. On the contrary, this is the Cuban people's moment to reflect on what they've been deprived of over the last 47 years, lose their fear, and consider how to reclaim their future. That requires a judicious, coordinated communications strategy on the part of the democratic world.

Officially, the United States and other governments have primed the pump for years through foreign broadcasting efforts like Radio and TV Martí, some of which get through unjammed. Commercial radio stations also reach the island, and foreign visitors sometimes bring literature to break the regime's information blockade.

The good news is that the Cuban government has no new ideas or solutions to the island's problems. Fidel and Raúl expressly set up the Communist Party and the National Assembly as parallel organizations, peopled by rivals, to compete in approving and enforcing the Maximum Leader's pronouncements. They provide an institutional facade for a one-man state.

The bedrock of the regime, the Revolutionary Armed Forces which Raúl created, is unlikely to do more than put boots on heads for a short period. According to former Castro official Alcibiades Hidalgo, its mission is to prepare for "War of All the People" and enforce martial law in case of Fidel's incapacitation or death, but not much more. Again, it lacks ideas outside of defending the fatherland against a U.S. invasion.

Outside messages to the Cuban people should be both personal and institutional. It would help if the Mart's and responsible commercial broadcasters feature candid messages from Cubans living abroad, thoughtfully emphasizing that what they do with their own lives is their business, not the state's. They should explain how the

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government should belong to the people, not to its leaders.

Personal stories can highlight the individual successes of the Cuban diaspora's entrepreneurs, professionals, sports heroes, and celebrities who have benefited from living in free societies throughout the world.

To avoid misidentifying dissidents with the United States, which the regime considers its adversary, European and Latin American broadcasters should be the ones to discuss homegrown transition initiatives like the Varela Project and National Dialogue, both created by Cuban dissidents.

It is also time for Latin American countries like Mexico, Chile, and Uruguay to step up to the plate. While it would be uncharacteristic for them to bid either Castro brother ill, it would be appropriate for their leaders to wish the Cuban people strength in creating a vibrant free society in which all citizens can realize their dreams.

President Bush should point out how long Cubans have waited for the freedoms that nearly every American enjoys. And he should also emphasize that Cuba's next leader should be chosen by the people, through competitive elections. Smoke-filled rooms are no place for the peoples' patrimony to be carved up by generals and sycophants.

The Helms-Burton Act that codifies U.S. sanctions against the Cuban regime is now more important than ever as a negotiating tool. But its contents should be expressed as incentives to Cuba's leaders.

For instance, Cuba could enjoy basic trade relations with the United States when ordinary Cubans may establish and run their own businesses and work for whom they wish. Diplomatic ties could be restored when Cuba celebrates competitive elections and guarantees certain civil liberties. Restrictions on American tourists visiting the island could end when Cubans may travel freely and work where they please.

And then there is the possibility of aid as contemplated by the President's Commission for Assistance to a Free Cuba. Conditions for aid should be clearly stated to Cuba's leaders and frequently broadcast to its citizens over U.S.-sponsored Radio and TV Martí, acknowledging that these choices are theirs, as well.

Sociologists tell us that there are certain times when people are more apt to change behavior than others, such as when opportunities present themselves and when they experience a significant emotional event. Both conditions are present in Cuba.

It may be that the lights have dimmed on Fidel Castro's stage, the curtain is closing, and the microphone is finally off. Whether the old man is gasping and still pointing in the air with his index finger seems increasingly irrelevant. Now is the time for a communications strategy to open a path for true Cuban self-determination.

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