Bush’s Insane Approach to Cuba
trying to save Cuba or trying to save votes?
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By Mark Sawyer

Albert Einstein once defined insanity as “doing the same thing over and over again and expecting different results.” George Bush recently in making a speech on Cuba policy and in many ways reflecting on his failed attempt to bring democracy to Iraq, lapsed into just this form of insanity. Bush in a seemingly high minded speech on October 25 affirmed support for the destructive decades long blockade against Cuba as the prime strategy for destabilizing the Cuban Revolution and bringing democracy to the island 90 miles to the South of Florida.

Regardless of how one feels about Fidel Castro or the Cuban Revolution, the US embargo against Cuba is insane. It hurts the people it purports to help. Most dissidents on the island do not support it, and it hurts Black Cubans the very most. Further, the blockade is counter-productive. Everyone knows that interaction and engagement lead to change over time while hostility and isolation maintain the status quo as it has for over forty years. Even a card carrying Communist knows that the number one way to destabilize the regime is to allow Americans to travel there freely, for Cubans to come and go freely to the United States, to allow Cuban athletes to compete in professional baseball and boxing without defecting, and to open up opportunities for trade and economic engagement with the small island. We trade with communist China and Vietnam where 58,169 Americans lost their lives. We now have friendly trade relations with both countries and basketball star Yao Ming can be seen by both Chinese communists and American citizens in the NBA. Why the difference?

It all comes down to Florida and the critical Cuban American vote. Cuban American exile leadership demands that we punish Castro and Cuba, but meanwhile their community members send money home to support their families. This policy insures the status quo. Money from Miami means Cuba will never get poor enough or engaged enough to begin to change or collapse, and the exile leadership keeps Castro as the main issue allowing them to dominate exile politics.

But let’s get to the crux of the issue. If Cuba were to collapse the number one fear of the Bush administration and the Cuban exile leadership is that one million mostly black and brown Cubans would show up at our doorstep in Florida. These people will not look like Ricky Ricardo but more like Haitian boat people, with the caveat of being educated, sophisticated and concerned about racism and inequality.

The current system helps to undo one of the advantages of the revolution – the reduction of disparities in income and infant mortality, and an increase in life expectancy and literacy. Cuban blacks have the longest life expectancy of any black population in the world. That is in sharp contrast to pre-revolutionary Cuba where inequality reigned.
That same population of now Miami-based Cubans who governed over black poverty and illiteracy later in Florida also denounced Nelson Mandela as a terrorist and embraced the apartheid regime as heroes for standing up to Castro. An infusion of Black people with different attitudes about politics, religion and everything else under the sun is not something they desire.

These Cubans of African descent will likely challenge the prevailing attitude that casts Cuban Americans as the "model minority" that overcame communism to become the ultimate Hispanic success story, in stark contrast to their darker fellow Latinos -- Mexicans, Puerto Ricans and Dominicans. While this perspective ignores the millions in government subsidies given to Cubans to build businesses and commerce in Miami, it plays an important function. It maintains the myth that Cuba is a "white" country and it helps the Republicans make the argument to other Latinos that if they would just vote Republican they too might taste the kind of success that the Cuban American leadership has seen.

So perhaps my opening is misstated. Bush's embargo is designed to keep Afro-Cubans poorer, punish them disproportionately for not overthrowing the Castro regime and most importantly, keep them in Cuba. Thus, the Bush speech was not really about Cuba and the Cuban people at all. The speech was designed to satisfy rabid Castro haters.

A sensible policy to bring "democracy" to Cuba would recognize the progress made by the revolution and create dialogue with American groups of all political stripes. The Bush brand of bringing democracy, fortunately for Cuba, is not as radical or as tragic as his failures in Iraq. But it is equally cynical and yes, in Einstein's definition, perhaps insane. We need a Cuba policy that focuses on the needs of the Cuban people, real change, and recognizes the realities of the world we live in. That, I suppose, is a lot to ask from Bush.

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