

Cuba Joins the List Of Bush Policy Messes

by Gretchen Small

Former President Jimmy Carter dropped a small bombshell on May 13, when he told reporters in Havana that Bush Administration officials had briefed him that they had no evidence of Cuban involvement in bioterrorism. Carter revealed this, with Fidel Castro standing at his side, after touring Havana's Center for Genetic Engineering and Biotechnology, one of the leading centers in the biotechnology program which U.S. Undersecretary of State for Arms Control John Bolton had just charged was involved in biowarfare technology proliferation.

Six days before Carter was to leave, on one of the biggest initiatives toward Cuba from the United States in years, Bolton delivered a speech to the Heritage Foundation, which he titled "Beyond the Axis of Evil," and in which he accused Syria, Libya, and Cuba of developing chemical or biological weapons. "Cuba has maintained a well-developed and sophisticated biomedical industry, supported until 1990 by the Soviet Union. This industry is one of the most advanced in Latin America and leads in the production of pharmaceuticals and vaccines that are sold worldwide," Bolton stated, as if this were a crime. "The United States believes that Cuba has at least a limited offensive biological warfare research and development effort. Cuba has provided dual-use biotechnology to other rogue states," he asserted, citing "suspicions" of "analysts and Cuban defectors."

'We Didn't Say . . . Weapons'

Cuba has a world-class biotechnology industry, which has produced 29 new vaccines, among them, eight for cancers, since the first biotech programs were established in 1979-81. It exports products, diagnostics, and technology transfer to countries ranging from India to Great Britain.

Visiting the Havana center on May 13, Carter praised the Cuban program as one which has benefitted "tens of millions of people around the world."

"With some degree of reluctance I would also like to comment on the allegation of bioterrorism," he added. "I do this because these allegations were made maybe not coincidentally just before our visit to Cuba." In the "intense briefings" received from administration officials before the trip, "I asked them specifically on more than one occasion: 'Is there any evidence that Cuba has been involved in sharing any information to any other country on Earth that could be used for terrorist purposes?' And the answer from our experts on intelligence was 'no.'"



The biggest impact of former President Carter's trip to Havana will be in the United States—among farm and business groups, many ordinary citizens, and even some anti-Castro Cuban-Americans who want travel between the two countries opened up.

Bush Administration officials scrambled. A State Department statement insisted that "Secretary Bolton's remarks reflect the consensus of what the administration's experts believe about Cuba and its biological weapons capability." Assistant Secretary of State for Inter-American Affairs Otto Reich—already under fire for the Venezuela coup fiasco—told Associated Press that Carter had not been briefed, because the information was classified until Bolton delivered his speech, and Carter's briefings had been held before this. That, however, proved untrue, as Carter had met with National Security Adviser Condoleezza Rice on May 9.

Secretary of State Colin Powell, while stating that "we do believe Cuba has a biological offensive research capability," corrected Bolton's charge a bit, by adding, "We didn't say it actually had some weapons, but it has the capacity and capability to conduct such research." A Bush Administration official, speaking on the condition of anonymity, admitted, according to the *Washington Post* on May 14, that they had no evidence to back up Bolton's assertion. Cuba has "a number of projects that are what could be dual-use things, but they're probably not—it's a question more of them exciting suspicions by not being open. I don't know of any tangible stuff." The Cuban press had a field day.

Then, the State Department issued its 2001 annual report on "Patterns of Global Terrorism" on May 21. Cuba was included in the list of countries designated as state sponsors of terrorism, but on the basis that it provides safe haven to such terrorist groups as Spain's ETA, Irish Republican Army members involved in training the Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia (FARC), and, possibly, the Chilean Manuel Rodríguez Patriotic Front. Much more could be said about

the Castro regime's sponsorship of the continental narco-terrorist São Paulo Forum apparatus, and particularly, its central role in the FARC-ELN-Hugo Chávez axis; but no mention was made of the bioterrorism charged by Bolton.

Otto Reich assured North Dakota's Sen. Byron Dorgan (D), nonetheless, that the charge stood; the State Department's report simply "was incomplete."

U.S. Presidential pre-candidate Lyndon LaRouche's comment on the Bolton flap, issued on May 13 and reported in last week's issue, was vintage LaRouche: "Even if there had been merits to aspects of his charges, it is not useful to get the U.S. involved in yet another situation it can't handle. Bolton reminds me of the typical American who would travel to Cuba in the pre-Castro days, proceed to get royally drunk, and then loudly threaten to satisfy all of the whores of Havana. It's this kind of typical 'gringo' attitude that gives a dirty name to being a gringo American, if Bolton didn't have it already."

A Missed Opportunity

Jimmy Carter's visit to Cuba, May 12-17, was treated by the Cuban government like none since Pope John Paul II's historic 1998 visit. Received with the honors usually granted a head of state, Carter had two official dinners with Fidel Castro, met with at least four Cabinet ministers, the Vice President, and the head of the Parliament, and toured Cuban schools, health facilities, a municipal council, and farm projects. He also received permission to meet with dissidents, which he did twice.

The most prominent moment of his trip, was a May 14 address at the University of Havana, broadcast on national television, and later published in full in Cuba's official daily, *Granma*. Carter called upon the United States to take the first step in changing relations between the two countries, by repealing the embargo, and permitting unrestricted travel between the two countries.

He made a pitch for greater democratic opening in Cuba, specifically mentioning the "Varela Project," a campaign by a group of dissidents who, only days before Carter arrived, presented a petition to the National Assembly, for a referendum on changing Cuban laws to permit freedom of expression and association, an amnesty for political prisoners, more openings for private business, a new electoral law, and a general election. The Cuban Constitution requires 10,000 signatures to call a referendum, and this one was signed by just over 11,000 Cubans. Until Carter's speech, the Varela Project had gone unmentioned in Cuba's government-controlled media.

Carter, however, offered as his vision for a future democratic Cuba, that it would participate in a Free Trade Area of the Americas—a proposal, in effect, that Cuba leave its current dictatorship, only to join another failed system, already in its death throes.

The biggest impact of Carter's trip may be felt inside the United States, rather than in Cuba. Pressure for an end to the

embargo on Cuba has been growing, from the farm lobby, to the food cartels, certain establishment circles, a growing number of Congressmen, and intelligent citizens.

Bush Goes to 'Little Havana'

The right-wing Cuban exile lobby, however, is powerful, particularly so in Florida, where the President's brother comes up for re-election as governor this November. It also has its people well-placed in the Bush Administration's Ibero-American policy team, both at the State Department (Reich) and the National Security Council. President Bush was quickly scheduled to give a speech on Cuban policy on May 20—at a Miami fundraiser for his brother's re-election campaign! White House spokesman Ari Fleischer's protestations at his May 15 briefing, that the administration's Cuban policy is made on "merits, not politics," left reporters chuckling.

To put a better face on the matter, a speech was scheduled for Bush at the White House on May 20, so he could unveil his "Initiative for a New Cuba" before he flew off to Miami for a Cuban-American rally and the \$25,000-a-plate Republican Party fundraiser, to raise \$2 million for his brother's campaign.

May 20 being the 100th anniversary of Cuban Independence, the right-wing Cuban-American organizations took over Miami as their own. Celebrations began with horsemen in Cuban cowboy attire carrying a torch to such beloved Cuban exile monuments as the Freedom Tower, the Bay of Pigs monument, and a cemetery where three Cuban former Presidents are buried.

The crowd was well-primed for Bush. His teleprompter interspersed sections from the morning's "policy" speech with bits of Spanish, lots of crowd-pleasers, and the following exuberant declaration of family values, which met with cheers: "I want to thank '*mi hermanito*'—(laughter)—'*el gran gobernador de este estado*.' Thank you, Jeb! We love you! '*Y mi cunada bella*.' (More applause.) I love being with my family. I love being with my family. There's nothing more important than family in life, and I love my brother, Jeb, a lot."

Literally, Bush's Spanish interpolations translate as "my little brother, the great governor of this state . . . and my beautiful sister-in-law," but a more accurate translation might be: "My kid brother's a jerk, but vote for him anyway."

The "Initiative for a New Cuba" announced in all this, boils down to a commitment not to lift the embargo, provide financing for Cuban imports of U.S. food, or permit unrestricted travel, unless Cuba conducts free and fair elections for the National Assembly in 2003 and permits international monitors to oversee them, allows independent trade unions, and implements political and economic reforms. The United States will, however, negotiate with the Cuban government to permit direct mail service to and from Cuba (which the U.S. side had blocked). Meanwhile, more money will be provided to U.S. humanitarian groups and non-governmental organizations operating in Cuba, and the like.