

Why mess with 40 years of success?

- George Bush reinforces the Cuban embargo

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Cuba policy *Demographics may yet succeed where reason has failed*

MIAMI'S harder-line Cuban exiles had been looking forward for months to the White House review of Cuba policy. They hoped for tighter restrictions on travel to the island, more money for Radio and TV Marti, the federally-run stations that beam propaganda across the Florida Strait, and perhaps even an indictment of Cuba's leader, Fidel Castro, for the shooting down of two exile aircraft in 1996. In the event, they got rather less. Mr Bush even suggested, with a softness more reminiscent of former President Jimmy Carter on his recent trip to Havana, that postal service would be resumed with the island and that NGOs would get money to send Cubans help. But the president, speaking to a cheering crowd of Cuban-Americans in Miami, was implacable on the most important thing: America's trade embargo against Cuba, in place more or less since Mr Castro's takeover in 1959, would continue. Mr Carter, on his visit, had called for the embargo to end. Mr Bush was having none of that. He ringingly endorsed the embargo, and promised to veto any attempt by treacherous legislators to water it down. Only on certain conditions would he relent: if Mr Castro allowed opposition parties and free trade unions, if he freed all political prisoners, and if he allowed human-rights organisations and international observers to ensure the fairness of elections in 2003. "Once, just once," Mr Bush challenged him, "show the world you respect Cuban citizens enough to listen to their voices and count their votes." For good measure, Cuba was included, as expected, on the list of state sponsors of terror released the next day by the State Department (see box on previous page).

The president's hard line can only have done him good where it counts: in finely-balanced Florida, where he almost lost the 2000 election and where his brother Jeb, the governor, is up for re-election in November. On the day of his speech, a \$25,000-a-couple fundraiser at the home of Armando Codina, a Cuban-American developer, brought in \$2m for Republican causes. According to a new study by

Cynthia Thomas, a Dallas public-policy analyst, in the past three years Cuban-American business executives have contributed an estimated \$1.8m to Democrats and Republicans alike. But Republicans see Cuban exiles as a dependable store of votes, and as their proportion of the Latino population of Florida has shrunk - from 43% in 1990 to 32% today - so the Bush brothers are all the keener to hang on to them.

Keep it in the family

Increasingly, however, the administration's stand on Cuba could be out of step with American opinion. Farmers and business groups, who see the island's potential, have been pressuring Congress for years to end the embargo. Numbers of politicians, both Democratic and Republican, agree that the embargo has only strengthened Mr Castro (four decades is quite a long time for a strategy to fail). Bill Clinton got very close to ending it, before Mr Castro shot down the exile aircraft.

The most interesting change, though, could be demographic. About 250,000 Cubans, most of them young, have come to America since the new migration accords of 1994. A recent poll, commissioned by the Miami-based Cuba Study Group, found that although 61% of exiles still support the embargo, 52% think sanctions should no longer be the focus of American policy. Some 56% would favour an amnesty for Castro officials who co-operated with a transition to democracy, and 46% would like the ban on tourist travel lifted.

The same study also found that 48% of Cuban exiles are sending precious dollars home, bolstering the Cuban economy to the tune of \$600m-\$950m a year. A majority would like to send more to the beleaguered island if they could. Despite the reinforcing of the wall between America and Cuba this week, family feeling should break it down eventually - though not before Jeb has been safely re-elected.

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