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EDITORIAL

Wrong Time to Lift the Embargo

BY ROGER E. HERNANDEZ

In the wake of Fidel Castro's resignation, it is not difficult to find pundits dismissing the Cuban embargo as a Cold War relic supported only by a handful of old men in Little Havana, "hard-liners" who have somehow taken control of U.S. foreign policy between domino games at the nursing home.

Pundits and congressmen, I should say.

"I wonder what twisted new rationale they will create to continue their failed policies," says Jose Serrano, the South Bronx Democrat, about those crotchety right-wing viejos down in Miami. His press release actually compliments the Cuban dictator: "This important figure defies the attempts of his critics to paint him simply as a power-hungry authoritarian. Instead, it proves that Castro sees clearly the long-term interests of the Cuban people."

Yes, a member of the United States Congress, explicitly and without shame, defending an internationally condemned violator of human rights. And Serrano is not even Republican.

Serrano was one of more than 100 con-

gressional representatives who sent a letter to Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice calling for a "complete review of U.S. policy" because the current policy "leaves us without influence at this critical moment."

You see, Castro's resignation brings the possibility of "a new chapter," Arizona Republican Jeff Flake, another signatory, tells us. "Whether that new chapter will be open, however, largely depends on a new approach to Cuba by the U.S. government," he says.

So don't fault Cuba's 49-year-old, one-party, Marxist-Leninist, Maximum-Leader system for failing to embrace democracy. Blame America first.

And Flake is not even a Democrat.

Actually, what would really really leave the United States without influence in Cuba is to unilaterally lift the embargo without preconditions, as some have urged.

There would be no better gift for an essentially unchanged Cuban regime than re-established trade with the United States or (their fondest hope) a friendly normalization of diplomatic relations. The Havana leadership hopes that with U.S. backing, the

system can perpetuate itself for a generation. And that is why the embargo cannot be reduced to an outdated policy favored by a couple of old guys in Miami. The embargo cannot bring democracy to Cuba, but lifting it at the wrong time can keep democracy out.

Still, Cuba is in a moment of uncertainty, or at least less certainty than there was before Fidel Castro became ill. Should U.S. policy just proceed unaltered as if nothing had happened?

There have been calls for an incremental lifting of the embargo, calibrated on what actions Havana takes. "If the Cuban leadership begins opening Cuba to meaningful democratic change, the United States must be prepared to begin taking steps to normalize relations and to ease the embargo of the last five decades," went Barack Obama's statement on Castro's resignation.

Nothing new there. The embargo has always rested on the premise that if Havana moves toward democracy, Washington lifts the embargo.

Which is all that Miami is saying anyway. ■

— Roger Hernandez is a syndicated columnist and writer-in-residence at New Jersey Institute of Technology.

OPINION

Whose politics of fear?

BY RICH LOWRY

Last month, in the words of Nancy Pelosi, House Democrats struck back against "fear" and "fear-mongering." They let the terrorist surveillance program expire, thus making a stirring gesture of national self-confidence and fearlessness.

House Democrats probably can't sustain their stand against renewing the program over the long term, so they will have managed a Pyrrhic defeat, losing on the policy and exposing a major political vulnerability for the fall.

President Bush compromised with Senate Democrats on a renewal of the surveillance program that passed by a 2-1 margin. The program monitors the communications of terrorist suspects outside the United States, which the president has the inherent authority to do. The legal and political controversy has arisen because many overseas communications now -- in the age of fiber optics -- travel through the United States and has gotten entangled with the Foreign Intelligence Surveillance Act.

FISA plainly isn't meant to apply to

foreign communications. Its purpose is to protect people in the United States from being targeted for national-security surveillance unless there is a finding of "probable cause" by a special FISA court that they are an agent of a foreign power. But a judge on that FISA court ruled early this past year that foreign communications must meet the same probable-cause standard under the law. According to Director of National Intelligence Mike McConnell, our intelligence yield dropped off by a catastrophic two-thirds.

The urgency of the situation led to the quick passage this past summer of the Protect America Act that exempted foreign communications from FISA's restrictions. The act had a six-month sunset. The House has now let it expire.

House leaders shrug and say that the essential authorities remain in place for another six months. This is a dodge. We can continue to surveil current overseas targets, but can't pick up any new targets without FISA's onerous restrictions -- a severe hampering of our intelligence.

House Democrats tell themselves they

are striking a blow against the politics of fear. But only if we suffer another mass-casualty terror attack will a politics of untrammelled fear be unleashed on the land. Best to do all we can to avoid it, especially when it involves nonviolations of the non-rights of non-Americans.

It's not as though Democrats don't traffic in their own politics of fear. Barack Obama summons a dark vision in his speeches of Americans denied economic opportunity and health care by lobbyists and callous corporations. Indeed, Exxon puts our planet "at risk." It's just that terrorists don't make his fright list. In his victory speech after the Potomac Primary, Obama warned of using "9/11 to scare up votes."

Naturally, Obama opposed the Senate's FISA deal, and he even denounced the telecoms that have cooperated with U.S. intelligence as "special interests." Here is a major opening for John McCain. The Arizona Republican will never out-inspire anyone, but he can lead a serious national discussion of what we reasonably should fear, and how Obama, and the Pelosi wing of the Democratic Party of which he is the soaring avatar, discount it at our peril. ■

— Rich Lowry is editor of the *National Review*.

MOMENTS IN TIME

• **On March 6, 1899**, the Imperial Patent Office in Berlin registers Aspirin, the brand name for acetylsalicylic acid, on behalf of the German pharmaceutical company Friedrich Bayer & Co. In its primitive form, the active ingredient, salicin, had been used for centuries in folk medicine.

• **On March 7, 1946**, actress Joan Crawford, born Lucille Fay Le Sueur in 1905 in Texas, is awarded the Oscar for her performance in "Mildred Pierce." Crawford made some of the finest films of her career after age 40.

• **On March 8, 1986**, "Mask," starring Eric Stoltz and Cher, opens. Cher, who

had launched a serious acting career with her appearance in Robert Altman's "Come Back to the Five and Dime, Jimmy Dean, Jimmy Dean" in 1982, received the Best Actress prize at the Cannes Film Festival for her role in "Mask."

• **On March 9, 1913**, writer Virginia Woolf delivers the manuscript of her first novel, "The Voyage Out," to her publisher. In 1941, fearful for her own mental state and afraid of the coming world war, she filled her pockets with rocks and drowned herself.

• **On March 10, 1876**, the first discernible speech is transmitted over a telephone system when inventor Alexander

Graham Bell summons his assistant in another room by saying, "Mr. Watson, come here; I want you."

• **On March 11, 1888**, in one of the worst blizzards in U.S. history, New York City grinds to a near halt, with elevated trains blocked by snow drifts and unable to move. Up to 15,000 people were stranded on the elevated trains.

• **On March 12, 1969**, the London drug squad appears at the house of Beatle George Harrison and wife Pattie Boyd with a warrant and drug-sniffing canines. Sergeant Norman Pilcher, the man behind the raid, was convicted of planting drugs in other cases and went to jail in 1972. ■