

Richard Cohen

U.S. Policy: Held Hostage in Miami

Question: Who sets U.S. policy toward Cuba?

(A) The president.

(B) Congress.

(C) Any Cuban American with an airplane.

The answer, apparently, is "C"—or, if you'd like a name, Jose Basulto. He is the leader of Brothers to the Rescue, the humanitarian group with a political mission, and a survivor of the recent massacre in the skies near (or over) Cuban waters. Four others died when their unarmed Cessnas were downed by Cuban MiGs. They were brave men.

It is important to say, as the American government has, that Cuba was wrong. The downing of the two planes, no matter what their location, was a violation of international law—not to mention common decency. It was as if the police here had caught some burglars red-handed, determined they were unarmed and executed them on the spot. Fidel Castro committed murder—and not for the first time.

Whatever its faults, though, the nature of the Castro regime is well known. It is a museum piece, a relic of the communist era, frozen in ideological amber and, like Pavlov's famous dog, predictable in its reaction to certain stimuli. After years of a U.S. embargo—after the Bay of Pigs and other CIA operations, after Radio Marti and numerous attempts at coups, a farcical facial (the CIA tried to make his beard fall out) and, probably, assassination—it would be just plain insulting to call Castro paranoid. The man has enemies, and they are out to kill him.

One of them, in fact, is Basulto. Not only was he flying the one plane that was not downed, but he announced himself to the Cuban authorities as

the guy in the cockpit: "Cordial greetings from Brothers to the Rescue, from its president, Jose Basulto, who is talking."

That greeting, it turned out, was met with a warning: "Sir, be informed that the north zone of Havana is activated." Basulto was then told he was in "danger," and he responded with an acknowledgment: "We are aware that we are in danger each time we cross the area to the south of the 24th [parallel], but we are willing to do it as free Cubans."

Ah, but Basulto is not merely a "free Cuban." He is also a Cuban American. As such he reminds me of those zealous Israeli settlers who, citing the Bible, declare a certain spot divinely zoned for Jewish occupation and promptly establish a settlement there. The Arabs respond with clenched teeth and unsheathed daggers, and the settlers demand that the Israeli army protect them. Which side are you on? they demand to know, ours or the Arabs? The army moves in.

In this case, the Clinton administration is playing the role of the Israeli army. Deep down it has all sorts of reservations about the United States' traditional Cuba policy, but it cannot afford to show good sense lest it be seen as weakness. The boycott of Cuba has done little more than make the Cuban people miserable. Castro remains—resplendent, entrenched and still wearing those silly fatigues. He is no more and no less a communist than the leaders of Vietnam, old foes with whom we now do business.

The influence Cuban Americans have over U.S.-Cuba policy is neither illegitimate nor novel. American Jews have a passionate concern about Israel,

and the Irish here are intensely interested in the Irish there. One might even suggest that the recent U.S. occupation of Haiti would not have happened were it not for the political clout of African Americans—an assertion, you might say, a fact, I would insist.

Yet, some Cuban Americans are in a class of their own. Basulto, for one, does more than write his congressman or raise money. He was at the Bay of Pigs and, a year later (1962), was one of 23 men who took two converted PT boats into Cuban waters and shelled a Havana suburb. The Associated Press named him "the man behind the gun." Since then, he has formed Brothers to the Rescue, which, among other things, has dropped anti-Castro leaflets on Havana, testing the dictator's celebrated sense of humor.

Basulto had been warned by both Washington and Havana to watch his step. That does not excuse the subsequent killings, but it does tend to explain them. The same holds for Washington's policy toward Havana. It's easy enough to explain why Washington toughened the embargo in response to the shoot-down (all those votes in Florida), but harder to excuse. It makes little sense. Toughening the embargo causes ordinary Cubans—not Castro—to suffer even more.

The Clinton administration had little choice but to get tougher with Castro. But it has to be firmer, too, with certain Cuban Americans. U.S. policy toward Cuba, inching toward sanity until the recent shootings, cannot become the captive of anyone, no matter how well-intentioned, who literally flies off on his own. More than planes got shot down the other day. So did U.S. policy.