

Jim Hoagland

Twilight of the Thugs

Fidel Castro has demonstrated anew his zest for creating mischief for a U.S. president seeking reelection. But Cuba's cold-blooded shooting down of two unarmed U.S. civilian aircraft on Saturday also shows the insecurity and desperation that now envelops the Western Hemisphere's last dictator and his kind.

The two Cessnas piloted by Cuban exiles, out to help fleeing rafters and perhaps drop propaganda leaflets on their homeland, were mosquitoes buzzing around El Jefe's beard. Castro was not strong enough to laugh them off. Instead he turned them into martyrs. His savage response is the act of a wounded, cornered animal fighting off the end.

To be sure, there is a mountain of politics and diplomacy to be worked through in the days to come, with debates flowing here over whether President Clinton's classically incremental response to the shoot-down was overly mild.

But the focus should stay on Castro and his regime, revolutionary relics floating like debris in the wake of the Soviet collapse of 1991. Just as time ran out on the Soviet Union five years ago, it is now running out for the rogue regimes and rulers who have clung to power in the Third World after the demise of their superpower protector.

The same lurching, cornered quality of the Cuban shoot-down is apparent in the grisly spat between Saddam Hussein and the two defectors-in-law he accepted back to Iraq and then had executed, and in Moammar Gadhafi's desperate efforts to construct the most grandiose poison gas factory in history in the empty Libyan desert. Instead of fiddling as their regimes crumble, these modern Neros pass their time by expanding their repertoire of murder and mass destruction.

North Korea plays out its version of the communist endgame by black-mailing the United States and its allies for financial help to stave off a total, sudden collapse. Vietnam plays the game by opening up to foreign investment and trade, an approach Syria toys with, trying to wrinkle concessions out of Warren Christopher and Shimon Peres for doing so. China and Iran, which also practice Soviet-style tyranny at home and criminality

Time is running out for the rogue regimes.

abroad, do not—alas—appear to be as close to revolutionary burnout. But cheer up. I could be wrong, particularly about China.

Why get our hopes up now? Because the extinguishing of the Soviet sun has left this shrinking universe of thug-rulers without a center, without a system of political gravity. They have lost their international reason to exist. They have coasted for five years on the strength of brute force and in some cases on the political and financial glory of nationalized oil or other resources coveted by the West.

But the disgrace and isolation Castro, Gadhafi, Saddam, Syria's Hafez Assad, North Korea's Kims and the others have brought on their nations can no longer be justified in the name of international revolutionary glory or hidden from their citizens. The growing isolation of the world's outlaws is underscored by their willingness to serve as platforms for the pitch of an itinerant American snake oil salesman—that is,

for the race-baiting of Louis Farrakhan, recently hosted by Gadhafi, Saddam, the ayatollahs and the criminals who run Nigeria, and others.

Farrakhan is no doubt right when he says he has a constitutional right to travel to these countries and meet with whomever he likes. But Americans who were willing to grant him the benefit of the doubt based on his Million Man March, and the promises of reconciliation and tolerance he voiced there, would be fools to continue that openness after his Grand Tour of Murder Inc. International.

Congress should not give Farrakhan a new platform by bringing him to town for hearings that, as a master showman, he can manipulate. Farrakhan has said everything Americans need to know by kissing the blood-stained rings of the killers with whom he has cavorted on this trip.

But this does not mean that America should passively wait for the world's second-tier thugs and their would-be acolytes to disappear into the sunset created by the collapse of communism. Keep the focus on the Friends of Farrakhan. Make it clear that any financial transactions between the rogues and any Americans, including Farrakhan, will be investigated and if warranted prosecuted. President Clinton should not remain silent on the minister's travels.

On Cuba, keep the focus on Castro. Clinton's Republican rivals lack a sense of history and proportionality in concentrating their fire not on Castro but on the president's low-key, still evolving response to the shoot-down. We fall into Castro's trap if we let these murders become an American political football. You can almost hear Castro laughing and saying, "There they go again."