

**“U.S. TELEVISION NETWORK NEWS COVERAGE OF
THE CARTER VISIT TO CUBA, MAY 2002 ”**

Walter C. Soderlund

**Professor Emeritus
Department of Political Science
and
Acting Director
Centre for Social Justice
University of Windsor
Windsor, Ontario
N9B 3P4**

Phone: (519) 253-3000

Fax: (519) 973-7094

E-mail: <akajake@uwindsor.ca>

**Paper prepared for presentation at the
Annual Meeting of the Canadian Political Science Association
Halifax, Nova Scotia
May 30- June 1, 2003**

INTRODUCTION:

For nearly fifty years, from Fidel Castro's attack on the military barracks in Santiago de Cuba in 1953, continuing through the success of the Revolution in 1959 and traumatic events such as the Bay of Pigs invasion in 1961, the Missile Crisis in 1962, the shoot-down of two American-based aircraft by the Cuban air force in 1996, and into the new millennium, Cuba has occupied a unique place in the foreign policy concerns of the United States. Due largely to the efforts of its remarkable revolutionary leader, Cuba has been a factor not only in the politics of the Western Hemisphere generally, but, during the 1970s and 1980s, in those of Africa as well. Most significantly, through a military alliance with the principal Cold War antagonist of the United States, the leader of a small island nation located some ninety miles from U.S. shores, brought the Cold War dangerously close to the United States. In one way or another, Fidel Castro has been a major irritant in the lives of no less than ten presidents, beginning with Dwight Eisenhower and continuing through the first years of the George W. Bush administration. In short, the hostile relationship between the United States and Cuba ranks among the most long-lived and unpleasant in contemporary world politics (see Domínguez, 1989; Erisman, 2000; Bardach, 2002).

In this paper we will examine U.S. television network news coverage of a potentially significant development in this relationship-- the May 2002 visit by former U.S. President Jimmy Carter to Cuba. Over the period May 10 to June 1, the Carter visit and its ramifications were covered in 16 television news stories appearing on the premier evening news programs of three of the major U.S. television networks-- ABC, CBS, and NBC. The Carter visit marked a major change in Cuban foreign policy towards the United States, as it appeared that, at long last, Mr.

Castro was genuinely interested in warming the frigid climate in which the bilateral relationship has been entrapped for over forty years. In that television news is the major source of information about the world for the American public, its coverage of this event could serve as a significant input into U.S. foreign policy decision-making with respect to Cuba through the process of agenda-setting (see Cohen, 1963; McCombs and Shaw, 1972; Iyengar and Kinder, 1987; Norris, 1995).

PAST MEDIA COVERAGE OF FIDEL CASTRO AND CUBA:

Given the history of Cuban-American relations since the revolution, it is not surprising that throughout his tenure as Cuba’s leader, U.S. journalistic assessments of Fidel Castro have been quite negative.

TABLE 1
Percentage of Descriptors in *The New York Times* reflecting
Positively and Negatively on Fidel Castro, 1953-1992
(Neutral and Ambiguous descriptors omitted)

	Positive	Negative	Total
1953-1958	68%	32%	100%
1959-1962	20%	80%	100%
1963-1987	24%	76%	100%
1988-1992	14%	86%	100%

Table 1 shows data from a study of *New York Times*’ descriptive references to the Cuban leader from 1953 to the beginning of the Clinton presidency. Here we see, following a generally favourable press prior to his coming to power in 1959, an uninterrupted negative press portrayal of the Cuban leader (Soderlund, 2001).¹

Television is a mass medium that while sharing certain characteristics with newspapers,

is qualitatively different from the print medium in at least three important ways: (1) due to severe restrictions on available time, television news reports tend to be brief (two minutes being considered a long story); (2) in order to attract viewer attention, complex situations tend to get portrayed as conflicts between personalities (Gitlin, 1980); and (3) despite the above liabilities, it is primarily to television news that American audiences turn for news of world events (Iyengar, 1991; Larson, 1990; Rotberg and Weiss, 1996).

Over the past decade I have been involved in research on television news coverage of Cuba in three projects. The first is a study of U.S. network television news coverage dealing with Cuba between 1988 and 1992, paralleling Period IV in *The New York Times* study. The study found nine “issue clusters”: (1) Drug trafficking and relations between Fidel Castro and Panama’s Manuel Noriega; (2) the Cuban military withdrawal from Angola; (3) Mikhail Gorbachev’s visit to Cuba and Cuban-Soviet relations more generally; (4) the trial and execution of Cuban general and Angolan war hero, Arnaldo Ochoa; (5) the ongoing Cuban economic crisis; (6) human rights abuses in Cuba; (7) the Pan American games hosted by Cuba; (8) Fidel Castro himself (as ruler and personality); and (9) new insights into the Cuban Missile Crisis that emerged from a Havana conference featuring Russian, American and Cuban participants (Soderlund, Wagenberg and Surlin, 1998).

Following this study, now into the period of the Clinton presidency, the first of two post-Cold War events examined was the *balseiro* or rafter crisis that occurred over the summer of 1994. Due largely to worsening economic conditions on the island, in early 1994 an increasing number of Cubans began leaving for Florida in small boats and rafts. After August 12th, when Fidel Castro gave orders to his police and border guards not to interfere with those wanting to

leave, the flow of refugees increased to a level that constituted a crisis for the State of Florida. The situation brought to mind the chaos of the 1980 Mariel Boat lift, when 125,000 Cubans landed in the state (Ackerman and Clark, 1995).

In response to Castro's actions, on August 19th President Clinton changed the immigration rules that had allowed Cuban refugees virtually automatic entry into the United States. Cuban refugees were now to be interdicted at sea and returned to the U.S. Naval Base at Guantanamo Bay, Cuba. As well, Mr. Clinton terminated family visits and charter flights to Cuba and, most importantly, cut off remittances from Cubans in the United States to their families in Cuba. Talks to end the crisis between Cuba and the United States began on August 26th and concluded successfully on September 9th, when an immigration agreement was announced whereby the U. S. government would issue 20,000 visas annually to Cubans wanting to immigrate to the United States (Domínguez, 1997). On September 13th, only five days prior to an anticipated U.S.-led invasion of Haiti to restore Jean-Bertrand Aristide to the presidency, Castro reimposed border controls and the flow of rafters came to an abrupt end.

The third study deals with the February 1996 Cuban Air Force shoot-down of two civilian aircraft piloted by a Miami-based Cuban exile group, "Brothers to the Rescue." This group had risen to prominence in the 1994 rafter crisis, when it flew missions over the Straits of Florida, locating drifting rafts, radioing their location to the U.S. Coast Guard, and dropping fresh water to the rafters. Following the end of the crisis, in search of a new mission, the group began to agitate for the removal of Fidel Castro, and, on a number of occasions, violated Cuban airspace to drop anti-Castro leaflets on Havana.

While not confirmed, apparently an overflight of Cuba was a part of the Brothers to the

Rescue mission on February 24, 1996, as three Cessna aircraft piloted by members of the group entered Cuban airspace without authorization. When Cuban MiG fighters were scrambled to intercept them, the planes left Cuban airspace. In the pursuit that followed, two of them were shot down over international waters, killing the four pilots onboard.

The shoot-down left Mr. Clinton with a problem. On the one hand, the president did not want to let the crisis escalate into a military confrontation with Cuba, and, on the other, he needed to be seen to be taking some resolute action to punish Fidel for his misdeed. The result was that the Helms-Burton Bill, legislation that Mr. Clinton had opposed as it targeted businesses in countries dealing with Cuba and, in the opinion of most, violated well-established principles of international law, suddenly took on new life (see Lisio, 1996). After the bill was passed by both houses of Congress, President Clinton signed it into law in mid-March in the presence of the families of the deceased pilots.

TABLE 2
Percentage of Descriptors in U.S. TV News Stories Reflecting
Positively and Negatively on Fidel Castro, 1998-1996
(Neutral and Ambiguous descriptors omitted)

	Positive	Negative	Total
1988-1992	21%	79%	100%
1994	15%	85%	100%
1996	15%	85%	100%

As we see from Table 2, which incorporates data from all three of these studies, the pattern of negative evaluations of Fidel Castro documented in *New York Times*' reporting, was largely replicated in television news coverage from 1988 to 1996 (Soderlund, Wagenberg and Surlin, 1998 and Soderlund, in press).²

In examining these data more closely, first of all it is evident that during the transition years from the Cold War to the New World Order, television news presented only a slightly less negative image of Fidel Castro than was seen in *The New York Times* (79 percent negative descriptors versus 86 percent). Somewhat paradoxically, it also appears that from 1988 to 1996, as the actual military threat inherent in the earlier Cuban alliance with the USSR declined and disappeared, Castro's media image became even more negative.

CUBA POLICY UNDER THE CLINTON PRESIDENCY:

With the Cold War coming to an end and a new Democratic administration in power, conditions for a change in U.S. foreign policy towards Cuba and its leader were clearly present. Such policy changes are certainly not beyond possibility-- to varying degrees they have occurred in the recent past with respect to China and Vietnam. In short, absent a military threat arising from Cuba's military ties with the USSR, it is important to understand that a "forgive and forget" approach toward Fidel Castro could have been adopted by the Clinton administration. Clearly, this did not happen.

Given that instability in Cuba, rather than military action, now presented the most significant threat to the United States (Latell, 2000), it is interesting to examine the reluctance on the part of the Clinton administration to improve relations with a post-Cold War Cuba. According to Walt Vanderbush and Patrick Haney, the failure to engage Cuba still under Castro's political control can be explained largely in terms of American domestic politics, both electoral and presidential-congressional (1999). Given the concentration of Cuban-Americans in the key Electoral College states of Florida and New Jersey, and with marginal countervailing interests pushing for improved relations, there simply was no impetus for a policy change. As

well, the 1990s were characterized by greater Congressional activism in foreign policy and Cuba was a country in which presidential primacy was being challenged. In these circumstances presidential political advantage lay in maintaining the hard-line status quo.

The intersection of these two political arenas are explained by Vanderbush and Haney as follows: At the time of the 1992 election, the Cuban Democracy Act (better known as the Torricelli Bill) was making its way through Congress. Although President Bush the elder had inherited the support of the Cuban American National Foundation (CANF) and its leader Jorge Mas Canosa, he was reluctant to give the bill his support on the grounds that it infringed “on the President’s constitutionally mandated powers to conduct foreign affairs” (1999, p. 394). Sensing an opportunity to attract Cuban-American voters, gain financial contributions to his campaign, and force Bush to devote political resources to a normally safe constituency, Democratic candidate Bill Clinton seized the initiative and endorsed the bill: “I have read the Torricelli-Graham bill and I like it” (as quoted in Vanderbush and Haney, 1999, p. 394; see also Bardach, 2002, pp. 128-129). Clinton’s manoeuver had the effect of pushing the reluctant Bush to the side of the Cuban Democracy Act, which was designed to tighten the embargo and bring about the economic collapse of the Cuban government in the period immediately following the withdrawal of Soviet/Russian financial support. Domestic electoral considerations also seems to explain the Clinton administration’s withdrawal of Mario Baeza’s name for the position of Assistant Secretary of State for Inter-American Affairs in the face of opposition from members of Congress as well as the CANF. As summarized by Vanderbush and Haney, “The perceived influence of the CANF over presidential appointments by the first Democrat to hold that office in

more than a decade gave some indication that Cuba was not a place where the Clinton administration intended to immediately to challenge the policy status quo” (1999, p. 396). Thus, in spite of a team of foreign policy advisors, including Warren Christopher, Anthony Lake, and Strobe Talbott, who were on the record “about the need to reevaluate, if not change, U.S. policy toward Cuba,” President Clinton continued the policy of supporting the trade embargo with Cuba, that with the passage of the Torricelli Bill, had become even more restrictive (Vanderbush and Haney, 1999, p. 397).

Another key reason for a continued American policy of hostility toward Cuba is that Fidel Castro was not really interested in improved relations with the United States, save perhaps the unilateral ending of the U.S. trade embargo (Suchlicki, 2000). As Andreas Pickel has argued, the formula underlying Castro’s longevity has been the fusion of socialism and nationalism, combined with charismatic leadership (1998, pp. 78-79). In this context, defending his nation against U.S. imperialism had long been the trump card used by Castro to justify his rule, and, during the 1990s, his rhetoric, as well as actions, indicate that he was far from enthusiastic about relinquishing it. The looming presence of a hostile United States, poised to undo the benefits of the revolution and return Cuba to the role of an American protectorate, served Castro’s efforts to shore up a faltering revolution perfectly (Falcoff, 1998). For example, in the context of the 1994 *balseo* crisis, David Rieff cites the comment by Cuban dissident Eloy Gutiérrez Menoyo (made partly in jest), that “if he were President Clinton, he would call Castro and tell him that if he allowed one more rafter to leave, the United States would lift the embargo immediately. ‘That would put an end to it, I guarantee you’ ” (as quoted in Rieff, 1996, p. 76).

The circumstances surrounding the passage of the Cuban Liberty and Democratic

Solidarity Act (the Helms-Burton Bill) in 1996, which, among other things, codified the Cuban trade embargo into law,³ provides another example where the Cuban leader's actions firmed up American resolve not only to maintain, but to intensify its hard line policy (Falk, 1997; Smith, 1998). The shoot-down of two Brothers to the Rescue aircraft by the Cuban air force, killing three American citizens, left President Clinton few options but to support a bill that was obviously seriously flawed and, which previous to the shoot-down, had been opposed by the administration (Leogrande, 1997). Michael Radu offers the following assessment of Castro's motivation for attacking the aircraft: "Once again, just as in 1980 [with the Mariel boat lift], Castro decided that American hostility serves his purposes better than the threat of a Washington embrace" (1998, p. 546).

The significance of the Carter visit is that for the first time, Fidel Castro indicated by inviting Jimmy Carter to Cuba and giving him unrestricted access to address the Cuban people on Cuban television, that he was actively seeking better relations with the United States. It is to how this Cuban diplomatic initiative was presented to the American people through U.S television news that we now turn our attention.

FINDINGS:

In May 2002, former president Carter responded to an invitation from Fidel Castro to visit the island. Two major issues were on the agenda: (1) domestic political reforms in Cuba leading to greater democratization and human rights and (2) an easing or ending of the 40-year old U.S trade embargo. It would be to understate the case to say that the Bush administration was not pleased with the former president's visit to Cuba (Bardach, 2002, pp. 348-349). In view of this hostility, it is significant that on the eve of Mr. Carter's visit, Undersecretary of State John

Bolton (a Bush appointee to the U.S. State Department) charged that “the United States believes that Cuba has at least a limited offensive biological warfare research and development effort” (CBS, 2002, May 13), and, in the view of Ann Louise Bardach, “there was little doubt that Bolton’s primary target was the imminent visit by former President Jimmy Carter to Cuba” (2002, p. 345). Thus, at the last minute, these charges, along with Mr. Castro’s denials and Mr. Carter’s support for the Cuban position were added as a wild card to the mix of issues. President George W. Bush’s response to the Carter visit, delivered to a Cuban-American audience in Miami on May 20th, just after Mr. Cater’s return to the United States, was predictable in terms of its Cold War-era, anti-Castro rhetoric. So too, was Mr. Castro’s retort to Bush, delivered on June 1 (Cuba, 2002). In all, over the period from May 10 to June 1, the Carter visit was covered in 16 network TV news stories. And, although the position of the U.S. government toward Castro and Cuba had not changed, media coverage of the island’s leader and government clearly had. Moreover, this change was not in the direction hoped for the by the Bush administration.

TABLE 3
Story Characteristics
N=16

	Percentage
Lead Story	6%
First Three Positions	44
30 Seconds and under	19
3 Minutes and over	19
Reporter in Cuba	69
Use of Experts	19
Two or more news segments	13
Video of Bush	38
Video of Castro	94

Video of Carter	75
Video of Castro and Carter together	50

In viewing the various dimensions of the network TV news coverage of the Carter visit, we see in Table 3 evidence of reasonably strong media interest. While only one story led off a newscast, nearly half occupied one of the first three positions. The same number of stories (three each), ran for 30 seconds or less as ran for 3 minutes and over. Nearly 70% of stories featured a reporter covering the story from Cuba, while expert analysts contributed their insights to 19% of stories. Only two stories contained multiple news segments.⁴ Fidel Castro clearly won the visual representation contest, appearing in fully 94% of stories. Jimmy Carter appeared in 75% of stories, while the two leaders were shown together in 50%. George W. Bush appeared in 38% of stories.

Reporters are seldom on hand to cover events live, rather they have to rely on sources to construct news stories. As pointed out by Steven Livingston, “Most of the power to define reality... resides at the point of reporter-source contact” (1996, p. 70). In this context, sources used by reporters (either on-camera or quoted) are the first link in the journalistic gatekeeping chain and are crucial to the manner in which a story is portrayed (Mermin, 1997). As Table 4 indicates, the cast of major characters contributing to news stories dealing with the Carter visit is fairly condensed. Jimmy Carter, Fidel Castro, the U.S. State Department and Cuban dissidents dominated the attention of journalists, while the U.S. President and the U.S. Congress received somewhat less interest, used as sources a total of four times each.

TABLE 4
Number of Times Leading Sources Used
N=16

	Lead Source	Total
Jimmy Carter	6	12
Fidel Castro	4	7
U.S. State Department	3	7
Cuban Dissidents	0	6
George W. Bush	3	4
U.S. Congress	0	4

Framing has been defined by William Gamson as “the central organizing idea for making sense of the relevant events and suggesting what is at issue” (1989, p. 157). Further, as explained by Tod Gitlin, framing is used by journalists to “process large amounts of information quickly and routinely: to recognize it as information, to assign it to cognitive categories, and to package it for efficient relay to their audiences” (1980, p. 7), and, as Robert Entman adds, framing can be employed to define problems, diagnose causes, offer moral judgments, and suggest remedies (1993, p. 157).

Table 5 shows the major frames employed by journalists in the coverage of the Carter visit. In the battle between political reforms and the embargo, somewhat surprisingly the democratic reforms frame clearly outstripped the end the embargo frame by some 25 percentage points, with the bio-terrorism frame trailing the embargo by yet another 25 percentage points. Implications of the visit to American elections (both nationally and in Florida) and Cuban-American relations more generally, round out the coverage and were employed mainly as secondary or tertiary frames.

TABLE 5
Percentage of Stories Containing Media Frames
(N=16)

Primary	Secondary	Tertiary	Total
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Democratic Reforms	50%	38%	/	88%
U.S. Embargo/Trade	25	25	12.5%	62.5%
Bio-Terrorism	25	6	6	37.5
U.S. Elections	/	6	6	12.5
U.S.-Cuba Relations	/	/	12.5	12.5

“Spin” is another important factor in media coverage and Table 6 shows the percentage of stories that were seen to take a pro-normalization of relations with Cuba stance, as opposed to those that supported the maintenance of the status quo. On this dimension, three possible coding outcomes were possible. Of these, pro-normalization carried the day, encouraged in 56% of stories. While 25% of stories took no clear position or did not deal with the issue, only 19% of stories were seen to be supportive of maintaining the status quo.

TABLE 6
Percentage of Stories Taking a
Pro-normalization or Pro-Status Quo Position
(N=16)

Pro-Normalization of Relations	56%
Pro-Status Quo	19%
Ambiguous/No stand taken	25%

Language is the raw material out of which journalistic evaluations are crafted and in this context, words and phrases used by reporters to describe political leaders are an important indicator of their feelings about these actors, as well as the positions they represent. Table 7 shows the balance between positive and negative descriptors used with respect to the three major leaders involved in the visit-- Jimmy Carter, Fidel Castro and George W. Bush. That former president Carter was

described overwhelmingly in positive language is not surprising. His humanitarian efforts, recognized by the receipt of Nobel Prize in the fall of 2002, had been apparent for many years. Significant in the coverage of the Carter visit is a marked departure from the negativity that characterized U.S. media coverage of Fidel Castro, as we have seen, literally from the time he first came to power in 1959. Also, while George W. Bush was not a major actor in the visit for most of its duration, it is significant that a very popular president fared no better than he did with respect to positive descriptive language, especially when compared to such a dedicated opponent of the United States as Fidel Castro.

In an introduction to the visit former President Carter was described as “the first American president since Calvin Coolidge to visit Cuba.” Moreover, his undisputed reputation as a champion of humanitarian interests underlay his positive reception by the media, as seen in language such as “he has a record of devotion to human causes.” Likewise, he was seen as a political heavy-weight, having “both the motivation and capital to engage Castro.” It was also pointed out that Carter was even-handed, criticizing “both the U.S. trade embargo and the Castro dictatorship.”

TABLE 7
Percentage of Descriptors Reflecting
Positively and Negatively on
Jimmy Carter, Fidel Castro and George W. Bush
(Neutral and Ambiguous descriptors omitted)

	POSITIVE	NEGATIVE	TOTAL
Jimmy Carter (N=35)	83%	17%	100%
Fidel Castro (N =30)	42.5%	57.5%	100%
George W. Bush (N=29)	52%	48%	100%

By and large, his uncensored speech on television to the Cuban people was portrayed as a

success: “he told the Cuban people things about their island that most had never heard before”... “a former U.S. president on television, live, uncensored, and lecturing to the Cuban government on the need for democratic reforms” and “[shaking] his finger at the Cuban government, calling it undemocratic and saying it needed to change.” As well, he was lauded for “single-handedly [boosting the Varela project’s] prominence and [bolstering] the dissidents”... “until Mr. Carter spoke, the average Cuban knew nothing about the human rights movement here” and “it’s hard to overstate the impact of Mr. Carter’s speech here in Cuba.” Bardach describes the speech as follows:

“With Fidel Castro and most of the politburo seated in the front row, the Sunday Bible teacher endorsed the Varela Project, gave a failing grade to the country’s human rights record and rued its tortoise crawl to democracy. But he also laid waste to American policy, dismissing the Embargo as a vestigial relic. ‘Our two nations have been trapped in a destructive state of belligerence for forty-two years...and it is time for us to change our relationship and the way we think about each other. Because the United States is the most powerful nation, we should take the first step’ ” (2002. p. 349).

At the same time there were realistic appraisals in news reports regarding the lasting importance of the visit: “it is too early to assess the impact of the visit”... “it is pure delusion to think one trip by a former U.S. president guarantees immanent concrete changes in Cuba”... “Carter’s speech will not lead to a revolution”... “that change [in Cuba] may come slowly, if not at all” and that “his speech was ignored in government newspapers.”

Carter played his controversy with the Bush administration over the bio-terrorism charge very carefully. In responding to administration charges, he pointed out that in his pre-trip briefing by the State Department, in response to his question on the issue, he was told that there was no evidence of Cuban involvement in the transfer of bio-technology to powers hostile to the United States. He also deflected possible criticism over supporting the Cuban position by pointing out, that unlike Cuba, “we take great pride in our freedom to criticize our own government.” The only comment that

attacked Mr. Carter personally, was offered by Florida Congresswoman Ileana Ros-Lehtinen: “it hurts us to see a man of Jimmy Carter’s credibility lend legitimacy to Fidel Castro.” The majority of language used to describe Carter took a decidedly different tack: “Carter’s trip has been extremely positive” and “he made the most of his invitation.”

Of potential significance, the Carter visit marks the first time since the rupture in Cuban-American relations following the Revolution, that we see evidence of a recasting of the descriptive language pertaining to Fidel Castro and the Cuban government-- 42.5% positive as opposed to 57.2% negative. We interpret this as a significant change, although certainly not a change amounting to a “conversion” in media attitudes toward Castro and Cuba (see Deutsch and Merritt, 1965).

Negative language attached to Castro, for the most part, was a continuation of the type seen since the immediate post-revolutionary period: “dictator”... “tyrant”... “43-year record of iron-fisted rule”... “using the embargo as an excuse for Cuba’s poverty”... “losing his capacity to inspire fear” and “a relic from another era who has turned a beautiful island into prison.” However, for the first time since the 1950s, a positive dimension to Mr. Castro’s behaviour received considerable attention. It was pointed out that he had “aided the United States in its war against drugs” and that he had “stayed silent as Washington put prisoners from Afghanistan at Guantanamo.” A change in Castro’s attitudes toward Washington was also mentioned, as it was pointed out that “he wants better relations with the United States” and “is open to efforts to negotiate.”

It was, however, in his responses to charges of promoting biological warfare, specifically as restated by Colin Powell (in language worthy of Bill Clinton for its specificity), that “we do believe Cuba has a biological offensive warfare research *capability*,” (ABC, 2002, May 13- italics by the author; in his delivery, Mr. Powell appeared to stress *capability* as opposed to the earlier charge of

effort), that Mr. Castro scored most heavily with the television journalists. He “strongly denied the charges” and “dared the State Department to backup its charges with public evidence.” Moreover, he told Mr. Carter publically, “You can go anywhere and talk to anyone.” Further, Ricardo Alarcón invited the American people “to come down and see for yourselves” and accused Undersecretary Bolton of “Lying from the first to the last word.” In turn, Mr. Carter, speaking from a Cuban biological research facility, reported that in his pre-visit briefing by the State Department he specifically asked : “Is there any evidence that Cuba has been involved in sharing any information with any country on earth that could be used for terrorism purposes?” (ABC, 2002, May 13). In that the answer to this question reported by the former president was “no,” Mr. Castro’s position that the U.S. charge was “an Olympic-sized lie,” was given even greater credibility.

If the Bush administration’s strategy was to discredit Mr. Castro and to distract the media covering the visit by hijacking the agenda, things could not have turned out worse. On the original two issues, the administration stood to loose on the continuation the embargo and win on the need for political reform in Cuba. By adding biological warfare to the agenda, they ended up losing two out of three, as they appeared caught with having made a weak charge (in its final form, probably applicable to most reasonably sophisticated university bio-medical research laboratories) and then failing to back it up when challenged. Bardach summarizes the controversy as follows: “The fact that Cuba has one of the most advanced biotechnology programs in the world was hardly news, and Bolton’s claim that the program, which has won kudos for its vaccines and medical research, could also be used to do harm was also not news” (2002, p. 345).⁵ In the final analysis, the responses of Mr. Castro and Mr. Carter were presented as more credible than the State Department charge, allowing Fidel Castro to score unexpected points with reporters covering the visit.

Language used to describe President Bush and the U.S. government was split very nearly equally between positive and negative descriptors. On the positive side were comments that linked the embargo to the achievement of democratic reforms in Cuba: “to have a fundamental change in American foreign policy towards Cuba, there has to be a fundamental change in Cuba” and “the embargo is something that has to stay there until Cubans have the opportunity of live in a democracy.” On the negative side were references to the American president being increasingly out of touch with on-going events: of “lacking vision,” of “not looking at Cuba in the big picture because opportunities are there,” and of being “frozen in the past.” His motivations regarding continuing a hard line toward Cuba were also called into question: “Cuban-Americans are key to his reelection in 2004,” “Republicans need every single Cuban-American vote in Florida they can get” and “ with his brother’s reelection effort needing the support of anti-Castro voters in Miami, President Bush has no incentive to rock the boat.”

CONCLUSION:

In spite of the changes evident in media coverage, is hard to assess just how much to make of the balanced treatment of U.S. policy and the softening of media criticism of Fidel Castro that was evident in coverage of the Carter visit. It certainly would be premature to argue that it represents a shift of a magnitude implying that a policy change on the part of the United States would be inevitable. Moreover, just as with the case with the rafter crisis in 1994 and the aircraft shoot-down in 1996, it is crucial to point out that the nature of the event on which media coverage is focussed is an important factor in the way in which it is covered. That the Carter visit involved a former American president, who over the years had gained in stature; that Mr. Castro observed rhetorical “good behaviour” in meetings with Mr. Carter and in press interviews; that he abandoned his

customary military fatigues for suits and guayaberras for his well-photographed meetings with Mr. Carter; plus the unanticipated benefits created by an apparently politically motivated, ill-thought out American charge of Cuba's promoting of biological warfare-- all worked to Mr. Castro's advantage. Also important in this case is that there was no atmosphere of confrontation or crisis to bring to mind past negative behaviours on the part of Cuba. Thus, in the context of the Carter visit, it was Fidel Castro who came off as reasonable, while it was the Bush administration that seemed intractable in its views and behaviours.

An other important factor contributing to the changed media attitude towards Cuba was the emergence of a bi-partisan Congressional "Cuba Working Group"/business interest group coalition as a counter-weight to the CANF in the formulation of American policy towards Cuba (Bardach, p. 344; also see Horowitz, 1998). Specifically, American agro-businesses and farmers, that had been allowed to ship agricultural produce to Cuba in the wake of Hurricane Michelle, were anxious to solidify this new-found lucrative market (King, 2002, Aug. 14). Not surprisingly, given the entrepreneurial nature of American politics, Republican Congressmen (representing farm states) as well as Democrats, were quite vocal in their calls for lifting the embargo, getting on with life, and in the process, making money for their constituents. This is an important development, as within the Republican party there are now interests feeding into the policy-making process other than getting Cuban-American campaign contributions and votes at election time. If Lance Bennett's theory of *media indexing* is an accurate predictor, we should see the U.S. mass media paying greater attention to views calling for the lifting of the embargo as credible business and political elites give voice to them (Bennett, 1990).

Significant as well, the death of Cuban-American National Foundation leader Jorge Mas

Canosa, the consequent struggle for leadership within the CANF (resulting in the formation of a rival, ultra-hardline Cuban Liberty Council in October 2001), combined with the long, painful saga of Elian Gonzales have diminished, at least to some extent, the power of the Miami Cubans to control the direction of U.S. Cuban policy. In this context, it is interesting to note that Jorge Mas Santos, the son of Mas Canosa and new leader of the CANF, has adopted a more flexible approach in dealing with the Castro government than that followed by his father; “dialogue” is no longer a banished word in the relations between exiles and the Cuban government (Nielsen, 2003, Feb. 20-26).

However, all of these development in Cuban-U.S. relations, while moving in the direction of regularizing relations between the two countries, are unlikely to be sufficient to bring about major policy changes. George W. Bush’s icy response to the Carter visit to Cuba and his personal attacks against the Cuban leader (referring to him as a “tyrant” and a “relic”), made it clear that frosty relations continued to serve the electoral fortunes of the Bush brothers, if not those of the Republican party. At least this appears to be the case in Florida (both at the presidential and gubernatorial levels) where the President’s brother Jeb, successfully ran for reelection in November 2002 and where, if the 2000 election can be taken as a predictor, the president’s anticipated reelection bid in 2004 will require a strong Cuban-American voter turnout for him to carry the state.

Nor is it clear that in 2003 hostile relations with the United States do not continue to serve Fidel Castro’s interests.⁶ Toward the end of February 2003, it was reported in the *Miami Herald* that “the [Cuban] government has stepped up... a crackdown on supporters of the [Varela Project] reform movement”(De Valle, 2003, Feb. 20, p. 1A). By mid April, seventy-five dissidents had been convicted and given lengthy sentences for “helping U.S. diplomats undermine Cuba’s socialist

system. Castro made it clear he considers his country under U.S. attack.” He also reiterated that Cuba would “fight until the end [and that] we will die with the greatest dignity in the World” (*Windsor Star News Services*, 2003, April 14, p. B2). For its part, the Bush administration ““is not going to let this go passively”” (Jaime Suchlicki as quoted in Marx, 2003, April 20, A16). Speculation centred on “punishing Castro by further curbing American travel to Cuba or by limiting money transfers-called remittances- from Cuban exiles to friends and family members of the island.” Castro’s repressive actions also appeared to have spiked the cannons of those in Congress seeking to soften the U.S. economic embargo (Marx, 2003, April 21, p. A16).

Thus, it may well be, as Fidel Castro was reported to have said in the context of the earlier Brothers to the Rescue aircraft shoot-down, that “normal relations with the United States may never come in his lifetime” (CBS, 1996, March 2). We can add to Castro’s observation that this also appears to be the case at least as long as George W. Bush continues to occupy the White House. This said, the changes we have seen in media coverage of the Carter visit can be seen as an important start; for the first time since the end of the Cold War in the early 1990s, U.S. media looked at Fidel Castro and his government outside of the narrow set of parameters established some forty years ago, in an other era of world politics. While we see this as a positive development, given Castro’s subsequent crackdown against political dissidents and the current U.S. administration, “stockpiled” with hard-liners on Cuba (Bardach, 2002, p. 320), remaining in office, it is not likely to change the U.S. government’s behaviour toward its long-estranged neighbour.

NOTES:

1. Years studied in Period III include:
 - 1965- the U.S. intervention in the Dominican Republic
 - 1967- the death of Che Guevara
 - 1970- the Election of Salvador Allende

1973- the Pinochet coup and the death of Allende
1976- the Cuban intervention in Angola
1977- the Carter thaw
1979- the triumph of the Nicaraguan Revolution
1980- the Mariel boat-lift
1983- the murder of Maurice Bishop and the U.S. invasion of Grenada
1985- the inauguration of Radio Martí
1987- the campaign of “rectification of errors” and the defection of General Rafael Del Pino

2. Videotapes of these news stories, along with those covering the Carter visit, were furnished by the Television New Archive at Vanderbilt University. All coding and interpretation of these tapes was done by the author.

3. Prior to the passage of the Helms-Burton bill, the embargo had been based on an Executive Order, which would have allowed the president to rescind it unilaterally. At present, an end to the embargo would require Congressional approval, making any policy change more difficult.

4. A “news segment” is defined as a part of a total news story given focus by a single reporter. When the full news story is handled by the anchor, one news segment is counted. When a story is introduced by the anchor and then turned over to a reporter or reporters, the number of news segments equals the number of separate reporters used, as the anchor’s introduction is not counted.

5. In an article dealing with the effects of more stringent controls on biological research mandated by the USA Patriot Act, it was reported that up to “800 facilities [in the U.S.] will be impacted.” (Dorschner, 2003, Feb. 23, p. 15A.

6. Bardach predicted, however, that even if Fidel Castro did return to his old ways, the tide toward reform in Cuba had turned: “But no matter what the future holds for the Varela Project and Cuba’s dissidents, the mood has shifted among the Cuban *nomenklatura*. As the island awakens from its Cold War stupor, many who had one sought to leave are now banking on their future in Cuba and setting down their markers” (2002, p, 352). Obviously, the final words on this matter have not been written.

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