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RADIO MARTI: GETTING THE TRUTH TO CUBA

INTRODUCTION

The Reagan Administration has proposed that the United States establish a radio station to broadcast news to the people of Cuba. This so-called Radio Marti would break the information blockade that Fidel Castro has imposed on Cuba's citizens. It would get the truth to Cubans, letting them know the full extent, and cost, of Castro's activities at home and abroad.

The concept is not new. For years, Radio Free Europe has broadcast into Eastern Europe, as Radio Liberty has into the Soviet Union. Both tell their listeners living behind the Iron Curtain about events in, and concerning, their homelands.

Plans for Radio Marti have generated opposition from American broadcasters because Castro has threatened to retaliate by jamming on U.S. stations. Cuban jamming capabilities, however, are limited and costly. They could block broadcasts from other countries in the region with whom Cuba is trying to maintain good relations. Furthermore, American stations have the technology to overcome such interference.

The Administration's foreign policy critics also attack the plan. They call it provocative and suggest instead that the U.S. negotiate with Cuba for better relations. But Castro himself is the biggest obstacle to improved U.S.-Cuban relations. Moreover, Cuba for years has transmitted radio programs, laden with propaganda and anti-American rhetoric, into the United States and Latin America. Radio Marti, by contrast, would consist solely of news and entertainment; it would be prohibited from broadcasting propaganda. Establishment of Radio Marti would not preclude American negotiations with Cuba.

Radio Marti represents a peaceful, effective, and inexpensive foreign policy tool for U.S. efforts to deal with Fidel Castro's destabilizing activities. It can give the Cuban people the news and information about their own country and its activities that is currently denied them. It thereby may divert Castro's energies from creating instability abroad and focus his attention on problems closer to home.

BACKGROUND

The Reagan Administration repeatedly has sought ways to blunt Fidel Castro's adventurism. Since his takeover in 1959, Castro has vowed to export his revolution; in recent years, direct Cuban involvement in African, Central American, and South American affairs has grown ominously. For instance, Cuba has supplied proxy troops for the Soviet Union in Ethiopia and Angola. It has also trained and armed rebels in Nicaragua, Colombia, and El Salvador, to name just three trouble spots.

Castro's efforts at subversion, though, are not limited to the battlefield. Whenever he can drive a wedge between the U.S. and its neighbors, he does so.

A dramatic case in point occurred during the Falklands/Malvinas crisis. Cuba's relations with Argentina's right-wing military government had never been good. But when the U.S. announced it would side with Great Britain in the conflict, Cuba suddenly became Argentina's best friend. Cuban propaganda carried relentless denunciations of the United States and praise for the Argentine struggle to defeat what Cuba termed "imperialist actions." Cuban delegates to the Organization of American States and to the United Nations pointedly supported Argentina's side in the dispute. Just this year, Fidel Castro endorsed a resolution of support for Argentina at the Non-Aligned Nation's conference in New Delhi.

Cubans are kept in the dark about their country's extensive destabilization efforts around the globe. They have not enjoyed a free flow of information for the nearly quarter-century that they have lived under communism. Cuba's mass media is strictly controlled by the government. The estimated 130 radio stations, three TV channels, and magazines and newspapers in Cuba give the public only the information that fits into the Communist Party line.

Not only do Cubans receive sketchy news about foreign affairs, they are told little about domestic events. They do not know, for instance, the full extent of Castro's vast political prison system and systematic violation of human rights, or about acts of industrial and agricultural sabotage committed by disillusioned workers, or of the Soviet Union's \$3 billion annual subsidy to keep the Cuban economy afloat. The Cuban people get information about events within their own country through official propaganda and by word of mouth, both unreliable.

In 1980, candidate Ronald Reagan's advisers suggested that the United States break this information blockade and enable Cubans to know what their government was doing at home and abroad. The idea was to direct Castro's attention away from international adventurism and toward domestic problems. They recommended a radio station devoted exclusively to the task.

After his election, Reagan endorsed the concept of such a radio station. The Presidential Commission on Broadcasting to Cuba was established in September 1981 to study its feasibility.¹ The panel's favorable report led to the drafting of plans for direct U.S. radio broadcasts to Cuba.

As originally envisioned, the new station would be named after José Martí, a 19th century Cuban patriot. It would beam programs of news, music, and sports to Cuba fourteen hours daily. The entire operation would be run by the Board for International Broadcasting, the same federal agency operating Radio Free Europe and Radio Liberty.

BROADCASTERS' OBJECTIONS

Plans for Radio Martí drew immediate fire from U.S. broadcasters. They expressed concern over threats by Castro that he would jam Radio Martí, fearing the effect of such action on American radio stations. They ignored, however, the fact that Cuban radio transmissions already interfere with U.S. stations, particularly in Florida. Cuba also has broadcast on frequencies and at signal strengths that violate international agreements. It has done so for years, long before plans for Radio Martí were announced. In addition, Castro revealed plans in 1979 for two Cuban AM "superstations" of 500,000 watts each, ten times the maximum power allowed to American stations. Such superstations could substantially disrupt radio signals throughout the U.S.

Castro apparently has played on American broadcasters' fears of radio interference. On August 30, 1982, in a display of radio muscle-flexing, Cuba broadcast four hours of programming at extremely high power over five AM radio frequencies. Twenty-two U.S. radio stations using those same frequencies encountered some interference with their broadcasts.²

The potential impact of Castro's threat, however, is overstated. Jamming has limitations and even drawbacks for Cuba. It requires transmitting high-power signals on the same wavelength as the targeted station in order to disrupt incoming signals. These can be simply noise and static to garble the offending broadcasts or "counterbroadcasting" that drowns out the incoming

¹ Executive Order 12323, September 22, 1981.

² "Cuban Radio War?" Washington Post, September 1, 1982, p. B-6.

signals by sheer power. Sustained jamming and counterbroadcasting, though, require quantities of electricity, which could tax severely Cuba's limited and expensive power-generating capabilities. Moreover, counterbroadcasting affects not only U.S. radio stations but also those of neighboring Central and South American countries with which Castro wants to maintain good relations. Already, Mexico, Venezuela, and Colombia, among others, have voiced concern over current and potential Cuban radio interference.

Jamming does not always work. The Soviet Union and its East European satellites have tried to block Western radio transmissions for years, but with only limited success. During the height of the martial law crackdown in Poland, for instance, Polish authorities sought to jam radio transmissions from the West. But by one account, an estimated 60 to 90 percent of Poles could still hear Radio Free Europe--despite the jamming effort.³

Even if Castro decides that the cost, effort, and consequences of jamming are worth it, U.S. broadcasters can overcome Cuban radio interference. Transmitter power can be stepped up, and the radio beam can be focused to reach target audiences with greater precision. Moreover, early plans calling for Radio Marti to use AM frequencies that are also used by other U.S. radio stations have been modified, so that Cuban attempts to block Radio Marti would not necessarily interfere with American commercial broadcasts.

With or without Radio Marti, though, rogue Cuban radio transmissions could remain a problem for American broadcasters. Eliminating Radio Marti is not the answer. The problem will be solved only when Cuba abides by international broadcasting rules and standards.

FOREIGN POLICY CONSIDERATIONS

Opponents of the Administration's foreign policy have argued that President Reagan seeks confrontation, rather than negotiations, with Cuba. They point to Radio Marti as proof of this, seeing it as an effort to provoke Castro.

Yet Cuba and other Communist countries long have used radio broadcasts to further their policies. Cuba transmits some 280 hours of programs to North America and the Caribbean each week. This is in addition to the more than 130 hours a week of Soviet broadcasts into the region, as well as broadcasts from East Germany, mainland China, and other Communist bloc countries into this Hemisphere.⁴

³ "Poland Censures Old Annoyer: Radio Free Europe," New York Times, May 11, 1982, p. A-2.

⁴ "Broadcasting to Cuba," National Review, July 23, 1982, p. 877.

Cuba's own radio broadcasts have not stopped the U.S. from trying to negotiate with Castro, just as Radio Marti alone would not preclude efforts to improve relations with Cuba. Rather, Castro has been the main obstacle to negotiations. He repeatedly has rejected both open and secret overtures for better relations. In addition, he refuses to discuss the issues of greatest concern to the United States: the Cuban military presence in Africa, his support of guerrillas in Central America, his complicity with drug smuggling into the U.S., and immigration matters. His dealings with the United States have been marked by intransigence and defiance.

The Carter Administration, for instance, made repeated efforts to reestablish relations with Cuba. During that same period, though, Castro sent more troops into Angola, dispatched forces into Ethiopia, supplied arms and training to the Sandinista guerrillas in Nicaragua, and released massive numbers of Cuban refugees through the Port of Mariel.

LEGISLATIVE HISTORY

Legislation to set up Radio Marti passed the House of Representatives on August 10, 1982, by a vote of 250 to 134. The bill cleared the Senate Foreign Relations Committee, but died in the Senate during the 97th Congress' lame duck session.

Congressional critics in both Houses expressed concern about the wisdom of the move from a foreign policy perspective. They questioned the cost of the new enterprise (an estimated \$7 million to \$10 million a year) and suggested the use of Voice of America facilities for broadcasting. They echoed broadcasters' concerns about potential interference with U.S. radio stations, should Cuba try to jam Radio Marti, and about the costs if American stations needed to purchase equipment to counter Cuban interference.

Some of the strongest objections to Radio Marti came from the Iowa congressional delegation. Original plans had called for Radio Marti to use a frequency of 1040 kilohertz (kHz) on the AM band, the same spot on the dial as station WHO in Des Moines. WHO is a so-called clear channel station, which means its power is boosted at night to reach much of the United States. Broadcasters there feared that Cuban jamming could block WHO's signal throughout the country.

The Radio Marti bill has been reintroduced in the 98th Congress with changes designed to address the concerns raised by the plan's opponents. The new legislation does not restrict Radio Marti to the AM band, but specifies that, should Radio Marti choose to use an AM frequency, it must use the one currently assigned to the Voice of America (1180 kHz). This would limit interference from Cuban jamming efforts to this government frequency and spare commercial broadcasts. To save money, Radio Marti would be permitted to use the VOA's broadcasting facilities as well.

The measure's supporters have called for a fund to compensate radio stations that suffer from Cuban radio interference. Legislation in the House included \$5 million for that purpose, and a similar amount will be proposed in the Senate.

To address foreign policy concerns, both the House and Senate bills contain identical language requiring that broadcasts to Cuba avoid provocative or inflammatory rhetoric. The legislation specifies that Radio Marti programs must "serve as a consistently reliable and authoritative source of accurate, objective, and comprehensive news."⁵

CONCLUSION

Radio Marti's fate should not depend on Fidel Castro's threat of radio blackmail, but rather on the station's value to American foreign policy. On this score, Radio Marti is a good investment.

Using a tested and proved concept similar to the successful Radio Liberty and Radio Free Europe, Radio Marti may divert some of Fidel Castro's energies from foreign troublemaking. At the least, the station will help Cubans understand the full extent and cost of Castro's policies. The fact that Castro seems so anxious to block Radio Marti testifies to the idea's impact and effectiveness.

Radio Marti offers the Reagan Administration a low-cost, high-yield foreign policy option. It is a peaceful means of containing Fidel Castro and his activities. Given the lives and treasure that are being spent in order to contain Castro's policies in Central America, the idea of redirecting his efforts back home has an appeal, and an urgency, that cannot be denied.

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⁵ "Radio Broadcasting to Cuba Act," H.R. 2453, S. 602, 98th Congress.