

## WHAT IS KEEPING RADIO MARTI SILENT ?

Radio Martí's airwaves were silent yesterday, as they have been for month after month, despite the Reagan Administration's commitment to broadcast accurate news to Cuba. The delay is puzzling, since the project enjoyed strong bipartisan support in the Congress, passed in the House by a 3 to 1 margin, and in the Senate by acclamation. It is all the more curious that such an important initiative has stalled under an Administration actively engaged in containing Cuban expansionism and subversion in Central America.

Named after José Martí, the 19th century Cuban nationalist hero, Radio Martí was conceived as a "surrogate home service," to provide Cubans information about Cuba that is not available through the country's state-controlled media. Reporting would cover such government policies as the Cuban military presence in Africa and Central America, as well as the true state of the Cuban economy and the human rights situation. Broadcasting accurate news to communist-controlled countries, where a state monopoly on information is an important tool of totalitarian control, long has been a key instrument of U.S. foreign policy. Radio Free Europe and Radio Liberty provide news withheld by communist governments, making it possible for millions of listeners behind the Iron Curtain to know the truth about the West and their own countries. A similar news service to Cuba would remedy a major weakness in U.S. policy toward that country.

The Reagan Administration has presented well-documented evidence of extensive Cuban involvement in Central American destabilization. Fidel Castro offers logistical support, training, and weapons to the Marxist guerrillas in El Salvador and Guatemala, and is the godfather of the Sandinista government in Nicaragua, currently host to some 9,000 Cubans. Radio Martí could induce Castro to curb his adventurism in Central America. And the Cuban people may be less compliant about Cuba's "internationalist" role if they are aware of its full extent and its impact on the Cuban economy.

Radio Martí also is important as a response to the ideological war so deftly waged by the Soviet Union and its allies, especially Cuba. In 1982, for example, Cuba broadcast 283 hours per week to the Western Hemisphere, and in 1983, the Soviet Union 334. The most effective way to counter Cuban propaganda and disinformation is to offer accurate news and information about conditions in Cuba, and the costs and nature of its foreign policy.

Reagan's Radio Martí proposal was not unopposed. Critics argued, for example, that Castro would simply jam the broadcast and interfere with U.S. broadcasting in retaliation. Opponents also warn that Radio Martí will be denounced by Castro and used to reinforce anti-Americanism and loyalty to his regime. Some opponents of the new radio service complain that it would not be bound by Voice of America standards of accuracy and objectivity.

These concerns were addressed effectively in the legislation that approved Radio Martí. Compensation will be made to U.S. broadcasters who suffer if Castro interferes with U.S. programming. Radio Martí, meanwhile, has been placed under the Voice of America, subject to its reporting standards. And a majority of Congressmen apparently were persuaded that it could have a positive impact on U.S. efforts to bring peace to Central America.

Postponement of Radio Martí broadcasting may in part have been caused by lengthy administrative procedures required for security reasons, and the need to find highly qualified and specialized personnel. Nevertheless, there is a large pool of talent to draw on for the service in the Cuban-American community, which strongly supports Radio Martí. Moreover, the usual red tape explanation for delays is incongruous for an Administration dedicated to efficiency in government.

The smooth passage of Radio Martí legislation in the Congress 15 months ago gave evidence of strong support for the President's proposal from both sides of the aisle. The decision to launch Radio Martí has been made, and the funds have been appropriated. There appears to be no technical reason for not going on the air on schedule. It is time to give Cubans a chance to tune in to Radio Martí.

Virginia Polk  
Policy Analyst

---

For further reading:

Joel M. Woldman, Radio Martí, Updated 12/12/84, Library of Congress, Congressional Research Service.

Luis A. Luna, "Radio Martí: Getting the Truth to Cuba," Heritage Foundation Issue Bulletin No. 92, May 1983.