



Center for International Policy

Policy Update

Bush Administration Claims of Cuba as Terrorist State Unfounded

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Center for International Policy
June 12, 2008

In the June 8 edition of *The Washington Post*, U.S. Secretary of Commerce Carlos M. Gutierrez, and Director of the Policy and Evaluation Division at the Office of Civil Rights in the U.S. Department of Commerce, Jorge E. Ponce, submitted letters to the editor in response to Eugene Robinson's May 31 editorial entitled "Hard-Line Lunacy on Cuba." They expressed their adamant support for maintaining the Cuban embargo, basing their arguments on fallacious reasoning. In order to provide justification for keeping the 50-year-old embargo in place and identifying Cuba as a terrorist state, Ponce once again rehashed a controversial statement Fidel Castro supposedly made in 2001: "Iran and Cuba, in cooperation with each other, can bring America to its knees."¹

Despite the questionable authenticity of this quote, it has been used by members of the Bush Administration to link the Cuban government to terrorist activities. Fidel Castro reportedly stated these words in a speech at the Islamic University of Tehran during a visit to Iran on May 10, 2001. And yet, while various credible news agencies covered the event, this quote is noticeably absent from the transcripts of Castro's public statements. No international news sources – including those from the United States, Cuba, and Iran – had recorded this quote, with the exception of the *Agence France-Presse* (AFP).² On May 6, 2002, almost a year later, the quote reemerged in a speech at the Heritage Foundation given by John Bolton, then Under Secretary for Arms Control and International Security.³ In this same address, Bolton accused Cuba of sharing biological warfare technology with rogue states like Iran. On May 10, 2002, Fidel Castro responded to Bolton's claims by rejecting the Bush administration's accusation that Cuba possesses and shares biological weapons and denying the statement supposedly made in Iran a year earlier. Castro also gave assurances that Cuban territory would not be used as a launching pad for terrorist activity directed at the United States.⁴

Subsequent investigations into both of Bolton's claims turned up no evidence to prove their validity; in fact, they proved just the opposite, and required the administration to back-pedal. On May 13, Secretary of State Colin Powell was forced to retract Bolton's previous statements, tweaking the administration's rhetoric to declare, "We didn't say that [Cuba] actually had some weapons, but it has the capacity and capability to conduct such research."⁵

¹ Ponce, Jorge E. "Letter to the Editor." *The Washington Post*. June 8, 2002.

² "Iran and Cuba bolster ties, strengthen anti-US solidarity." *AFP*. May 10, 2001.

³ "Beyond the Axis of Evil: Additional Threats from Weapons of Mass Destruction." Speech given by John Bolton at the Heritage Foundation in Washington, D.C. May 6, 2002.

⁴ Speech by Fidel Castro, San Antonion de las Banos, Cuba, September 22, 2001.

⁵ "Powell eases off U.S. accusation on Cuba weapons." *Reuters*. May 13, 2002.

When these news events first broke in 2002, Nelson P. Valdes, Director of the Program of Academic Research on Cuba at the University of New Mexico, investigated the 2001 quote attributed to Castro. After analyzing transcripts of his Iran visit, Valdes concluded that the Castro quote was phony, as it did not appear in any of the documentation of the event other than the May 10 *AFP* article. Additionally, when questioned by Valdes, *AFP* produced no record of the quote's initial origin. The lack of credibility for the quote led Valdes to conclude that Bolton had "recycled an invented and false quote that [had] been used by rightwing Cuban exiles."⁶ A Senate hearing in June 2002, called by Senator Christopher Dodd (D-CT), further displayed the fraudulence of Bolton's claims when Carl Ford, Assistant Secretary of State for Intelligence and Research, stated that the State Department had no solid evidence to back up the Under Secretary's accusations.⁷

Remembering the atmosphere in which Bolton attempted to connect Cuba with terrorism, that is, during the Bush administration's frantic search to prove the existence of weapons of mass destruction in the lead-up to the invasion of Iraq, it is easy to see how Castro's alleged quote could be blown out of proportion. In the immediate aftermath of September 11, widespread hysteria and fear of another terrorist attack occurring on American soil led the Bush administration to begin a McCarthyesque search for other enemy targets that could be linked to terrorists (including Cuba), especially since the elusive 9/11 culprit Osama bin Laden remained at-large. However, seven years later, this particular quote's repeated use as justification by members of the Bush Cabinet for placing Cuba on the State Sponsors of Terrorism list and therefore maintaining the embargo, is ludicrous – just as Robinson stated in his original May 31 editorial.⁸ As Valdes' investigation revealed, the quote is most likely a fabrication conveniently employed to serve the selfish interests of the Bush administration, which has been floundering for any sort of justification for their ineffective policy toward Cuba that has failed miserably to achieve its stated objectives.

The reappearance of the original quote attributed to Fidel Castro in Ponce's recent letter to *The Washington Post* raises concerns that Cuba's supposed affiliation as a State Sponsor of Terrorism is based on a series of fallacies, such as this unauthenticated 2001 quote. Moreover, the Bush administration's mentality of "guilt by association" – insinuating cooperation between Iran and Cuba to "bring down" the U.S. – is completely wrongheaded. The Bush administration's continued insistence on linking Cuba to terrorism is based on unfounded claims of which this controversial 2001 quote is one, thereby creating a false target for the War on Terror at a time when U.S. resources would best be used if redirected toward authentic threats to our national security. The next president could better serve U.S. policy toward Cuba if he promoted a cooperative approach toward the island instead of following the current administration's cultivation of unnecessary acrimony and antagonism. The best way to achieve U.S. foreign policy goals in Cuba is through direct diplomatic engagement with an eye toward fostering greater mutual understanding so as to prevent the false perception of terrorist threats, or provoking future hostile actions, originating just 90 miles off the Florida coast.

⁶ Valdes, Nelson P. "The Problems of an Under Secretary of State: Fidel Castro, Bioterrorism and the Elusive Quote." *CounterPunch*. May 28, 2002.

⁷ Senate Foreign Relations Committee Hearing: Subcommittee on Western Hemisphere Hearing on Cuba and Biological Weapons, June 5, 2002.

⁸ Robinson, Eugene. "Hard-Line Lunacy on Cuba." *The Washington Post*. May 31, 2008.