



On-The-Record Briefing with Secretary of Commerce Carlos M. Gutierrez and Assistant Secretary of State for Western Hemisphere Affairs Thomas A. Shannon On Cuba Policy

Carlos Gutierrez, Secretary of Commerce
Assistant Secretary of Western Hemisphere Affairs Thomas Shannon
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(2:30 p.m. EDT)

ASSISTANT SECRETARY SHANNON: Good afternoon. Thank you all very much for coming today. As you know, the President just gave a speech in the Ben Franklin Room regarding Cuba and Cuba's march to democracy. We are very lucky to have with us today Secretary Carlos Gutierrez, Secretary of Commerce. As you know, Secretary Gutierrez is co-chair of the Commission for Assistance to a Free Cuba. And aside from being a prominent member of the Cuban American community and a prominent member of the U.S. business community and private sector, along with being a member of the President's cabinet, he has also been identified by the President along with Secretary Rice as being one of those who will work to explore and develop a multi-billion dollar freedom fund for Cuba. And I would like to give the podium to Secretary Gutierrez now to make a short statement and then we will both be happy to take any questions you all might have regarding the President's speech today.

Thank you very much. Secretary Gutierrez.

SECRETARY GUTIERREZ: Thank you. Thank you, Secretary Shannon, and a pleasure to be here. As Secretary Shannon just mentioned, the President just spoke about Cuba, and I think he had some very eloquent words about the plight of the people of Cuba and our commitment to help them achieve those fundamental freedoms that all people have: the freedom to speak openly, to worship, freedom to join a political party, to travel, to read, to work, to have labor rights -- all those things that we take for granted.

As Tom Shannon mentioned, the President mentioned that when Cuba adopts fundamental freedoms of speech, freedom of association, freedom of the press, freedom to form political parties, freedom to change the government through periodic multiparty elections, and when importantly they release all political prisoners, that we will explore with our international partners the opportunity to create a freedom fund to support the Cuban people's transition to democracy. And that was a very clear message for the international community and for the people of Cuba that we want to help them in their moment of transition. There's a lot of rebuilding that will have to take place at some point in the future in Cuba, and we plan to be part of that.

MODERATOR: Questions? Elise.

QUESTION: It seems as if -- I wasn't sure if he was really talking to the Cuban regime in terms of what he was really trying to, you know, get them to rise up and do the right thing by the Cuban people and trying to offer a new relationship with them, or he was trying to say directly to the Cuban people, you know, saying things that you've never believed that the Cuban regime is going to do anyway and it's time to rise up and talking to the military and the police and something about getting rid of the regime. I mean, is this Administration genuinely committed to a relationship with a Raul Castro regime that fundamentally does institute freedoms in the country? I mean, are you willing to take yes for an answer?

SECRETARY GUTIERREZ: The answer is no, that we are not committed to a relationship with Raul Castro. The President was very clear that we don't support the transition from one dictator to the other.

QUESTION: Right. But if he institutes new freedoms that -- this State Department had said that it would be a fundamentally different regime.

SECRETARY GUTIERREZ: The President was very clear on the types of freedoms: freedom of speech, association, press; freedom to form political parties; freedom to change the government through periodic multiparty elections; freedom for all political prisoners. We want to see that first.

QUESTION: Do you have any idea what kinds of concerns this is going -- this idea is going to have in -- among the Latin American countries?

SECRETARY GUTIERREZ: The President had two -- and also to the question here about to whom was he speaking -- he was speaking to the people of Cuba and to the international community. And to the international community, I think there is a very simple message: Where is the outrage? You know, there is such outrage today about the atrocities going on in Burma. Well, where is the outrage about the atrocities going on in Cuba? And the international community was challenged to speak out in favor of democracy in Cuba.

QUESTION: I would like to know why this speech now? Why today? Why not one month before? Why now? Is there a timing or --

SECRETARY GUTIERREZ: Well, you know, the President of the United States' calendar is very full and today happened to be a good day to get it on his calendar and to make the speech. And it seemed like as good of a day -- better than tomorrow and better than yesterday. So you know it's just one of these things.

QUESTION: (Inaudible.)

SECRETARY GUTIERREZ: Yes, it just came together today and we were able to do it today.

QUESTION: Can I have a follow-up on that? Sorry. There is nothing to do with next week's decision at the UN on Cuba?

ASSISTANT SECRETARY SHANNON: No, it is just not related to the United Nations. As Secretary Gutierrez noted, this is a speech about the Cuban people. It is a speech about their future, about their ability to be the protagonists of their future, agents of their own destiny, and the importance of the international community working to help build their capacity to be those agents. And so in that regard, it is important to understand that this was a speech that was not delivered in a diplomatic context. It was delivered in the context of the Cuban people.

QUESTION: Yes. I'm a little confused. Now, the President spoke about this freedom fund and that you and Secretary Rice would be in charge. But then you included that also because -- and you talked about the other new programs that would sort of ensue if the freedoms were adopted. But he spoke about the freedom fund that you and Secretary Rice would be assigned to creating; and then when you introduced it, you spoke of exploring the opportunity to create a fund. So I'm a little confused. Is this

something that you are setting out to do or is it something that may happen if there is some response in Cuba?

And then secondly, the President did indeed -- spoke about the shame of the international community that has not -- that has remained silent, I think he said. And I'm wondering why you think they would -- whether Europeans or South American countries, but why they would adopt a new policy now, instead of engagement, but isolation like the U.S., and come on board at this point, especially when they've just been told shame on you?

SECRETARY GUTIERREZ: Well, first of all, we want to work with the international community, so the whole idea is to work with allies and partners around the world to develop this freedom fund. You know, the President challenged the international community to speak up. And again, the question is: Where is the outrage? We've heard of the outrage about Burma. And you know the things happening in Cuba have been going on for a lot longer and more intensely than Burma. Where is the outrage?

And the President is asking countries to speak up, regardless of what their policy may be today toward Cuba, would speak up in favor of democracy, in favor of freedom of speech, in favor of freedom to work, in favor of freedom to read what you'd like to read, in favor of freedom to travel -- all of the things that people have in their own country and that we all take for granted to speak out in favor of those freedoms for the people of Cuba.

QUESTION: If I could, Secretary Gutierrez, I'd like to ask about one of the possible uses of the freedom fund. And would that play a role in settling property claims, given that that is always going to be a point of tension in any transition between people outside the country and people inside the country in expropriated properties?

SECRETARY GUTIERREZ: You know, there is so much to rebuild in Cuba. The whole country needs to be rebuilt, whether it be the physical structures, whether it be helping people get off the ground and start a business. So there's so much to do and so much to rebuild. What we said is it is a freedom fund to support the Cuban people's transition to democracy. But anyone who has seen pictures, who has heard the story, who has seen what's going on in Cuba, there is so much work that needs to be done. It is going to take a long, long time. But the Cuban people deserve to know that we and other members in the international community want to help them in that transition.

QUESTION: Could I then just ask -- just following up from a different angle, what -- if the U.S. is focusing on transition or a possible transition, as it is at the moment, given this speech, what is the U.S. thinking in terms of dealing between that tension between people who have valid property claims and people sometimes of quite humble origins who are living in expropriated properties?

ASSISTANT SECRETARY SHANNON: The United States has always recognized that all property claims issues would have to be resolved by a democratic government of Cuba. In other words, the United States would not have a direct or immediate role in that. What the United States has done is compiled lists of people, U.S. citizens who have property claims that they would like to be able to present once a transition has taken place. But ultimately, those property claims will be determined by a democratic government in Cuba.

QUESTION: You just mentioned that you want to see changes first (inaudible) before, but a year has passed already since the transition between Fidel and Raul and there is no talking, discussions with the Cubans. What if the Raul government keeps on going by their own hand for the next five years? The U.S. will still keep --

SECRETARY GUTIERREZ: Yes. I mean, that's the policy -- the President was very clear if that's the future of the Cuban regime, then that's very, very unfortunate for the people of Cuba because then it means that people will be living under oppression, they'll be living without freedom of speech, without freedom to read, without freedom to travel, without freedom to open up a business, without freedom to worship.

So what if? I would say that's a big, big shame for the people in Cuba who deserve freedom.

QUESTION: Can I follow up? Can I just have a quick follow-up? What about the idea of trying to change the nature of the regime? I mean, you deal with -- this Administration and the U.S. deals with countries all the time that are considered dictatorial regimes. I mean, what about trying to influence, having a hand on the ground, as some of your allies have recommended, trying to impose democracy by actually having dialogue?

SECRETARY GUTIERREZ: Well, you know, we're not talking about a new regime here. It's been 48 years -- 48 years, nine presidents. And I would just say all those countries who have had relations with Cuba and who have -- I think you used the word dialogue -- with Cuba, they haven't changed Cuba. So I think we have to be realistic about, you know, who's going to change Cuba. Cuba's going to change when the dictatorship goes away, but this notion of working with them to change them, it's been 48 years.

QUESTION: But that policy hasn't worked in 48 years, so what about trying something new?

SECRETARY GUTIERREZ: No, but as we've said before and the President's said, the policy is designed to not give oxygen to a dictator, to not put resources in their hands. Again, we have the benefit of 48 years. When they had resources, they -- at one time, they wanted to keep those

-- you know, going back to 1962, the missile crisis, going back to their adventure in Africa, going back to their adventure in Central America. When they have had resources, those resources have never been used to improve the lives of Cubans. They've been used to harass governments overseas. They've been used for foreign adventures. Again, we've had 48 years to observe and I don't think we should be naïve about that.

QUESTION: But there's been 48 years in Cuba, but in China's there's been more years yet and America has engaged with the Chinese. Why the difference between the Chinese and the Cubans?

ASSISTANT SECRETARY SHANNON: Well, before we get to differences between China and Cuba, which for some of us are quite obvious, our -- it's important to understand that this isn't an issue only of timing. Obviously, it took 75 years in the Soviet Union, but we didn't lose our focus. And we were determined to do what we could to help drive change in that country.

But it is important to understand that the President's message was about empowering the Cuban people to control their own destiny because the recognition is that change in Cuba will be driven by Cubans and that what the international community can do is create an environment that helps the Cuban people drive that change, and that is by insisting that the regime open itself to the possibility of democratic change and helping the Cuban people develop the capacity to make that change take place.

And that, I think, is the important thing to recognize and understand. Totalitarian regimes do not change only because of outside pressures or only because of outside relationships. Fundamental change happens when the people themselves determine to take control of their own destiny.

MODERATOR: The gentleman in the back.

QUESTION: This is a question for Secretary Gutierrez. Last year in this same room, you estimated that for the U.S. it would take some 18 months to rebuild Cuba after the -- after a new government, a democratic new government, takes position. And then for doing that, probably you have an estimate of how much will be needed for that reconstruction. And my question is if you have an estimate for starting this international fund, how much would be the U.S. down payment?

SECRETARY GUTIERREZ: Again, we are going to work with our international partners. We are just starting the process to work with them. If you look at other countries who have gone through this change, whether it be Poland, countries in the Soviet Union, it's taking them time. It's hard to estimate how much time. It's also hard to underestimate how much rebuilding needs to take place in Cuba. So I can't give you an estimate of time and dollars. I just -- I would like the Cuban people to be in a

position whereby we can get on with it and get to work on all the work that needs to be done to rebuild that once-wonderful country, that beautiful country.

MODERATOR: And Joel, final question?

QUESTION: Over the last, I guess, 40 years since the John F. Kennedy administration, we've had this tit-for-tat with both the Cubans and the Soviet Union. And I believe in history we have the Monroe Doctrine. The Monroe Doctrine basically says there should not be any foreign interference from another hemisphere into Central and South America. Now, is the responsibility to the -- from the Organization of American States and other governments in Central and South America, and why haven't they stepped up to the plate? I recognize we've had -- the United States and the Cuban Government were at odds, but could they have broken up this particular regime that still exists, as you say, 48 years down the line?

SECRETARY GUTIERREZ: That sounds to me like a question for our foreign policy expert

-- Monroe Doctrine and all the things you spoke about. So, please. (Laughter.)

ASSISTANT SECRETARY SHANNON: In many ways, this hemisphere has already spoken in a dramatic fashion through the Inter-American Democratic Charter, when it declared that democracy is a right for all the peoples of the Americas. There is only one country in the hemisphere that is not a democracy and that's Cuba. This is a region which has in its founding documents, especially in the OAS, enshrined also principles of a respect for sovereignty and non-intervention and self-determination. And this affects how this region addresses issues like Cuba.

But I think there is a clear expectation and a clear understanding that Cuba's future is democratic. And it is our hope and one of the things the President was talking about today is looking for countries who have this commitment in their own nations, to their own people, to make that commitment more explicit.

QUESTION: Ambassador Shannon, just on another subject. Do you have any comment on the apparent resignation of the Diplomatic Security person in charge in the light of the Blackwater report findings yesterday?

ASSISTANT SECRETARY SHANNON: No, I'm afraid I have no comment at this time. Thank you.

MODERATOR: Thank you very much.

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