

# Fidel Castro, Jimmy Carter and George W. Bush in the Canadian News Media: A Critical Analysis

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**Abstract**

This study examines prominent Canadian news media coverage of Fidel Castro, George W. Bush and Jimmy Carter, during the latter's trip to Cuba in 2002. The occasion provided an opportunity for the corporate media to trot out all of their clichés about Cuba and Fidel Castro, and to display their deep-seated ideological biases. These biases centered primarily around the alleged lack of democracy in Cuba, the communist if not totalitarian nature of Castro's alleged 'dictatorship', and the natural right of the US administration to interfere openly in the affairs of Cuba, even to the point of funding and fomenting the overthrow of a government which does not have its approval.

**Keywords:** Cuba, news media, bias, journalism, presupposition, Jimmy Carter, Fidel Castro, George W. Bush, US foreign policy, US interventions.

'Cubans would be better off with multi party democracy, a free press, respect for human rights and a market economy, things we take for granted' (Toronto Star editorial, May 2002).

## **Introduction**

Canada has a reputation for having a 'kinder, gentler' society than the USA, with a mixed economy including public as well as private economic initiatives, and where we value 'peace, order and good government'. Unlike the US, with its historical emphasis on 'life, liberty and the pursuit of [individual] happiness', Canadians have had a more interventionist economy, which has traditionally meant, among other things, relatively less disparity between rich and poor, and stronger social programs. When these social programs were perhaps at their zenith, in the Trudeau years of the 1970s and early eighties, there might possibly have been more appreciation for the accomplishments of Cuban society, with its lack of homelessness and poverty, its superior and free health care and education systems, et cetera. It may have been possible, within that context, to emphasise these enormous Cuban accomplishments. The era of corporate globalisation and its free trade agreements, along with the hegemony of the International Monetary Fund and World Trade Organisation, have served to undermine these historic differences, under the successive Liberal/Conservative governments of Brian Mulroney, Jean Chretien, Paul Martin, and now Stephen Harper. Especially under the corporate-like fiscal management of former finance minister Paul Martin, Canada's health care and education systems and budget deficits have been pruned in favour of increased corporate profits, budget surpluses, and debt reduction. These developments may be viewed within the broader context of not only corporate globalisation but also Thatcherism and Tony Blair's New Labour in Britain, and Reaganomics and its successors, the Clinton and Bush administrations, in the US.

In this neo-liberal context, while it is still possible for the Canadian news media to present an alternative perspective to the American take on Cuban government and society, it is increasingly unlikely that they will do so, owing to the triumph of corporatism within the media and internationally. Canadian government policies, ruefully, have become increasingly aligned with those of the US. For example, whereas the governments of Lester Pearson and Pierre Trudeau openly opposed US involvement in Vietnam and only covertly participated in the 1960s and 70s (Eayrs, 1983; Herring, 1983; Levant, 1986), by the 1990s the Mulroney government wholeheartedly embraced the Gulf War. When it came to the 'war on terrorism' in Afghanistan beginning in 2001-2002, the Chretien government openly pleaded with the Americans to let Canadians take part, although a suddenly kinder, gentler (and retiring) Jean Chretien balked at the second invasion of Iraq. Gone are the cool relations between former Prime Ministers John Diefenbaker and Pierre Trudeau, and their US counterparts. Former Prime Minister Paul Martin, for example, was bent on closer ties with the US, even entertaining involvement in the US 'Star Wars' Missile Defence project, only ultimately abandoning it in 2005, in face of public opposition and his minority government status. Conservative PM Stephen Harper, elected in 2006, will be even more closely aligned with US policies, as he demonstrated by traveling to Afghanistan to 'support the troops', early in 2006. Entangled in economic trade deals such as the FTA, NAFTA, and FTAA, Canadian governments now seem reluctant to extract themselves from US foreign policy, global pariah though it is.

Compounding these problems is the increasing reliance by Canadian media on American news sources for coverage of news beyond Canada's borders. Historically, Cuba has perhaps represented the most significant departure in foreign policy between Canada and the US.

Canada has never recognised the American trade embargo, and has maintained close diplomatic and trade relations with Cuba. In 1996, Canada objected to the Helms-Burton Act, whose provisions penalise Canadian companies and others who invest in Cuba. Provisions in the bill bar executives of foreign companies which invest in Cuba and their families from entering the US. Of course, relations have not been consistently warm. Shamefully, Canada did suspend aid to Cuba in 1978, when the latter sent troops to Angola, only resuming aid in 1994.

The Trudeau family made a memorable and highly publicised visit to Cuba in 1976, which reflected the evidently close relationship between Pierre Trudeau and Fidel Castro. Relations were somewhat cooler when Jean Chretien visited for two days in 1998. Indeed, the news about that visit was leaked by the Clinton administration, and the trip was reported to have ruffled American feathers (Diebel, 1998). On the other hand, no American president has visited Cuba since Calvin Coolidge, in 1928. That is, not until May 2002, when former US president Jimmy Carter undertook his own rapprochement with Cuba.

This article examines the relations between US foreign policy and Canadian reporting on Cuba, specifically within the context of former US President Jimmy Carter's trip to Cuba in 2002.

### **The historic record: US terrorism in Latin America**

The record of US policy in Latin America has been extensively documented by authors such as Noam Chomsky and William Blum. We will briefly refer to just two examples of 'viral control', in Chomsky's terms, which are a part of the public record. In Nicaragua, the US Administration under Ronald Reagan illegally sold arms in return for cash, which was used to bypass Congress to fund the Contra mercenaries, the armed resistance to the democratically elected Sandinista government of president Daniel Ortega. This all came out eventually in the mainstream: how Reagan lied, how he and Oliver North broke the law and defied Congress. All of this was aimed at destabilising and overthrowing a democratic government, which they viewed as socialist. Unlike Iraq, there was no oil involved. They also spent millions funding the opposition, and on an economic blockade, and mining the harbours to 'discourage' other countries from doing business with Nicaragua. This happened in the latter half of the 1980s, and they succeeded in pounding the people into submission and in driving the Sandinistas from government.

Another example is Panama, which of course the US invaded in 1989, alleging that President Manuel Noriega was a drug lord. Of course he was one, under Reagan, and including the time when George Bush senior put him back on the CIA payroll, at \$100,000 plus per year, as an ally and informer. Noriega's mistake was not drugs; it was refusing to give up the Panama Canal, which was to revert to Panamanian control, partly in 1990, and entirely in 2000, under treaty with the US. So the US took out Noriega, put their own guy in control, and disbanded the Panamanian Defence Forces, which were necessary for the protection and control of the Canal. Their new man in Panama, Guillermo Endara, outlawed the Panamanian Defence Forces, which were required for the implementation of the treaty with the US. Hence, the canal stayed in US hands, and the vital US military bases remained in Panama.

As for the media role in events such as these that was summed up in the context of Iraq by Karen DeYoung, a Washington Post reporter and former assistant managing editor. In an August 12th, 2004 Post story examining the paper's failures leading up to the Iraq War,

DeYoung was quoted as saying, 'We are inevitably the mouthpiece for whatever administration is in power. If the president stands up and says something, we report what the president said'. With rare candour, DeYoung said that any contrarian views are swept from the front pages and buried deep in the story, where few if any readers see them (Jensen, 2005). So, if the American president says Sandinistas are socialists, or Noriega is a drug lord who has to be taken out, or Fidel Castro is a dictator, that's what the media report.

It behooves us to recall some of the terrorist attacks against Cuba by the US government, or by Cuban Americans with the tacit approval of their government, since 1959. One could reasonably argue that these events are relevant to any discussion of Cuban-US relations, ranging as they do from the CIA-organised 1961 Bay of Pigs invasion and attempted coup, to bombing and strafing attacks on Cuba which began in 1959, and have been supplemented with such actions as: 'pirate' attacks on Cuban fishing boats, shelling of a theatre, commando raids on oil refineries, chemical plants, bridges, cane fields, sugar mills; a bombing attack on a baseball stadium, blowing up ships, orchestrating ship collisions, and the use of chemical and biological weapons (Blum, 1998). Regarding assassination attempts on Fidel Castro, there have been literally dozens of attempts documented, and the US Senate Investigation into the CIA chaired by Senator Frank Church in 1975 concluded: 'We have found concrete evidence of at least eight plots involving the CIA to assassinate Fidel Castro, from 1960 to 1965 . . . the proposed assassination devices ran the gamut from high-powered rifles, to poison pills, poisoned pens, deadly bacterial powders, and other devices which strain the imagination' (Church, 1976). This is a report by the US Senate, covering just a five-year period in a forty-five year history

It should be stressed that absolutely none of the above events rated mention in any of the coverage of Jimmy Carter's trip to Cuba, in the Canadian media. This speaks volumes about the bias, selectivity, framing and sins of omission by the media. To do otherwise would be to abandon their role as, effectively, an arm of the US State Department.

We applied Critical Discourse Analysis to a total of thirty six texts that appeared in May, 2002 in five different major Canadian media outlets: The Toronto Star, Globe and Mail, National Post, CBC News On line, and Maclean's magazine.

### **Jimmy Carter**

Jimmy Carter was portrayed in the press as an elder statesman who wanted to broker the Cuban transition to democracy. His credentials were enumerated, he was described as a human rights advocate, even as 'the activist former president', in a Reuters story in The National Post. A Toronto Star article described him as 'one of the world's most experienced and respected statesmen' (Sullivan, 2002). Carter was treated respectfully by the Cuban people, including Castro, and by the media in both Cuba and Canada. With regard to the former, this respect was afforded to Carter despite his own strong ideological biases toward, and extreme naïvety about, Cuba. For example, Carter began his speech at the University of Havana by commenting that relations between the two countries are complex, and that we must reject overly simplistic solutions, such as the US simply lifting the embargo, or Fidel Castro stepping 'down from power [to] allow free elections' (Carter, 2002a).

Hence, it was clear from the outset of Carter's speech that he was not going to call for the embargo to be lifted, without some quid pro quo. In other words, to Carter it is equally simplistic for Cubans to call for the end of the embargo as it is for Bush to call for Castro's

resignation and 'free elections', i.e., the complete overhaul of the Cuban constitution and electoral system. Fidel Castro and the Cuban people generally displayed remarkable restraint in listening politely to these comments. As for the Canadian media reaction, well, they thought Carter was fabulous. Paul Knox of *The Globe and Mail*, for example, wrote that 'The former US president won't win any gold stars for his Spanish, but he packed a lot into his 1,400 words. If there were any justice, the party would be debating it in study sessions for months' (Knox, 2002). This demeaning and paternalistic perspective displays gross ignorance about Cuban politics and society.

Carter went on to say he hoped that as the superpower in the relationship the US Congress would take the first step and end the embargo, but he fully expected the Cubans to reciprocate by taking measures to 'democratise' their elections and open their country to free market capitalism. 'Democracy is a framework that permits a people to accommodate changing times and correct past mistakes', Carter said, listing some accomplishments in the US. In contrast, he lectured: 'Cuba has adopted a socialist government where one political party dominates, and people are not permitted to organize any opposition movements. Your Constitution recognizes freedom of speech and association, but other laws deny these freedoms to those who disagree with the government'.

Carter, and the media that reported on him, repeatedly take advantage of a technique called presupposition, in Critical Discourse Analysis terms, in which their particular perspective is privileged and alternative views are precluded (Huckin, 1997; van Dijk, 2000). The 'one party domination' presupposition is a case in point. In fact, the Communist Party is prohibited from taking part in elections, under the Cuban constitution (Saney, 2004: 64) and opposition movements flourish within the dialectic of the revolution. Opposition and 'disagreement with the government' does not present a problem: it is those who the security services believe are actively working in the hire of a foreign power to overthrow the Cuban government whose actions are quite rationally prohibited and subjected to Cuban laws.

To provide some perspective, think about the Canadian government's reaction to the Front de Libération du Québec (FLQ) crisis in October 1970, for example, when the War Measures Act was invoked nationally, in response to two kidnappings and some bombings by a few dozen people in Quebec. British Trade Commissioner James Cross and Quebec Labour Minister Pierre Laporte were kidnapped by two separate groups. Laporte was killed a week later, and eventually Cross was released in return for safe conduct to Cuba for the kidnappers and their families. In the interim, on October 15th, 1970 the federal cabinet invoked the War Measures Act, which gave the police sweeping powers to arrest people and search homes without warrants, and to hold people without charging them for ninety days. Almost over night, four hundred and sixty-eight people were arrested, including FLQ members but also many nationalists. Four hundred and eight were eventually released without charges. Only ten of those arrested were ever convicted of anything.

Parti Québécois leader René Lévesque commented: 'This was a manipulation of the people of Quebec, and Trudeau behaved like a fascist manipulator'. NDP leader Tommy Douglas said law and order was 'a smoke screen to destroy the liberties and the freedom of the people of Canada', and that the government was using 'a sledgehammer to crack a peanut' (Gray, 2000). For his part, Trudeau responded by calling critics 'a lot of bleeding hearts' who don't like to see helmets and guns.

In a review article about the FLQ crisis when Trudeau died in 2000, John Gray of *The Globe and Mail* effectively admitted that Tommy Douglas was right, but managed to side with Trudeau anyway. Gray wrote, 'Later, it became clear that the FLQ, as an organization, was a laughable threat. It was more than anything else a broad community of young nationalist radicals, sometimes friends, who found each other and made common cause'. Obviously, if the FLQ turned out to be 'a laughable threat', then imposing the War Measures Act and arresting four hundred and sixty-eight people for ten convictions was indeed 'using a sledgehammer to crack a peanut', as Douglas said. And yet, John Gray and others in the media applauded Trudeau. A *Toronto Star* headline described him as 'The Most Memorable Canadian of the 20th Century', in part because of his 'steely determination' to 'crush the FLQ' (Gerard, 2000). These conclusions are revealing: when a Canadian Prime Minister imposes the draconian War Measures Act over what was later conceded to be 'a laughable threat' posed by the FLQ, he is lauded by the Canadian media and celebrated - in part for this - as the 'most memorable Canadian', and we are told that 'it worked' and there 'is no cost'. And yet when Cuban president Fidel Castro and his government bring the rule of law to bear on those accused of sedition in their country, Castro and company are roundly condemned. What about Castro's 'steely determination?'

Imagine how the Canadian government would react if it were subjected to the concerted campaign by the US government and Miami Cuban-Americans against Cuba over the past forty years, replete with dozens of documented assassination attempts, bombings, and so forth. Indeed, since Helms-Burton, it is official US policy to overthrow the Cuban government. USAID alone provided \$6 million (US) to foster 'opposition' in Cuba, in 2003. The US government provided \$9 million (US) in 2002 (Saney, 2004: 77). As Castro has put it, 'For forty years you try to strangle us. And then you criticize us for the way we breathe' (Durand, 1992).

The Canadian media are seemingly incapable of this simple exercise in logic, and apparently unaware of these historical facts. As for democracy in Cuba, there is considerable evidence and quite a cogent argument for the seemingly absurd notion that Cuban democracy is far more advanced, more representative, indeed more 'democratic' than the tremendously flawed Canadian or American variants (August, 1999; Saney, 2004). Although space does not permit extensive elaboration of these matters, perhaps one example will illustrate. Returning once again to the relatively more progressive Trudeau era in Canada, as we did for the War Measures Act, we look at the subject of taxes and controls on wages. We begin, however, with the Cuban example.

### **Taxing versus controlling wages: The Cuban and Canadian approaches**

In December 1993, still reeling under the impact of the collapse of the Soviet Union, the Cuban Ministry of Finance proposed to the National Assembly a business and personal tax system, including a tax on wages (Saney, 2004: 51-52). This proposal was vigorously opposed by the unions, as it had not been previously discussed. As a result, the National Assembly voted to delay a decision pending a national debate. From January to March 1994, more than 80,000 meetings were held, involving more than three million workers (eighty-five per cent of workforce). The consensus of these meetings was against the proposal for a tax on wages. Consequently, in May 1994 the National Assembly passed a resolution calling for study of a tax on income, 'excluding wages'. In August 1994 the National Assembly adopted an income tax law on self-employed rather than waged workers, which is still in effect.

According to Professor Isaac Saney, this example reflects the way in which changes in the Cuban economy involve the 'broad and active participation of the population'.

By comparison, in the 1974 Canadian federal election campaign Conservative leader Robert Stanfield proposed introducing wage and price controls, as a means of controlling inflation. In response, incumbent Prime Minister, Pierre Trudeau, ridiculed Stanfield, saying the whole idea was ridiculous. How do you freeze wages, Trudeau asked? 'Zap, you're frozen!' Trudeau repeated, sarcastically, pointing his finger in ridicule. He said, 'they didn't work in the US, [and] they didn't work in Britain' (Gwyn, 1976). Trudeau won the election, yet just fifteen months later he imposed wage controls, introducing as policy what he'd condemned on the way to winning a federal election. The law was so unpopular that one million workers mobilised for a one-day protest strike on October 14th, 1976. Trudeau ignored the protests and kept the freeze intact until the federal Anti-Inflation Act expired in 1978. In 1979, Trudeau lost an election to Conservative leader Joe Clark. One is left to wonder which approach is more 'democratic', and although the blatant public flip-flop by Trudeau's liberal government is a relatively unusual occurrence, the lack of consultation in policy formulation and implementation is of course quite typical in Canada.

Continuing with the reporting on Carter's speech, in a bizarre but not atypical reading appropriately entitled 'Carter's Cuban Coup', The Globe and Mail's Marcus Gee wrote that the thrust of the speech was about the Cuban government's denial of human rights. Of course, Carter did mention this, but it was hardly the thrust of a speech which largely concerned restoring relations, which is what the trip was all about. Gee praised Carter for his gentlemanly conduct and for his deft handling of the 'tyrant' Castro, with his 'excuses and evasions', and his 'dodges', concluding that, 'truth is poison to tyrants, and Mr. Carter's speech may one day be seen as a tipping point in the fall of the Castro regime' (Gee, 2002).

Gee also claimed that 'Cubans have never seen anything like it', in terms of a nationally, broadcast speech which contained criticisms of the Cuban government. Well, of course, this is a startling presupposition by Gee, who is not fluent in Spanish and whose commentary was written from Toronto. Even Carter's own speeches and articles undermine the extremely speculative statements advanced by Gee. Similar presuppositions riddled the reports of others, such as Globe reporter Paul Knox, who began his report on Carter's speech as follows: 'Cubans are among the best-educated people in Latin America, and among the worst informed. That's why Jimmy Carter's speech in Havana on Tuesday night was such a landmark' (Knox, 2002). Well, how does Knox know the extent to which Cubans are 'informed?' A brief conversation with one or two Cubans would disprove this wild allegation. Having personally travelled across Cuba, and having spoken at length to dozens of Cubans, I would venture that they are among the best informed and the least indoctrinated people. To be 'informed' according to Knox apparently means having views which parrot American propaganda.

Carter's erstwhile progressive and even leftist position was that the US should remove the embargo on the understanding that Cuba would respond with 'free elections' and go on to negotiate property settlements and all of the outstanding US 'grievances' such as the human rights 'abuses' inflicted on 'dissidents' believed to have been hired by the US government to overthrow the Cuban government. The difference between Carter's position and Bush's position was that Bush wanted Castro to act first while Carter said the US should go first as a sign of good faith. The eventual outcome was to be the same: the return of Cuba to the sphere of US influence.

Finally, with respect to Carter, we return to this notion of him as an activist and human rights advocate and mediator for the South. This is the same Jimmy Carter, after all, who issued the 'Carter Doctrine' in 1980, in response to the Iranian revolution which overthrew the Shah of Iran. This stated, in part, that 'An attempt by any outside force to gain control of the Persian Gulf region will be regarded as an assault on the vital interests of the United States of America, and such an assault will be repelled by any means necessary, including military force'. This has since been used as a 'legal principle' to justify US invasions in the region (Foster, 2005). In 1977, Carter displayed his 'respect for human rights' when he explained how the US owed no debt to Vietnam. He justified this belief because the 'destruction was mutual, he said, a statement Noam Chomsky wrote was 'worthy of Hitler or Stalin' (Mickey Z, 2002).

### **George W. Bush**

US President George W. Bush was treated with deference by the media. Even when his administration, on the eve of the Carter trip, wildly accused Cuba of engaging in bio-terrorism, this was duly reported and treated in a serious fashion. Almost without exception the media failed to label this for the blatant propaganda that it was. Similarly, when Bush announced the results of the White House Cuba Review, headed up by undersecretary of state for Western Hemisphere affairs, Otto Reich, described by Reuters as 'an anti-Castro Cuban American', the media reported the news with alacrity (Whitesides, 2002). The CBC's Online coverage was somewhat more balanced, describing Bush as 'hard-line', for example, in his response to Carter, along with reference to 'Cuba's communist regime'. The implication is that both sides are entrenched, while Carter represents a progressive viewpoint. But the bulk of the coverage was focused on Bush and his spokesperson Ari Fleischer, who described Castro as a 'tyrant', and said trade 'only benefits the repressive government' rather than the people of Cuba. Just one line of response was given to the Democratic Senate Majority Leader, representing another side of things. No Cubans were consulted. Carter's criticisms of Cuba were included, but not his criticism of his own country, or any of the rapprochement which took up the bulk of his speech.

The CBC online stories were relatively more critical of Bush, for example a headline stating that 'Bush's new Cuba policy [is] just like the old policy'. And there was mention of the Florida connection with Jeb Bush and the political basis for Bush's policies, but aside from equating them there is no criticism of the new or old policy, nor of the political pork barrelling. The bulk of the report simply reiterates Bush's views about Cuban political prisoners, elections, and democracy, and Bush's bold assertion that Cuban elections are all 'a fraud and a sham' goes unquestioned. What's more, the blatant fraud and sham of Bush's own election in 2000 is unmentioned, leaving the stone of hypocrisy unturned (CBC, 2002).

Globe reporter Barrie McKenna began his report on Bush's response to Carter by quoting Bush that Castro is 'a tyrannical prison warden', which was factually reported and without a rejoinder. McKenna himself used phrases such as, 'Communist island state' and referred to 'while Mr. Castro rules Cuba', both easily insinuated into what is ostensibly a factual news report. What passes for 'the other side' of things was backgrounded, in an example of news framing, in the final sentences of the report. 'Critics on Capitol Hill called the new Cuba policy more of the same bad medicine that has failed to democratise Cuba for four decades', McKenna wrote. So, from the reported Democrats' perspective, the embargo is a failure only because it has not succeeded in pressuring Cubans to depose Fidel Castro (McKenna, 2002).

An AP story in *The Toronto Star* reported Bush's speeches in Washington and to the Miami Cuban community in a straight-laced manner. Bush's 'Initiative for a new Cuba' reportedly 'set out a list of tough conditions for lifting' the embargo, such as allowing opposition parties to speak freely and organise, allowing independent trade unions, freeing political prisoners, et cetera (Gedda, 2002). Each of these 'conditions' is in fact a questionable presupposition, which is instrumental to the US administration's propaganda campaign against Cuba. The fact that they are accepted unquestioningly by the media and listed as 'conditions' for the removal of the embargo is a remarkable public relations coup, the result of forty-five years of relentless and one-dimensional propaganda.

### **Fidel Castro**

Only passing reference is made to Fidel Castro, which may be plugged into the previously-formulated social construction of a man who has been demonised perhaps more than any other for almost half a century, for example, the above description of him as a 'prison warden'. No evidence or explanation is offered, nor is one required. These are simply truths, spoken by respected leaders and duly reported. They are presuppositions, promoted as taken-for-granted truths, but in reality untrue or at least highly debatable. When Marcus Gee reported on Carter's speech, for example, Castro was mentioned, in passing.

'Jimmy Carter's speech to students at the University of Havana was broadcast live and uncensored, something without precedent in a country where all media is strictly controlled and no criticism of the Castro regime is allowed. Mr. Carter spoke in Spanish, so everyone who tuned in could understand what he said (including Mr. Castro, who sat silently in the front row). And what he said was devastating'.

So, it is 'the Castro regime' where there is strict control and no criticism. Castro himself 'sat silently' a description that uses insinuation to imply disapproval. It's not clear what Gee expected Castro to do during the speech, other than to sit quietly. Dance? Applaud? Stand and cheer? And, was he sitting quietly or was he sitting politely? How does Gee, who himself was sitting quietly in Toronto, know the difference? CBC news online wrote: 'Castro offered polite applause to the speech on Tuesday night'. One is left to infer that Castro's applause was less than enthusiastic. The insinuation is that Castro disapproved, that perhaps he only grudgingly allowed Carter to speak or to be broadcast. In a one-paragraph story, *Maclean's* magazine quoted George W. Bush to the effect that, 'Fidel Castro is a dictator'. CBC news Online quoted Bush saying, 'Trade with Cuba would do nothing more than line the pockets of Castro and his cronies', and simply told us, 'Fidel Castro came to power in a 1959 revolution'. Nothing of the elections since, mention of which would call into question characterisations such as 'dictator'.

The *Globe's* Marcus Gee refers to 'the Castro regime', a synonym for dictatorship. Later on, he writes: 'Mr. Carter neatly punctured the excuses and evasions that Mr. Castro uses when his dictatorship comes under attack'. Later still he refers to blaming the embargo for economic ills as 'another of Mr. Castro's dodges'. Later still Castro is 'a tyrant' and again, 'a dictator'. Gee refers to Jean Chrétien's visit in 1998, when Castro 'launched a diatribe about US "genocide"'. The quotes around 'genocide' are to tell us that the US has not committed any such thing, and that it is a wild allegation, part of a meaningless 'diatribe'; others would disagree. Paul Knox of *The Globe* also referred to 'Fidel Castro's regime'. He went on to say: 'The lone national daily, *Granma*, is an eight-page tabloid that generally runs less than a page of world news and devotes vast acreage to Mr. Castro's pronouncements'. This

characterisation reinforces the notion of a dictatorship, which issues pronouncements. Could they not be more accurately described as 'speeches' in Granma? Knox says Castro 'forbids dissent'. He continues: 'True: the media are starved for resources. But that is Mr. Castro's policy. He himself has a voracious appetite for information; it's of a piece with his penchant for micromanagement'. Here, Cuban policies are the personal purview of Castro.

Barrie McKenna of *The Globe* quoted Bush, saying Castro is 'a tyrannical prison warden', and said Bush 'isn't about to give an inch while Castro rules Cuba'. McKenna writes: 'In a typically anti-Castro speech at the White House, Mr. Bush accused the Cuban President of being a brutal tyrant 'who turned a beautiful island into a prison'. McKenna goes on to quote Bush: 'In a career of oppression, Mr. Castro has imported nuclear-armed ballistic missiles, and he has exported his military forces to encourage civil war abroad. He is a dictator who jails and tortures and exiles his political opponents'.

Virtually the only favorable context in which Castro was mentioned was in a letter to the editor of *The Globe and Mail* from a writer in Knowlton Quebec. Here, Castro was favorably compared to his predecessor, the dictator Batista: 'When US President George W. Bush rants about a free and democratic Cuba, he really means a Cuba that will serve as a Caribbean Las Vegas for US businessmen, as was the case during the reign of Fidel Castro's predecessor, Fulgencio Batista' (Gordon, 2002).

In an editorial, *The Toronto Star* slammed Castro while discussing Bush's 100th birthday wish for Cubans, and generalised Bush's views to most Canadians: 'US President George Bush wished 11 million Cubans nothing but the best Monday on the 100th anniversary of their independence. His appeal to President Fidel Castro to relax his one-party Communist grip is one that most Canadians can heartily endorse' (Star, 2002). An AP story in *The Toronto Star* reported on Bush's White House speech about Cuba, and his reference to Castro: 'Bush said Castro will have a chance to establish democratic credentials next year when voters elect members of the National Assembly. As a rule, only loyal members of the Communist party are eligible to run' (Gedda, 2002). This is untrue, as Cuban elections are open to all citizens, and the party is prohibited under the constitution from taking part in elections. Membership in the Communist Party and its youth wing comprises just 1.5 million people, or 15 per cent of the population (Saney, 2004: 65). The article also stated that Castro should ease his 'stranglehold' over Cuban economic activity.

These caricatures of Castro do not even pass minimal standards for reasoning and logic. For example, Carter and occasionally the media would admit that Cuba has excellent educational standards, with a high literacy rate, free university, and a highly educated population, and indeed Cuba trains medical students from around the world, including the United States. If Castro were the ruthless dictator he is made out to be, the last thing he would want to do is to have an educated population. Illiteracy and ignorance are the hallmarks of dictatorship. On the rare occasion when Castro is granted any prolonged exposure in the North American media, such as Oliver Stone's 2003 documentary film, *El Comandante*, it puts the lie to these wild and irrational claims about him. Just to use one example, Stone demonstrates how, unannounced, Castro can go into the streets or any setting and he is, a) unguarded and, b) greeted like a rock star by the Cuban people. Well, how does that square with the notion of him as a ruthless dictator or prison warden? What would happen to George W. Bush if he were to wander the streets of New York City without bodyguards?

By listening to Castro at length, any but the most indoctrinated observers may see for themselves that Castro is rational, reasonable and sensible in his defence of Cuban policies. Another, competing assessment of Castro comes from a Toronto psychiatrist and former Ontario provincial Member of Parliament. He presented a paper on the topic at the Ontario Psychiatric Association meetings in 1997. The column he submitted to *The Globe and Mail* was extracted from that paper. In the column, he carefully assesses Castro, based on extensive research and a two-hour personal one-on-one meeting. Dr. Jim Henderson praises Castro effusively as 'an historical giant who has given hope and a sense of dignity to oppressed people in Cuba and elsewhere'.

'Dr. Castro conducted himself more like a thoughtful professor emeritus than a revolutionary politician and world statesman. I had the impression of a man of tremendous self-knowledge and personal integration who had dedicated his life to his country and to the goal of social justice. I sensed that his views were based on thorough thought and a great deal of scholarly pursuit and investigation' (Henderson, 1997).

Henderson's account is certainly more in keeping with the Castro who comes across in the lengthy interviews conducted by Oliver Stone. Unlike real dictators who have been supported by US administrations, such as General Augusto Pinochet of Chile, General Suharto of Indonesia, the Duvaliers of Haiti, et cetera, Castro has been repeatedly elected by a majority of votes both in his own local District, and also in the National Assembly (Saney, 2004).

### **Western-style 'democracy'**

It's already clear that the media portray the Cuban political system as the antithesis of democracy, contrasting it with what we 'know' to be attainable, i.e., 'western-style democracies' such as what we have in Canada, or the US. Despite what we have seen, for example, regarding the implementation of wage and price controls in Canada, versus the much more democratic Cuban approach, the notion that Cuba is a dictatorship is always treated as a presupposition, and the Cuban system is never described beyond oblique references to the 'one-party state'.

It's abundantly clear that we are not in a position, in our 'western-style democracies', to criticise others for being 'undemocratic', while assuming that we are. What we have, in fact, more closely approximates an oligarchy or plutocracy, rather than a democracy. Even the basic requisite for a democracy, majority rule, is seldom attained, as a cursory examination of the popular vote in recent decades demonstrates. Only one Canadian federal government in the last forty years has achieved more than fifty per cent of the popular vote. The current Conservative government is ruling, albeit in a minority government, with thirty-six percent of the popular vote following the February 2006 election (Politics Canada, 2006).

The unsavory characteristics of 'western-style democracies' are the very reason for their rejection by Cubans, who have ample knowledge of them, historically. What Cubans know is that so-called 'multiparty elections' are the Trojan horse of politics, or, the 'democracy of exploiters', as Castro has put it, allowing the US government to bribe and buy its way into government through one power hungry comprador or another. In Third World elections the US has openly or covertly run a favoured candidate, directed massive funding toward its preferred candidate, and threatened economic or military repercussions if its candidate is not elected. Once elected the candidate and his or her party run a client government at the beck

and call of its American sponsors, just as the domestic equivalent is at the behest of his or her corporate backers. Relatively speaking, in comparison the Cuban political system is a model of democracy. As Professor Isaac Saney notes, contrary to conventional wisdom, Cubans have developed an elaborate, representative and inclusive democracy, which has an exemplary level of voluntary participation (Saney, 2004: 54-55).

The media simply are not open to these points of view, choosing instead to parrot exclusively the views of the US administration, with its distorted perspectives and cold war caricatures.

### **The embargo**

In the coverage of Carter and Cuba the embargo was not described in any meaningful fashion, which is a serious omission. No historical context was provided in any of the news coverage. There was no mention of how, under America's Torricelli and Helms-Burton Laws, the embargo has been intensified to the point where these are the harshest sanctions in the world today, (Chomsky, 2000) and extend beyond bilateral relations to involve any country trading with Cuba. For example, Ian Delaney, CEO of the Canadian company Sherritt, along with all company officers and directors have been blacklisted and barred from entering the US because of Sherritt's joint ventures in Cuba, a fact that received some media attention in 1997 (Saney, 2004). However, this was not tied into any of the coverage of the embargo and Carter's visit. The media also downplayed the effects of the embargo when they reported on Carter's naive and unsubstantiated assertion that the embargo is not the problem (Carter, 2002, Gee, 2002). No mention was made, for example, of the collapse of the Soviet Union, which was Cuba's largest (almost exclusive) trading partner, accounting for eighty-five per cent of trade, up until 1989. Russia provided ninety-five per cent of Cuban oil imports, for example. Cuban per capita income dropped by thirty-nine per cent following the Soviet collapse (Saney, 2004: 21). In the 2002 media coverage there were those who supported the embargo, inasmuch as they supported it as long as the Cubans continue to fail to meet President Bush's conditions for its removal.

Even for those who, like Carter, wanted the embargo removed, the leading rationale was that it 'hasn't worked', in the sense that it has not gotten rid of Castro, and hence after more than forty years it should be abandoned. This position was exemplified by The Toronto Star, in an Associated Press story which stated: 'Critics on Capitol Hill said Bush maintained the status quo, including the trade embargo that had failed to bring democracy to Cuba' (Gedda, 2002). Nowhere to be seen was the argument that the embargo violates international law, owing to its extra-territorial measures. Very little attention was given to the fact that it is inhumane in its impact on the Cuban people. Its downside was largely that it was ineffective, politically. Another criticism of the embargo was that it serves to provide a 'scapegoat' for Castro, both abroad and with his own people, allowing him to point the finger at the US for his economic woes. The Globe and Mail editorialised: 'As with Iraq, the embargo against Cuba chiefly serves to punish the country's impoverished ordinary citizens rather than its (non elected) rulers. As well, it provides those rulers with a handy scapegoat for every social ill that confronts the country, real or perceived' (Globe and Mail, 2002). Barrie McKenna of The Globe and Mail reported that the onus is on Castro: 'Mr. Bush marked the 100th Cuban Independence Day with speeches in Miami and Washington yesterday that laid out what Mr. Castro must do to see the strict embargo lifted' (McKenna, 2002).

In its editorial, and to its credit, The Toronto Star pointed out the hypocrisy in Bush's policies towards Cuba, given that his country does \$6 billion (US) in two-way trade with the 'axis of

evil', Iran, Iraq, and North Korea. It did \$120 billion (US) in trade with China, and \$19 billion (US) in trade with Saudi Arabia. Why is trade okay with these countries, which are not 'western-style democracies' either? This is an excellent question, especially in light of recent publicised information from Amnesty International that China, for example, had executed almost 3400 people in 2004 alone (Maclean's, 2005). The Star asked the question: 'Why continue to impoverish Cubans with a trade embargo?' answering: 'For defying Washington for 41 years. And for Miami votes in a US election year'. The Star gets part marks for asking the right question, (which eluded everyone else in the media) but coming up with the wrong answer. 'Defying Washington', although The Star does not explain how, is not the reason: if it was, then Washington wouldn't trade with China or Iran or Iraq or Korea either, all of which have defied Washington. It's okay to 'defy' Washington, if you do so in a brutal and repressive manner. And contrary to popular mythology, Bush didn't need the Miami Cuban vote to lose in 2000, or to win, if win he did, in 2004.

The real reason for the embargo is so shocking, so unspeakable, that it must never be broached in the corporate media, except perhaps in a brief account or statement from someone who can be dismissed as a demented conspiracy theorist. The real reason the US continues its merciless punishment of Cuba, is because of what Noam Chomsky calls, 'the threat of a good example'. If a country whether great or small starts to get along outside the US sphere of influence, outside of the so-called 'western-style democracies', where the US cannot use its money and power to directly or indirectly subjugate the people and extort their labour and raw materials, then that country is a rotten apple which must be gotten rid of, before it spoils the rest of the barrel. When the people of a country take matters into their own hands and revolt against hierarchy and inequality and the abject squalor and poverty to which the American Empire has reduced them, they must be beaten down again. When a leader - a Fidel Castro or a Hugo Chavez - tries to do something for the poor and downtrodden of his country, instead of serving Washington and the IMF and other powers that be, there will be demonising and economic squeezes and coup attempts: if all else fails, the US invades.

At various intervals the US government and its agencies have openly admitted to the real reasons for punishing Cuba. As Chomsky notes, in early 1964, the US State Department Policy Planning Council expanded on these concerns: 'The primary danger we face in Castro is . . . in the impact the very existence of his regime has upon the leftist movement in many Latin American countries . . . The simple fact is that Castro represents a successful defiance of the US, a negation of our whole hemispheric policy of almost a century and a half' (Chomsky, 2000: 82).

## **Conclusions**

This case study of Jimmy Carter's trip to Cuba provided an opportunity for the corporate media to trot out all of their clichés about Cuba and Fidel Castro, and to display their deep-seated ideological biases. These biases centered primarily around the alleged lack of democracy in Cuba, the communist if not totalitarian nature of Castro's alleged 'dictatorship', and the natural right of the Bush administration to interfere openly in the affairs of Cuba, even to the point of funding and fomenting the overthrow of a government which does not have Bush's approval. The editorial, opinion and news perspectives advanced by Canadian media outlets openly displayed the effects of forty-three years of relentless propaganda by successive American administrations, to the point where one would be hard-pressed to differentiate between media content and State Department news releases, other than nuances.

The framing of issues by the media presupposed American viewpoints and automatically censored Cuban perspectives.

The portrayal of Fidel Castro was a caricature drawn from a Cold War comic book, and contrasted sharply with the deferential coverage provided to Jimmy Carter and George W. Bush. The illegal US embargo of Cuba was either defended or narrowly criticised. Cuban history, its regular elections and its political system generally, American atrocities against Cuba: nothing about any of this was written. In sum, the media coverage was positively shameful.

In the Canadian media, as with their American counterparts, the range of debate or what Chomsky calls 'the bounds of the expressible', ran from Carter's position, which was that the US should end the embargo and then Castro would hold 'free and democratic' Cuban elections, to Bush's position, which was that Castro would have to 'democratise' Cuban elections and free political prisoners as a precondition to the lifting of the US economic embargo. As Carter wrote in *The Washington Post*, after his trip: 'the ultimate goals of the White House and the Carter Center are the same: to see complete freedom come to Cuba and, in the meantime, to have friendly relations between the people of our two nations' (Carter, 2002b). What remained beyond the pale to policy makers and journalists was the simple fact that the US has no right to interfere in Cuban internal matters, or that the notion of US electoral 'freedom and democracy' as applied to Cuba, in the form of multiparty elections, would amount to American manipulation of Cuban elections and subsequently, control of the Cuban economy, as has happened historically in Nicaragua and elsewhere throughout Latin America and around the world.

Media content such as this is indicative of the increasingly close relationship between the foreign policy of the American and Canadian governments. Sadly, it also predicts - inasmuch as media content is reflective of the elite agenda as well as influencing both public opinion and policymaking - an even greater emerging symbiosis between the two.

This article is dedicated to the memory of Bob Everton, who died tragically and prematurely in December 2004. Bob and I jointly presented an earlier draft of this article at a linguistics and communications conference in Santiago Cuba. The authors wish to thank David Berry, John E. Richardson and John Theobald for their valuable suggestions about an earlier draft. Any remaining shortcomings are the responsibility of the authors.

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