

THE WHITE HOUSE

Office of the Press Secretary

For Immediate Release August 19, 1994

PRESS CONFERENCE BY THE PRESIDENT

The East Room

THE PRESIDENT: Good afternoon. In recent weeks the Castro regime has encouraged Cubans to take to the sea in unsafe vessels to escape their nation's internal problems. In so doing, it has risked the lives of thousands of Cubans, and several have already died in their efforts to leave.

This action is a cold-blooded attempt to maintain the Castro grip on Cuba, and to divert attention from his failed communist policies. He has tried to export to the United States the political and economic crises he has created in Cuba, in defiance of the democratic tide flowing throughout this region.

Let me be clear: The Cuban government will not succeed in any attempt to dictate American immigration policy. The United States will do everything within its power to ensure that Cuban lives are saved and that the current outflow of refugees is stopped.

Today, I have ordered that illegal refugees from Cuba will not be allowed to enter the United States. Refugees rescued at sea will be taken to our naval base at Guantanamo, while we explore the possibility of other safe havens within the region.

To enforce this policy, I have directed the Coast Guard to continue its expanded effort to stop any boat illegally attempting to bring Cubans to the United States. The United States will detain, investigate and, if necessary, prosecute Americans who take to the sea to pick up Cubans. Vessels used in such activities will be seized.

I want to compliment the Coast Guard and the Immigration and Naturalization Service for their efforts. And I want to thank Florida's officials, including Governor Chiles and the Florida congressional delegation, for their help in protecting and saving the lives of Cubans who seek to escape the regime.

Now I'd like to speak just for a moment about the crime bill.(NB: This section and following questions not related to Cuba have been deleted)

.....Helen.

Q Mr. President, in the last 35 years we've had an embargo against Cuba and increased the economic burden on them. I understand that's why the refugees are coming in. What is the problem with taking a few small, albeit brave, steps to negotiate a possible movement toward democracy with Cuba? We've dealt with many communist countries through the last 35 years, and we're dealing with them now.

THE PRESIDENT: There aren't many left. I support the embargo, and I support the Cuban Democracy Act, which was passed in 1992. And I do not believe we should change our policy there.

The fundamental problem is, democracy is sweeping the world, democracy and freedom are sweeping our hemisphere. In the Caribbean alone, and in Central and South America and all of this region, there are only two countries now not democratically governed with open societies and open economies. The real problem is the stubborn refusal of the Castro regime to have an open democracy and an open economy. And I think

the policies we are following will hasten the day when that occurs, and we follow those policies because we believe they are the ones most likely to promote democracy and ultimately prosperity for the people of Cuba.

Q But that's not true of North Korea or China, and you're dealing with them every day.

THE PRESIDENT: I think the circumstances are different and I think our policy is correct.

Q Mr. President, recognizing that you're slowing down the process, do people fleeing Cuba still get automatic entry to the United States as political refugees if they're not criminals or ill?

THE PRESIDENT: No.

Q You're ending --

THE PRESIDENT: The people leaving Cuba will not be permitted to come to the United States; they will be sent to safe havens.

Q The people who reach here.

THE PRESIDENT: The people who reach here will be apprehended and will be treated like others. They will be -- their cases will be reviewed, Those who qualify can stay, and those who don't will not be permitted to. They will be now treated like others who come here.

Brit.

Q Mr. President, under the law it has always been clear that the Cuban refugees had a certain priority on staying here. The policy, of course, has been that anybody who got here got to stay. What restraints are you operating under in terms of the law in changing this policy? Or are you likely, sir, to be sued over this?

THE PRESIDENT: No -- let me -- I'm glad you asked that question in contradistinction to the one you asked right afterward. The Cuban Adjustment Act will continue to be the law of the land. But we are doing our best within that -- we will detain the Cubans who come here now, they will not simply be released into the population at large. And we will review all their cases in light of the applicable law, including the Cuban Adjustment Act.

Q Do you know how long it will take, how long --

THE PRESIDENT: It depends on how many there are, of course. And we don't know.

Andrea.

Q Can you give us some more details? Are these people going to be taken to Guantanamo? What kind of strain might this place on our naval forces, the Coast Guard? Already we're being told that drug interdiction is being cut back. And can you respond to criticism already from Bob Dole and Newt Gingrich? In particular, Mr. Gingrich said that your new policy is appalling, it's an example of mixed morality, and that he thinks it is illegal under the act.

THE PRESIDENT: Well, first, let me answer the factual questions. The refugees, those who are fleeing, will be taken first to Guantanamo where we will seek safe havens for them. That is plainly not illegal under international law, nor do we believe it is illegal under the Cuban Adjustment Act.

Secondly, as to whether it is immoral, I just would say it is my belief that the American people and that the Cuban American people and the people of Florida -- but the people of the entire United States -- do not want to see another Mariel Boatlift. They do not want to see Cuba dictate our immigration policy. They do not want to see Mr. Castro able to export his political and economic problems to the United States.

Now, that is what is plainly being set up. We have gone through that once. We had 120,000 people sent to this country as a deliberate attempt -- not because they themselves initially wanted to flee; they were encouraged to flee, they were pushed out; we had jails open, we had mental hospitals open -- all in an attempt to export all the problems of Cuba to the United States. We tried it that way once. It was wrong then, and it's wrong now. And I'm not going to let it happen again.

Q Can you respond to that other question?

THE PRESIDENT: Yes, that's my answer to them.

Q What about the naval forces, the Coast Guard? Are they up to this -- will it affect drug --

THE PRESIDENT: I think the Coast Guard is plainly up to it. We may have to have a little more Navy support. I met with the Secretary of Defense this morning; we discussed it at length. He is confident that we can do what we have to do without undermining our fundamental mission.

Q Mr. President, you say that you're not going to allow Fidel Castro to dictate U.S. immigration policy. But hasn't he just done that by forcing you to reverse three decades of a policy? And secondly, what do you say to Cuban Americans, especially in Florida, who feel betrayed by this change in policy?

THE PRESIDENT: Well, I believe that most Cuban Americans want us to be very firm. The Cuban Americans that I know, without regard to their party, supported the Cuba Democracy Act, and they remember how awful it was for the United States when the Mariel Boatlift occurred. They remembered what it did in this country and how -- the feelings it engendered in this country. And I do not believe they want another Mariel Boatlift. And I do not believe we can afford to do that. And so my own view is that most Cuban Americans will support what we're trying to do and wish us to be firm.

I would remind you that the Attorney General, who is in charge or oversees the INS, who has done a lot of work on this and who will have a press conference, I think, when I finish to answer some of the details of this policy was the prosecuting attorney in Dade County. I talked to the governor last night at some length about this -- of Florida.

I think my own feeling is -- and I've talked to Cuban Americans, of course, exhaustively for years now, and we've been in touch with them and with the Florida congressional delegation. I believe this policy will have broad support. I will be surprised if it does not have broad support.

Q By telling Cubans basically to stay home and at least temporarily to stomach conditions there, does that make it incumbent on you to be more active in seeking to oust Castro?

THE PRESIDENT: Well, what we are telling Cubans is that we have a provision for their coming to the United States through incountry processing. And at least as of this date, we have no evidence that the Castro has done anything to discourage Cubans from coming to the in-country processing, applying for the visas if they're eligible to come here, and getting them. That's what we're saying to them. That is, we do not have any evidence that would justify believing that that that process won't work in Cuba as it has in other places. And, indeed, the Castro government has encouraged Cubans to go down and apply to come here. But we don't object to that, that's the policy we have everywhere and that's the policy we should have there.

Q But doesn't that make it incumbent on you to unilaterally or multinationally press for the ouster of Castro in some way -- military, economic -- whatever?

THE PRESIDENT: The United States had done more than any other country to try to bring an end to the Castro government. We have done it through the Cuban Democracy Act. We have done it through the embargo. We have worked hard, often laboring almost alone, to that end. And we will continue to do that by whatever reasonable means are available to us.

Q Mr. President, Fidel Castro has been very high on the list of American demonology because he is a national security threat. I think of the Cuban missile crisis; he would provide a base for the Soviet Union. That's all ended now. Do you foresee a form of government, democratic government, in Havana with free elections that includes Fidel Castro? Or is it a case that Castro must go before there's any normalization?

THE PRESIDENT: Well, in any democracy it's up to the people to make their own decisions. The United States does not pick leaders or delete leaders for other countries; we let people make their own decisions.

Q Mr. President, can we turn the subject to your birthday today? What stirs within you as you celebrate another birthday? And if you could have three wishes fulfilled today, what would those three wishes be?

THE PRESIDENT: Well, I woke up this morning just grateful to be here. That's what I'm feeling -- I mean, grateful to be alive, grateful to have my health, grateful to have my family, grateful to have the chance to serve. And, you know, I like the tough fights, so this is an exhilarating period for me. I like the big challenges. I think we're all put on this earth to try to make a difference.

If I had three wishes, I would wish for the crime bill to pass -- (laughter) -- one; I would wish that I would make more progress on the way we do things around here as well as on the substance, because if we can open our minds and hearts to each other and play a little less politics, we can solve the health care problem, too, and other things.

And I would wish that I won't have to give up my whole vacation -- (laughter) -- because I still have dreams of breaking 80 on the golf course before I'm 50. (Laughter.)

Let me say, I feel that I -- this is not an easy job for you either, so since it's my birthday, if we adjourn here, let's go into the dining room and we can have some cake and whatever else is in there.

Thank you very much. Come on, let's have some cake.