

Let Cubans control their own political destiny



BARB GUY

"Reagan's been shot! If he dies, we'll close the store and have a party!"

I was 20 and rounding out a suburban upbringing by working in edgy downtown when an attempt was made on the president's life. The words my employer hollered throughout our workplace seemed harsh and hateful. It was just 69 days into the Reagan Era and already I was no fan, but to exult in the man being shot - I couldn't imagine.

Cuban exiles in Miami outdid my old boss this week as word came that Fidel Castro had undergone a major surgical procedure. Miami Cubans perceived this as news that the Cuban dictator was actually dead and they immediately began partying in the streets. How cold is that?

If any resident of Cuba felt like hiring a traditional *son* band and mixing up *mojitos* in a cold-hearted celebration of Fidel's

misfortune, they sure were not able to.

I visited Cuba's national headquarters for journalists in 2003, along with a group of NPR-listening Utahns. We were on a rare legal excursion of Americans into Cuba. It was sweltering in Havana's *Instituto del Periodismo* and, like everywhere else outside our hotel, at the *Instituto* there was no such thing as air conditioning and no such thing as toilet paper, but we were greeted with kind hearts, generous spirits and tremendous hospitality.

We were there for what had been billed as a free and open discussion between American tourists and Cuban journalists. We did not know that 75 Cubans, many of them journalists, had recently been sent to prison for up to 28 years for not supporting Castro.

As we entered the *Instituto*, we passed a huge photograph of Fidel in his ubiquitous fatigues leaning on a Mercedes, on his cell phone. About a dozen Cuban journalists were assembled and one of our group, after politely mentioning that our own country has many problems, asked about some of the troubles she had seen in Cuba - poverty, a dizzyingly unfair economy, racism.

She asked, "Are these the sorts of things that you write about?"

"No, these are not topics for our newspapers," they said.

Throughout the long, bizarre meeting, their answers to our questions made absolutely no sense.

At the end, our host thanked us for coming and casually mentioned an official from Castro's government had been sitting among us.

"We are so lucky," the man said, "whenever we have these meetings, he always makes time to join us."

Afterward, on the balcony, we were honored with a beautiful buffet that regular Cubans never see. We left frustrated and perplexed. Looking back, I see the roomful of Cuban journalists, surely some with colleagues who were just sent to three decades in prison for the kinds of things I freely say in *The Tribune*. I see the government official sitting there, well-known to the Cubans but not to us.

Everyone is talking about what will happen after Fidel. President Bush is poised to run in with Corn Flakes and Pepsi, remaking Cuba in our own image. He'll be rushing to beat Hugo Chavez of Venezuela who surely has a plan of his own, but maybe not the \$80 million Bush has earmarked.

The Cuban people undoubtedly have a good idea of what they want to be. I just wish the United States would stay out of it.

Cuba may choose to move toward a more democratic style of government. It may choose to

The Salt Lake Tribune

keep its education system, one that some other countries I can think of would do well to study. It may choose to ask the United States to end our crippling embargo of goods and services.

I have confidence in the journalists, musicians, waiters, cab drivers, mothers, artists and shopkeepers I met in Cuba. They have waited 47 years for a chance to speak up. I wish them the opportunity to autonomously choose their government's next structure and relationship with the world.

Barb Guy is a regular contributor to these pages.