

Helms-Burton likely to guide U.S. response

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The U.S. government is unlikely to drop its long-standing embargo of Cuba anytime soon, despite Fidel Castro's decision yesterday to step aside as leader of the island nation.

A 1996 law championed by then-Sen. Jesse Helms, R-N.C., keeps the United States' hard-line stance toward Cuba intact until the country has a Democratic government that "does not include Fidel Castro or Raul Castro."

Policy specialists on Cuba widely expect that Castro's brother, Raul Castro, will be named president next week.

"It turned out to be sort of prescient, that legislation," said Roger Noriega, a former foreign-affairs aide to Helms and now a visiting fellow at the American Enterprise Institute in Washington. "It's clear now that 18 months after Fidel Castro turned over control of the government to his brother . . . Raul shows no more interest in opening up (Cuba) than Fidel did."

As chairman of the Senate Foreign Relations committee in the mid-1990s, Helms was perhaps Castro's most forceful opponent in Washington.

In 1996, he and Rep. Dan Burton, R-Ind., co-wrote the Helms-Burton Act, which strengthened trade and travel sanctions against Cuba, for the first time penalizing foreign companies that did business with both Cuba and the United States.

The legislation forms the basis for the nation's current posture toward Cuba. The Bush administration made clear yesterday that the departure of Castro by itself would not lead to the removal of travel or trade bans.

"The changing of the guard is not significant of and by itself," The Associated Press quoted Tom Casey, a deputy spokesman for State Department, as saying. "The general analysis is that Raul Castro is 'Fidel lite.' He is simply a continuation of the Castro regime, of the dictatorship."

Longtime associates of Helms and those who have followed his career closely said yesterday that Helms would have cheered Fidel Castro's decision to step aside.

"He always said he would be happy for Fidel to go either horizontally or vertically – either way would work for him," said John Dodd, the president of the Jesse Helms Center in Wingate, N.C.

Helms was not available for comment yesterday. His health has deteriorated since leaving office in 2003. He suffers from dementia and now lives in a convalescent center, making interviews impossible, his wife, Dot Helms, said in an interview.

"He felt very strongly that Castro had to go," Dot Helms said.

That understates Helms's loathing of Castro, said William Link, the author of a new biography of Helms, *Righteous Warrior: Jesse Helms and the Rise of Modern Conservatism*.

"He had an almost personal abhorrence of the Castro brothers. He hated them," Link said.

Helms' interest in the nation's policy toward Cuba dates back to the early 1960s. He was fiercely anti-communist and saw the rise of socialist regimes in Latin America as a major threat to capitalism and democracy in this hemisphere.

To help counter what he saw as the communist threat, he also became a staunch supporter of right-wing regimes fighting communists in Latin America, such as dictator Augusto Pinochet in Chile, Link said.

Helms had a long-standing desire to strengthen the Cuban embargo. Becoming a chairman of the Senate Foreign Relations Committee in 1995 put him in a position to do it.

With Fidel Castro stepping aside, analysts who study Cuba policy say that it is likely – but not certain – that Raul Castro will be named president.

"If I had to bet money, I'd bet Raul Castro is it," said Philip Peters, a policy specialist on Cuba at the Lexington Institute in Arlington, Va., a conservative research group.

Dodd, Noriega and Dot Helms said they weren't sure how the former senator would react to the continuation of the Castro regime.

But Link said he thinks he knows.

"He would applaud the end of Fidel Castro. No question. But I think he'd say the next step would be getting rid of Raul."