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OUR OPINIONS | Editorials

*File:
Cuba*

Clinton on Cuba

The Clinton administration has responded to the recent flurry of debate and speculation about changing U.S. policy on Cuba with plain speaking: no change unless Cuba changes.

The forum was significant: a luncheon of the Cuban-American National Foundation, a conservative group based in Miami. Assistant Secretary of State Alexander Watson took note of a "misconception" that the administration plans to soften its policy toward Cuba.

"This is false," he said. "We can neither ignore nor negotiate away the human and political rights of the Cuban people. There will be no upgrade in relations until those rights are respected."

There has been particular speculation about whether the administration would lift, entirely or partially, the long-standing economic embargo that is truly pinching Cuba now that Cuba's financial props in the Soviet Union and the communist bloc have collapsed.

Said Mr. Watson: "Our relations will not improve and the embargo will not be lifted until such time as there are democratic reforms and respect for human rights in Cuba."

One talks of carrots and sticks, and the trade embargo is acting as both. It is the stick that has whipped Fidel Castro into freeing part of the consumer economy. He is allowing

individuals to hold dollars sent in from abroad and to go into small consumer businesses outside the central command system.

This, like Lenin's New Economic Policy at the outset of the Soviet communist regime, was a desperation move: that or collapse. Had the embargo not been in place, expanded trade with other countries could have filled in for the loss of communist countries as traders and subsidizers and continued to comfortably support Mr. Castro's incompetent economic system.

And lifting the embargo dangles like a carrot as a reward for the Cuban government's changing its ways, even though that may seem unlikely immediately unless something spectacular happens.

It seems unlikely that Mr. Castro would agree to fundamental change. It seems equally unlikely that there will be a coup, peaceful or otherwise, by his top circle, since they are basically yes-men whose well-being depends on Mr. Castro's remaining in power.

But conceivably economic hardship could become so severe that the people themselves would rise up, and it seems quite possible that the lower ranks of the military, who are as miserable as ordinary citizens, would refuse any orders to move against them. In such a situation, anything could happen, and the former Soviet Eastern European satellites provide several patterns.

High-tech legislation: Reporters get slipped the disk

Washington — Whoomp, there it is.

President Clinton's 1,336-page health reform bill weighed nearly five pounds, so it was distributed to reporters in a lighter form — on computer disks.

"Hey, this is the '90s," said White House press secretary Dee Dee Myers. "We're against killing trees."

Congress today starts the long process of taking apart, changing and putting back together the Clinton health care reform package.

Before the legislation can become law, it will be examined by virtually every committee in Congress.

Donna Shalala, secretary of

health and human services, will testify today at a hearing of the Senate Finance Committee, headed by Sen. Daniel Patrick Moynihan (D-N.Y.). Also expected on the Hill today are Treasury Secretary Lloyd Bentsen, Labor Secretary Robert Reich and Erskine Bowles, head of the Small Business Administration.

The festivities were held in the Capitol's ornate Statuary Hall, home to marble statues of the nation's heroes.

"From 1817 until 1857, it is where the House of Representatives met and deliberated," explained Thomas S. Foley (D-Wash.), the speaker of the House. "It has been, among other things, the inauguration of five

presidents of the United States, and it is a fitting place for the inauguration of the Clinton Health Security Act."

Rep. Newt Gingrich (R-Ga.) refused to attend the ceremony, calling it a "circus." He characterized the Clinton plan as "a power grab" and said he expects it to be rejected because it's too expensive and too bureaucratic.

"If you've seen public housing, you've seen public medicine, and it's not a pretty picture."

Speaker after speaker praised first lady Hillary Rodham Clinton, who turned 46 on Tuesday, as the leading author of the reform.

Not in our history has a first lady led such an effort so energetically, so thoughtfully, with

such knowledge and understanding," said Senate Majority Leader George Mitchell (D-Maine).

House Minority Leader Bob Michel (R-Ill.) warned this was "just the beginning of a long, tortuous process" and noted there were "substantive and profound differences" between Clinton's plan and those proposed by Republicans. "The debate that begins now will be about nothing less than conflicting visions of what America means — not just about health care reform itself, but about the role of government in our society."

— Staff writers Bob Dart, Andy Mollison and Jeanne Cummings contributed to this article.