

## READING THE TEA LEAVES – A GUIDE TO RECENT US/ CUBAN EVENTS

The recent expulsion of 14 Cuban diplomats in Washington DC and New York was dutifully portrayed in the press as *probably* having something to do with espionage, even as the State Department refused to reveal exactly how the United States had been harmed, and insisted the expulsions were not part of any larger anti-Cuban effort. Since the expulsions were only one item on a large menu fed the press pool at their daily State Department briefing, it's understandable that the full context would escape most reporters present. After all, the only press dedicated to following the Cuban story full time are writing for a S. Florida readership, whose anti-Cuban agenda is well known.

But the story is actually not that hard to follow. The Bush presidency, owing its very existence to a small group of fanatical expat Cubans in Miami, has a debt to pay, and a 44 year score to settle, and it has apparently decided that a migration crisis is the ideal trigger for a long-dreamed of military invasion of the island. If another military adventure against an outgunned, starved and sanctioned country diverts attention from the disorder in Iraq, Afghanistan and Saudi Arabia, so much the better.

In 1995, following the “Mariel” migration crisis, the United States and Cuba, recognizing that such calamities were in neither countries best interest, reached an agreement to allow for a more orderly immigration process. The United States agreed to process 20,000 U.S. visas per year. In reality, the U.S. has only ever lived up to a fraction of that pledge. But starting in October of 2002 (the beginning of the calendar year for the accord) the visa flow slowed from a trickle to a slow drip. By the end of April, seven months later, only 700 visas had been issued. The State Department's excuse? A slowdown caused by new security reviews put in place since September 11, 2001. The State Department insisted, until this week, that the other 19,300 visas would be issued before the end of September.

What are the chances? Even if the Cuban diplomats had not been expelled, it seems unlikely that the visa process could have cranked up to process 90% of the agreed upon visas in less than half the normal time. It seems certain that by expelling these Cuban diplomats out of the blue, the U. S. Government is hoping for Cuba to respond in kind and toss out a few of the American diplomats responsible for processing US visas in Havana. That way, the violation of the Immigration accords can once again be blamed, as everything usually is, on Cuba. The visa freeze will continue, and soon, especially if there is a further clampdown on remittances to Cuba (as Bush will almost certainly announce on Tuesday, May 20) someone will be foolish enough to attempt another hijacking, or else large groups will begin again to pile on rafts, secure in the

knowledge that the only way to pass Go is to touch Florida soil. (Note to Haitians: Not For You.) The fact that hijackers are almost always set free in Florida doesn't hurt either.

It's time for Americans (and their press) to wake up. Cuba is a sovereign country. The vicious attacks it has withstood from its northern neighbor over the past half century, from military to economic to pure propaganda, must cease. A quarrel with another country over the form of government chosen by its citizens, as is the undeniable case in Cuba, is not an invitation to conversion through subversion. Cuba's social record on behalf of its citizens is the envy of Latin America – what the country might have accomplished were it not fighting a war against the most powerful country in the world for nearly 50 years is something Cubans and Americans alike should still have the opportunity to see. The expulsions may be bewildering to some, but to those of us with family and friends in Cuba, Bush's latest war plan is as plain as day. Watch and see.

(Written after May 13th, 2003 expulsions.)

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Updated: 09/23/2004