

But the auto industry did have one reason to celebrate. It was getting something that regulated industries will kill for: harmonization of regulations. For several years carmakers had faced the possibility that California and other states would impose more stringent fuel-economy standards than those at the federal level, under the guise of reducing carbon-dioxide emissions. California, however, had agreed to hold off temporarily on enacting its own standard, given the increased stringency of the new federal rule. The nightmarish scenario of having to meet different standards for different parts of the country was thus removed, at least for the time being. Instead of multiple nooses around its neck, the industry will have only one.

If you want to see how the industry is learning to live with that noose, consider General Motors's shifting stance on CAFE. Last June, in comments filed with the NHTSA, it warned that a 35 mpg standard might require the use of "expensive technologies . . . that consumers may not find acceptable—due to price concerns, drivability issues, loss of utility, and noise/vibration acceptance levels." And that was under the assumption that the 35 mpg standard would be in place by 2020, which would have allowed more breathing room than President Obama's target of 2016 does.

But in December, when GM filed its restructuring plan with Congress in a bid for bailout funds, those concerns were gone. Instead, GM offered a mea culpa: "GM has made mistakes in the past . . . [including] insufficient investment in smaller, more fuel-efficient vehicles for the U.S." And at the Rose Garden ceremony, GM declared that it was "fully committed" to the president's approach. So it is that an industry's commitment to consumers is being replaced by a commitment to government.

But for the government to achieve what it desires, consumers have to behave in a certain way, and there's no guarantee they will. Suppose they don't flock to the new cars—what then? They may well hold on to their old cars longer, which means that our on-the-road fleet could end up having lower fuel economy than if CAFE hadn't been changed at all. And that scenario will be even more likely if gas prices stay low, because then the public will have even less reason to sacrifice such things as comfort and safety in the name of fuel economy.

So we have a Bizarro World in which the auto industry may root for high gas prices because they make complying with CAFE easier, even though they also make driving more expensive. And government may well try to boost gas prices, given that its auto-bailout funds and regulatory scheme hang in the balance. Simply raising gas taxes would probably be too politically honest; voters would never accept it, and rightfully so. But a complicated cap-and-trade approach, such as that contained in the new Waxman-Markey climate bill, might be politically viable. It would boost gas prices, avoid getting labeled a tax, and be good for the Earth all at once. What could be better?

There was a disturbing but largely unreported prelude to the White House event. A week before the ceremony, Charles A. Hurley, who had been nominated by the president to head the NHTSA, withdrew his name. What reportedly killed his nomination was his work for the Insurance Institute for Highway Safety, which is perhaps the last industry group to recognize the tradeoff between CAFE and vehicle safety publicly.

Making use of decades of auto-crash data, the Institute has long advised consumers on the importance of size and weight in car safety. It drove the point home again last April, by releasing a report on a series of mini-car test crashes in which the vehicles performed significantly worse than mid-size cars.

But well-founded as it was, Charles Hurley's view on CAFE and safety was too much for environmentalists. They have never admitted the tradeoff in the past, and now they apparently will go gunning for anyone who does. Dan Becker, former head of the Sierra Club's global-warming program and reportedly a key player in killing Hurley's nomination, said: "I'd rather talk about the future than . . . kick a dead horse. This gives the Obama administration the opportunity to choose someone who is committed to both sides of NHTSA's jurisdiction—safety and fuel economy." So much for the laws of physics.

Hurley's fate provides an Orwellian contrast to President Obama's recent claim that "under my administration, the days of science taking a back seat to ideology are over." Science taking a back seat to ideology? Buckle up, you ain't seen nothin' yet. **NR**

Cuban Hopes

*The people find their voice—but
will the world help the
Castros silence it?*

BY OTTO J. REICH &
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In the 1980s, most American foreign-policy experts and intelligence analysts failed to see the internal changes taking place in the Soviet bloc as serious challenges to the regimes. Could history be repeating itself closer to home, this time in Cuba?

After 50 years of living under the most repressive dictatorship in the Western Hemisphere, the Cuban people are losing their fear and beginning to push off the Communist boot from their collective neck. Paradoxically, this is happening as a dark cloud of authoritarian populism spreads throughout Latin America, financed by Hugo Chávez's petrodollars, undergirded by Castro's intelligence and security infrastructure, and propelled by years of incompetence and selfishness on the part of political elites. Democratic change in Cuba, long deemed an impossibility, could turn the tide and usher forth a rebirth of freedom in the region.

An uncommon sound was heard throughout three Cuban cities in early May of this year: pots and pans being banged in protest over political and economic conditions on the island. The protest was as unusual as the way in which it was organized: An incipient movement of young bloggers used their limited access to the Internet—the Cuban government severely restricts access to computers and the Web—to call on the population to carry out the protest.

A few weeks earlier, on March 29, at the annual Havana Arts Festival, some of these same bloggers, together with young artists, had taken the stand during

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a presentation and proclaimed an “open podium”—calling on the hundreds of onlookers and participants to express themselves freely. Many did, openly and courageously mocking government censorship.

These reports are unusual because any anti-government protests in Cuba have traditionally been met with furious physical attacks by police and government-organized “rapid-response brigades” of local goons armed with iron bars and other blunt instruments. In these recent cases, however, the rapid-response brigades have not been effective: The citizens have responded with passive, but consistent, resistance.

At a government-sponsored concert a few weeks before the Havana Arts Festival, many youths had openly protested the arrest of Gorki Aguila, leader of a punk-rock band known for its ob-

command-and-control apparatus. What’s more, after a grassroots campaign by activists throughout the island, more than 1.5 million Cubans of voting age refused to cooperate with the sham one-party, one-candidate “elections” organized by the government in January 2008 in order to “legitimize” the passing of presidential power from Fidel Castro to his younger (by almost five years) brother, Raúl. Never before had Cubans in such large numbers dared to defy the rigidly enforced order to vote. For the first time in half a century—because of this innovative campaign, carried out with fasts, public protests, workshops, Internet postings, leafleting, and programs on short-wave radio—citizens were galvanized into rejecting sham elections.

Since the March 18, 2003, crackdown that landed 75 civic activists and leaders

Nor is frustration with the current government limited to the young and anonymous. In March, some of the most powerful people in the government—including Carlos Lage, a key economic official, and Felipe Pérez Roque, the foreign minister—were summarily removed from their posts. Their future is being debated at the highest levels, including within the Politburo, the Communist party’s policy-making body, from which they were also expelled. Their crime: having been secretly tape-recorded mocking Raúl and Fidel Castro’s incompetence (and, in the case of Fidel, incontinence), as well as the advanced age of the ruling clique. Furthermore, they could be heard hoping for the day when a younger generation could rule. The political significance of the demotion of formerly trusted, high-ranking leaders of the next generation of the island’s rulers must not be underestimated.

A dialogue with the Castro government that ignored the growing dissidence and despair at all levels of Cuba would be as counterproductive as would have been ignoring Lech Walesa in 1980s Poland and addressing only General Jaruzelski. The U.S. should instead draw attention to the courageous Cuban resistance and insist that nations that engage Castro not turn their backs on these freedom fighters. In this decade, too many European embassies in Havana (most of them from “Old Europe”) have, under pressure from the Castro regime, stopped even inviting dissidents to diplomatic functions. Fortunately, the Eastern European states have not followed suit, since they remember what it is like to live under a Communist dictatorship, and how important it is for dissidents to know they have friends on the outside.

It is said that “generals are always ready to fight the last war,” because they fail to recognize the changes that follow it. The same may be said about diplomats and politicians who are calling for commercial and diplomatic engagement with Castro’s Cuba. They are ready to talk to a government that does not represent the future of Cuba—or even its present.

But perhaps they cannot be blamed. After all, when was the last time that the U.S. or international mainstream media reported the events described above?

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The U.S. should draw attention to the courageous Cuban civil resistance and insist that nations that engage Castro not turn their backs on these non-violent freedom fighters.

scene lyrics and no-holds-barred critique of the Castro regime. The Castros’ gerontocratic ruling clique is attempting to maintain total control over a nation whose population averages less than half its age.

In the town of Placetas, in the central part of Cuba, lives 44-year-old Jorge Luis García Pérez, also known as “Antúnez,” a black Cuban who served 17 years in prison for calling for glasnost and perestroika on the island. Antúnez has been called “the Black Diamond” by his fellow prisoners, for his tough resistance to the dictatorship and in reference to the color of his skin. He has organized meetings, marches, fasts, and vigils in a crusade to mobilize a nonviolent civic movement for change, and he recently went on a hunger strike to draw international attention to the plight of Cubans.

Antúnez has reasons to be hopeful. The Castro regime itself has recognized that it cannot extinguish what it calls “indisciplina laboral,” or rampant worker non-cooperation with the regime’s

in prison, the resistance movement has developed innovative ways of expanding the struggle for freedom, including the founding of groups such as the Rosa Parks Women’s Movement for Civil Rights, underground independent newsletters, and even citizen committees against police abuse. The movement grows, fueled by increasingly open popular discontent.

A number of U.S. congressmen and foreign governments are pressuring the Obama administration to accelerate U.S. diplomatic approaches to Cuba regardless of the action—or inaction—of the dictatorship. The result of following this misguided suggestion would be to undermine the growing dissident movement on the island and delay the day when democracy and freedom can return. The resilient civic resistance movement that has flowered in Cuba presents a constant challenge to a once all-powerful totalitarian regime. Unarmed but persistent, these nonviolent resisters represent a positive alternative future for Cuba.