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Arrogance in the Face of Disaster

The Bush Administration's Refusal of Cuba's Offer for Medical Assistance Following Hurricane Katrina
by **Stephen Zunes**

One of the most tragically irresponsible decisions of the Bush administration in the critical hours following Hurricane Katrina was its refusal to accept offers by the government of Cuba to immediately dispatch more than 1500 medical doctors with 37 tons of medical supplies to the devastated areas along the Gulf coast.

The Cuban government made its formal offer on September 2, as desperately overworked health care providers in New Orleans were unable to meet the needs of thousands of survivors due to the lack of medicines, equipment, and personnel. At that time, Senate majority leader and physician Bill Frist, who was visiting that flooded city, stated that "the distribution of medical assistance continues to be a serious problem." He confirmed reports from Louisiana's Health Department that scores of people were dying as a result.

The following day, the Washington Post reported that southern Mississippi's most essential need, in addition to fuel, was medical assistance. In the evacuation center in Houston's Astrodome, where infectious diseases were spreading, only a small portion of those seeking medical assistance were receiving care due to a shortage of medical personnel and supplies.

To both demonstrate the seriousness of his government's offer and as a shrewd propaganda ploy, Cuban president Fidel Castro assembled 1586 doctors with backpacks filled with medical equipment at the Havana Convention Center on September 4, announcing their readiness to leave at a moment's notice. Gulfstream Airways, a regional carrier based in Florida, offered to fly them into the affected region free of charge. There was no response from Washington.

The Congressional Hispanic Caucus tried to pressure the administration to accept the Cuban aid, with even the staunchly anti-Castro Cuban-American Republican Senator Mel Martinez of Florida stating, "If we need doctors, and Cuba offers them and they provide good service of course we should accept them." News reports indicate that Louisiana governor Kathleen Blanco, who had visited Cuba earlier this year, would have welcomed the assistance.

A full week after President Castro's initial offer, the State Department finally did respond, officially rejecting the offer on the grounds that the United States did not have full diplomatic relations with Cuba. Notably, the Bush administration did accept aid from the government of Taiwan, with which the United States does not have full diplomatic relations either.

Despite Cuba's many problems, the Communist country has established one of the finest public health care systems in the developing world, exporting thousands of doctors to poor parts of the Caribbean, Latin American, Africa and Asia. The island nation is frequently hit by hurricanes and – despite its lack of resources – has demonstrated a far greater ability to handle these storms' extreme winds and flooding with minimal loss of life than the far wealthier United States. Similarly, its doctors are well-trained to deal with such natural disasters.

Curiously, despite outcries by Congressional Democrats regarding other areas of negligence and incompetence by the Bush administration surrounding Hurricane Katrina, little attention has been given to the Bush administration's tragic decision to reject the offer of Cuban aid. Part of the reason may be that the Democratic Party has for decades shared the Republicans' seemingly pathological hostility toward Cuba even as they have supported bipartisan efforts to pursue close economic relations and even military and police aid to regimes with even worse human rights records.

The problems with the Cuban government – particularly regarding individual liberties and democratic governance – and other failures of the Cuba's brand of socialism are very real. However, this is no reason to have rejected the offers of badly-needed assistance which could have decreased the suffering and saved the lives of hundreds of Americans. No serious inquiry into the mismanagement of the response to Hurricane Katrina should avoid holding those responsible for rejecting the Cuba's offer of medical assistance accountable for their actions.

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