



A Place Where Dreams Are Pursued

An Interview with The Honorable
John Ellis "Jeb" Bush, Governor, Florida

EDITORS' NOTE *The Honorable Jeb Bush was elected Florida's 43rd governor in 1998 and reelected in 2002, becoming the first Republican in the state's history to serve a second term. Born in Midland, Texas, he started a real-estate development company after arriving in Florida; today, it is one of the largest full-service commercial real-estate companies in the southern part of the state. Prior to his election as governor, he served as Florida's Secretary of Commerce.*



The Hon. Jeb Bush

In this interview Governor Bush highlights several reasons why his state continues to attract investors, and comments on the United States' bilateral relationship with Cuba.

Why should readers of LEADERS invest in Florida?

Because we're one of the most business-friendly places in the country, both culturally and statutorily. We back that with low taxes and a strong commitment to quality of life, without overregulating. We have an abundant workforce, which is highly skilled and diverse. And Florida has always been an entrepreneurial, dynamic place, a place where dreams are pursued.

Additionally, we offer the added attraction of being the true gateway to the Americas. Our location and infrastructure allow businesses to service the entire Western hemisphere, reaching more than 825 million people with a combined GDP of over \$12.6 trillion. The chemistry created by these elements makes for a darn good business climate, which yields the highest job growth in the United States. We've shown job growth for the past 14 straight months.

Which economic sectors are primarily responsible for that growth?

Florida is not just for tourists anymore, but tourism is a good example of our state's dynamic nature. After September 11 [2001], our tourism numbers dropped dramatically, but we organized ourselves quickly, with government and

business working together to effectively respond to the crisis, and the numbers came back rapidly. In 2002 we welcomed over 76 million visitors, for a record year that exceeded pre-9/11 numbers.

Tourism remains a vital part of our economy, but it doesn't define Florida. It does, however, broaden our base, help us keep our taxes low, and allow us to pursue other economic sectors. Our aviation and

defense-related industries are growing, and our construction industry is very important and growing, while those in other areas of the country are seeing contraction. Over the past five or six years, high-tech industries have really taken off in Florida. Today, we're one of the top three technology exporters in the United States. We have strong R&D programs in the biotech and pharmaceutical fields, and have emerged as the nation's focal point for the simulation, modeling, and training industry. Our economic growth is across the board.

You've taken several overseas trips to promote the state more. Which markets have you been eyeing?

We want to enhance and build upon our gateway status with the Caribbean and Latin America. For many countries in that region today, as much as 50 to 100 percent of their trade with North America flows through south Florida. Numbers in the services sector are harder to ascertain, but they're significant as well.

Once a year I visit countries in Latin America, in addition to one or two more trips abroad. We normally put together a group of people called Team Florida and go on high-profile visits focused on transactions and market promotion. The combination of the two has been quite successful. We took the largest trade mission in our state's history in 1999 to Mexico, in an effort to try to build a "third bridge" – in addition to Texas and California – from the United States to Mexico. Those two states have strong connections to Mexico, but it remains the one country in the

region with which Florida is not a leading trade partner. Building that third bridge remains part of our strategy.

We know we can't be all things to all people, so we focus on specific sectors of the economy when we travel, whether it's nationally or internationally. It's easy to make a case for Florida because we're so well known around the world. There's an acceptance because people know Florida and have traveled here. We've been quite successful in promoting two-way trade and reverse investment in Florida.

The bilateral relationship, or lack of one, between the United States and Cuba has more of a direct impact on Florida than on any other state. What do you think Castro's latest moves portend?

I know some people were hopeful that Castro was changing his stripes, but I think his latest actions more or less crystallized the fact that he has no intention of changing. I also think they set in motion a reevaluation of the situation, which is healthy, because Castro has now made it quite clear, in his own words, that he doesn't desire to move toward freedom and democracy for the people of Cuba. I hope this will help the United States recognize that the underlying premise of our policy objective regarding Cuba needs to be that country's transition to democracy.

If we believe that, then accompanying that belief should be the recognition that Castro will not be in that picture. I know there were a lot of people once enamored of Castro, so I assume he must be a very charismatic guy. But the fact is, he refuses to open up the Cuban economy, and any dissent is stifled by house arrest or worse, such as the recent crackdown, which sent people to jail for 25 years simply because they have a different point of view on the need for democracy. There should be no doubt at this point as to Castro's intentions. He migrates toward the Stalinist mold; he's really more of a Stalinist than anything else. I think that's a good thing for people to realize because, the more they do, the more our policy can focus on supporting those people who aspire to democracy and freedom in Cuba. ●