

FIDEL AND I

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New Year's Eve was always a special celebration on the island. The parties were more elegant but less exuberant than what we know in the United States. This was true of the event in the country club residential area December 31, 1958. The location was different that year. The two golf clubs and the yacht club where the more sumptuous events were usually held had decided not to proceed with festivities because of the unsettled political picture. In order to keep up appearances, the President had asked one of his senior cabinet ministers to host a comparable event at his luxurious home in the suburbs.

The guest list was almost exclusively drawn from the government hierarchy with a sprinkling of ambassadors from countries like Chile, Belgium, and Brazil. Notably absent was the American ambassador. It later turned out he had an important assignment that would have dire consequences for most of those present before the night was out.

Midnight passed with customary gaiety, and the revelers had settled into a long night's entertainment far removed from the continuing stress and strain of managing the affairs of government when the news arrived at 1:15 a.m. that the President, Fulgencio Batista, had fled the country in his private plane after being convinced by the U.S. ambassador that this was his only recourse.

The scene was like a melodrama crafted in Hollywood. Robert Redford found it so full of suspense that he used it as the opening for a movie depicting the downfall of the old dictator and the arrival of Fidel Castro, the new Messiah, with his bearded warriors.

Through the political turmoil and frequent revolutions of Latin America since Spain was driven from the New World, the tradition of safe refuge in embassies has been established and respected by political winners. This means that if those who are losers can find their way to the embassy of another sympathetic Latin American country before being apprehended by those taking over the government, they are granted safe haven there. Since winners one day can be losers another, both sides play the game. Another unwritten rule is that the United States embassies are out of bounds, i.e. no refuge there for the deposed.

Most of the men at the New Year's party converged on the Chilean Embassy in downtown Havana. Seeking asylum was a laundry list of Batista government officials, including the President of the Senate, the

Secretary of Interior, Secretary of Commerce, the ex-Secretary of State, and the Attorney General, who had prosecuted Fidel Castro after his failed Moncada uprising of 1953. Also present was the Senior Minister who had the most to fear, the head of the Secret Police.

The Chilean Embassy was undergoing renovation, so there was limited space. Some eighty of them were jammed into small quarters with one bathroom. They were charged \$125 a day. It was pricey and uncomfortable, but better than the alternative. To leave the county each ex-dignitary needed a "safe conduct pass" from the Cuban President. In those early days of the revolution this was not Castro himself, but rather a middle-of-the-road compromise politician. Among those penned up, the Secret Police Chief displayed considerable bravado as he looked out the Embassy window and saw that his private car and chauffeur were waiting for him within sight two blocks away. He stated loudly that he could leave any time he wanted under these conditions. But he quickly shut up when the television showed his right hand man being dragged to a wall that first week and executed by rifle fire after a kangaroo trial. In fact, shooting was sporadic every night during the first two months following the arrival of Castro's forces, so that the unwilling Embassy guests spent a lot of time hugging the floor.

Eventually they all got out after paying a handsome ransom to the new regime. As there was growing alarm in the world press at the reports of the indiscriminate killing of those charged with being Batista supporters, the interim government seemed glad to be rid of them on these terms.

My story tonight revolves around my personal experiences with Cuba, its Revolution, and Fidel Castro. Like many Americans, I first saw Havana in its post war heyday. It had the highest standard of living south of the border. One indicator that stood out from

my business experience was that the per capita consumption of toilet soap was higher there than in any other Latin country. The Cuban peso was strong and stood at parity with the U.S. dollar. There was a freely elected (although venal) political establishment, and tourists flooded the island in search of the three S's - sun, sand, and sex! There were hopeful signs that a weak but toddling democracy might slowly find the right path. But such aspirations were nullified when Batista, anticipating a defeat at the polls, executed a military coup in March 1952. The populace, whether rich or poor, conservative or liberal, was outraged. Opposition started immediately. Batista countered with increasingly oppressive measures. This in turn triggered more violence. Revolution was in the air.

I must now step back two and one half years to the Summer of 1956 for my first encounter with Fidel. I was a newly minted Advertising Manager for Procter & Gamble in Mexico. My counterpart as Sales Manager was a personable, short, and slightly chubby Cuban who had been transferred from Havana some four years earlier to provide seasoned skill and leadership. In the first week of July 1956, Fidel came to Mexico with a vision to recruit and train Cuban expatriates who would be the vanguard for the military revolt to overthrow the Batista dictatorship. He obtained the use of a ranch outside the city from a sympathizer where he and his men practiced military tactics and fired their weapons.

Every revolution needs money for arms, ammunition, provisions, etc., and Castro set about seeking support from the local Cuban community. Our Sales Manager, who had never been involved in politics before, came under the sway of Fidel's charm, charisma, and persuasiveness.

It was hard for our Cuban to keep his interest a secret. One of our District managers, a Canadian import, told the wide-eyed story of entering the Sales Manager's office to confer on some business problem and

finding him instead with two roughly dressed individuals counting stacks of money spread over his desk. The Batista Secret Police were also on to Castro's activities and supporters with an ensuing cat and mouse game played on the streets of Mexico City as they sought to neutralize the revolutionary effort. The same Canadian happened to be driving up the Reforma, Mexico City's main avenue one weekend, when our Cuban Manager by chance pulled along his car at a traffic light and called out in anguish that they must immediately switch vehicles. Anything for the boss! This was done with dispatch, although leaving the subordinate shaken as he stared nervously through the rearview mirror all the way home.

It was with some chagrin that I have read in a book by one of Castro's former supporters that at this same time he and his group were hiding out and collecting arms in a couple of safe houses only several blocks from my residence.

When Castro seized the leadership of the Revolution and swept in triumph across the country, our Sales Manager could not wait to return to his native land to take part in the rebuilding of Cuba Libre. Procter & Gamble was only too glad to heed to his wishes, and he was transferred back to Havana as Sales Manager of that company.

The complex character of Fidel went through a radical change between the time of his Mexican days and his triumphant entry into Havana two and one half years later. One of his closest supporters, the woman who owned the safe houses in Mexico City and later served as his first Cuban representative to the United Nations, found that in triumph his previous earnest and engaging personality had been replaced by an absolutist approach which brooked no opposition. His leadership style precluded debate and compromise. This fanaticism, plus his mercurial nature and ingrained opposition to everything that had gone before, made him into another dictator whose chief preoccupation was to

retain power. In despair, this woman resigned her position at the United Nations and sought refuge, like so many others, in the United States.

Now let's move forward to July 1960, when I returned to Latin America from the calm and order of working in Great Britain to the excitement and uncertainty of life in Venezuela, first as Advertising Manager and then as General Manager. My stay in the country lasted four years. And while most of my time was spent in the normal effort of moving the business ahead, a disproportionate amount was devoted to counter the terror activities of the local Communists egged on and supported by Castro. For once the Cuban revolution succeeded, Fidel felt his mission was to save the rest of Latin America from American influence and to bring down any other government that stood in his way. Venezuela had chosen a very different path to that of Cuba after the fall of its own dictator in early 1958. Political parties were organized, and an election was held later that year that was accepted by all as representative of the peoples' wishes. The economy was free enterprise and vibrant. Castro's aim was to sabotage this effort and install something similar to his own one party state.

Since the Communists represented at best 3% of the populace, the only way to achieve their goals was through force. First of all, mobs were organized in Caracas to rampage through the city center and create havoc and helplessness. One of their favorite ploys was to descend upon the usual choked up traffic, pop open car hoods, and smash homemade Molotov cocktails against the engines to burn out the vehicles. Amid the fire and smoke came the destruction of storefronts and looting.

This was not a continual effort, but rather designed to hit sporadically to sow fear and apprehension and challenge the government's ability to maintain law and order. They were seeking to prod the military into seizing power from the fledgling

democracy. For it was always easier for the terrorists to mobilize the people against a military dictatorship than a democratic government. Cuba had been a good testing ground for the concept.

But this first effort was finally put down by the newly-elected President, who waited for the judicious moment when the citizens were fed up with the violence and welcomed firm action. He then brought in paratroopers in planes that flew dramatically down the valley of Caracas for all to see before landing. The streets were reclaimed, and the generals stayed in the barracks. The government, although hobbled, continued to operate while guaranteeing freedom of speech, the press, assembly, etc. and the shaken economy weathered the storm.

Castro's second effort to topple the government came through the military forces, particularly the Navy. An uprising of disaffected and leftist officers was carried out in two port cities. There was a lot of ammunition expended although both sides seemed to be pretty poor shots with few casualties reported. This also ended in defeat for the Communists.

The third and final Castro action was to attack the subsidiaries of American Corporations. Pulling the feathers of the eagle's tail has often been considered good sport in Latin America. So long as the average Venezuelan was not personally endangered, there was no popular ground swell against these incursions. The government continued to do its best to maintain law and order, but it was unable to provide protection for the many American operations. So for roughly two years we were all fair game. Goodyear had four major warehouses in the country, three of which were burned out. Flaming tires caused a lot of smoke, and the results were spectacular. Sears Roebuck was the major merchandiser, and the terrorists developed a way to slip glass flasks into the pockets of coats and dresses with a chemical at each end of the vial separated by a slightly porous material. Over time, say five or six

hours, when the two liquids worked through the material and met there was an instantaneous fire explosion. Thus the Sears representatives, particularly the American managers I knew, would often spend hours after store closing going through the pockets of every piece of clothing to remove such devices.

Sears also suffered the biggest fire loss in its history when the terrorists through a ruse got the drop on the watchman at their major warehouse. Having obtained access, they knocked holes in the walls inside the building and spread Russian Napalm throughout. The resulting blaze could be seen for miles.

Fortunately, we at Procter & Gamble had a Plant Manager and his number two man who were both veterans of World War II. One had served in the British Navy and the other in the German forces. They provided determined and imaginative leadership in protecting our premises.

Eight strong points were installed on the perimeter of the factory. Some were obvious bunker types sunk in the ground with firing slits and others were disguised like an old water tower. They provided each other with covering fields of fire. Steel plate was installed to withstand small arms assault. We employed twenty-five armed men full time in our defense force, who manned the posts with semi-automatic weapons twenty-four hours a day. Once we discovered that our troops tended to be trigger happy, a central command post was established in the basement of the plant and only its leader could authorize gunfire. Walkie-Talkies were given to all the firing points to ensure communication among themselves and with central command. Codes and passwords were created to foil any efforts to tap into our frequencies, and they were changed often. Some nice touches were added when parallel strands of barbwire were strung in front of each bunker, each strand rising slightly higher the closer it came to the firing point. This would cause any invader to expose his silhouette during a night

attack. We also dug up a ten-foot swath between the cyclone fence that marked the edge of our property and the start of the barbwire before the bunkers. Lots of rumors were floating around, and we intimated that the area had been mined.

These are but some of the techniques employed to protect ourselves. The Communists made a couple of poorly organized attack efforts without success. They also resorted to psychological warfare. One day a voice on the phone said, "Look at the wall behind packing line #3. Some four feet off the ground at the end of the line is a brown box containing a bomb that will explode in thirty-five minutes and destroy the packing room."

The area was evacuated, and the plant manager, who knew his terrorists, calmly walked up to the box, opened it gingerly, and lowered it to the floor. It was empty.

Yet, while we were able to protect our production facilities, we were not so fortunate at our general offices. These occupied three upper floors of a modern building at the opposite end of the Caracas valley from the plant.

An enterprising Castro believer slipped past the not-so-alert security forces, entered the men's room on the eighth floor, went into a cubicle, locked the door, slipped a time bomb down the neck of the commode, crawled under the door, and departed. The detonation was spectacular, demolishing the room and cracking a building wall. The last user of the facility had just departed, so we were again fortunate there were no casualties.

As an added poke in the eye to the U.S. presence, the bombing took place at 12:30 p.m. on July Fourth, a working day in Caracas but still celebrated in the evening by the American community. Needless to say, all tenants in the building took security much more

seriously after that, and further incidents were avoided.

The end of the Castro-Communist efforts in Caracas came with the presidential election of December 1963. This was to select the next leader for a 5-year term, as the president could not succeed himself under the constitution. Free elections were an anathema to the terrorists, and they let it be known that anyone voting that day would be summarily shot by their supporters planted in and around the polling booths.

Elections are often held on weekends in Latin America to ensure optimum participation. When we looked out that Sunday morning and saw throngs of people standing in line in the streets waiting to vote, we knew that the terrorists had been defeated, particularly in the eyes of the average Venezuelan. Though a few scattered activities lingered on, they were never able to mount a major effort again. It was a landmark victory for democracy, free market capitalism, and the United States.

But let's take a moment for a postscript on the likeable Cuban Sales Manager who had been shifted back to Havana following the Castro takeover. He soon saw what was happening to his country, and his disaffection was noticed by the new authorities. When the ill-fated Bay of Pigs Invasion foundered, he was one of many thousands who was seized and thrown into jail. In another melodramatic moment, he was actually able to telephone Fidel from his cell and call on their one-time friendship to seek his release. He was allowed to leave the country with his wife and children and return to Mexico. In doing so, he left behind all his assets, including his new house. When I met him for lunch a few years later in Mexico City, he was the same warm and enthusiastic individual I had known earlier. How could this be?

"It's simple," he replied. "So I lost all my money and my assets, but unlike so many others, I did

not lose my life. I know how to work and to manage. I'm making out all right."

And he was. At that point he was Sales Manager for a pencil company. Not a big job, but a start point. Later he began his own candy company, which prospered. The last time I saw him some ten years ago, he reported that his two sons were now running the business and everything was going well.

For Castro there were other opportunities to vent his revolutionary ardor. The Somoza regime in Nicaragua, another repressive dictatorship, was fertile ground for a people's revolution. The insurgents needed arms, ammunition, and leadership, which Havana was glad to provide. Beyond that, there was El Salvador, where the Castro and a Nicaraguan-supported guerilla war caught the attention of the U.S. media. Further afield were the conflicts in Angola and Mozambique. And let's not forget Grenada, a tropical isle athwart the shipping lanes for transporting oil to the United States.

Although all this adventurism had a cost, the Cuban economy was able to limp along in large part due to the artificially high prices paid by Russia and its satellites for the main Cuban product of sugar.

Things started to change during the 1980's. First, there was the U.S. intervention in Grenada, which ousted the leftist dictator Bishop and restored democracy. And then the politics of Eastern Europe dealt Castro a severe blow. The year 1989 was the turning point. When the wall fell in Germany, the domino effect was on. The citizens of Eastern European countries, including Russia itself, realized that only capitalism and political freedom combined could adequately supply goods and services and offer the hope of a civilized society. The Soviets urged Castro to also consider putting a more human face on his society and to loosen the reins of the state economy. He

reacted with scorn, called Western style democracy "pure garbage", and hunkered down.

Then Russia stopped buying Cuban sugar at a subsidized price. The country was forced to pay world prices for all imports. The always-fragile state controlled economy went into a free fall. The gross national product declined by 50 to 60% between 1989 and 1993, based on a consensus of experts. Oxen appeared as a means of transport. Blackouts to save energy were regular. Food supplies dwindled, and by 1993 there was a real threat that the government could no longer feed the populace. This became known as the "special period", and Castro's foreign ventures were put on hold as he was forced to direct his efforts to solving his internal problems.

The dire economic situation forced even Castro to accept radical changes as long as his power base was not threatened. Tourism was revived as a way to earn hard currency, and the island started to return to the era of "sun, sand, and sex" that it had scorned as American decadence. Foreign firms were invited to enter into joint ventures with Cuban ministries to build and manage the hotels necessary to accommodate the tourists. The latent entrepreneurial spirit of the people was tapped for private restaurants to again operate but with the stringent conditions that no outsiders could be employed (only family members), and only twelve chairs be allowed per establishment. These accommodations, known as Paladares in Spanish, flourished. By 1997, their numbers spurted to around one thousand seven hundred throughout the island, although mostly located in Havana. This alarmed the government as too much freedom, and the monthly fee to be paid per establishment, no matter what its sales, escalated sharply, and other ways were found to restrict operations so that the total has dwindled now to some two hundred fifty.

The new economic model was dubbed "cold capitalism" by the government and extended to normal

goods and services. Communist theology and practice were put on hold.

The final reform touch came when Cuba adopted the U.S. dollar as a form of currency. This was forced by the destabilizing effects of a vigorous black market that grew up during the "special period" when shortages became acute. Exiled Cubans, particularly in the United States, were supplying enough hard currency to their beleaguered family and friends that these dollars were threatening the government's control of the economy. The move to embrace the dollar brought everything out in the open, although at a price. And the price has been a two-tier standard of living, i.e. one for those who receive dollar remittances or can benefit from the tourist industry and one for the vast majority of the population who must exist outside of these spheres. The difference has been illustrated by two sets of supermarkets - some filled with quality goods that accept dollars only and others that are poorly stocked, require ration books, and accept pesos.

The new elite in the country are, as always, the top government officials now joined by those who can secure dollars, i.e. cab drivers, maitre d's at restaurants, waiters, and prostitutes. Those at the bottom are doctors, lawyers, and the vast majority of the people.

Because of my nine years spent in Latin America, I have always followed the Cuban story with keen interest. Then suddenly a little over a year ago an opportunity came to see things firsthand. As part of a bilateral agreement between Washington and Havana, a slight crack in the embargo on trade and tourism for Americans was created in the mid-nineties. This permits travel to Cuba by journalists, academics, and selected study seminars. This last category has proven to be an umbrella for limited tourism. Groups of twenty-five to thirty people under the aegis of university alumni organizations, the National Geographic Society, and selected Councils of World

Affairs, have organized visits through the Cuban Tourist Bureau. I received a mailing for one of these last year and jumped at the opportunity. I arranged for my brother to accompany me. Both of us are fluent in Spanish, and it seemed a good opportunity to experience for ourselves the picture of Cuban life that the authorities would permit.

So last April we joined other curiosity seekers for the standard seven day tour. We were drenched with pro-Castro propaganda from the moment we arrived. But there was nothing our indoctrinated guides could say to offset the shock of seeing Havana falling into ruins. Most of the buildings showed visible cracks and scars with peeling paint. The cars reflected the various stages of foreign connections, i.e. American models of the 1950's and a few Russian relics from later decades. Overall, it was a depressing sight that greeted us day after day.

The exceptions are related to the tourist industry. Old hotels like the famous Nacional, where we stayed, had been refurbished for dollar-spending customers. While not deluxe, it was adequate and clean. And new hotels built in conjunction with non-American capital were providing reasonable accommodations. The government has made a strong effort to bolster the tourist infrastructure, including renowned old restaurants, new tourist-only taxis and tour busses, places of interest, etc.

One thing missing from the picture was any Cuban not associated with tourism. Evidently, the regime does not want them either to be contaminated by Western niceties or allowed to get in the way of the foreigners. Each hotel and restaurant catering to the hard currency crowd has a large and visible bouncer to keep the locals out.

Although any member of our group was allowed to cut out of the structured daily program and go off on their own, there were very few who did so because of

the language barrier. Thus we had a chance to see and experience something of the city that the others could not. One day we wandered down to the site of the automobile agency that handled the cars and trucks of the company my brother represented in the pre-Castro days. Like everything else, it was now owned by the government. As it was a Sunday, the place was closed and all we could do was confirm its existence and note the minor changes made in the last forty plus years.

As we were about to leave, an old, thin Cuban came out of an adjacent one-room watchman's locale. He recognized my brother from time past with a warm smile, and talked at length about the "old days", which he relished. When questioned about his current status, he said he was retired and, as such, supported by the government. To our astonishment, his retirement pay is \$5 U.S. per month. He explained this was sufficient to live on beans and rice and obtain a bar of soap every now and again with his ration book at the peso stores. But he had not eaten chicken, pork, or meat in a long, long time. We pressed some significant dollars into his hand, which he at first refused, but it didn't take much persuading him to keep them.

One day we scouted out the former Procter & Gamble plant in the city. Once I identified myself, there was considerable excitement. I was the first visitor with ties to the company to appear since the expropriation in 1961. The offices were cramped, seedy, and rundown. But the people we met were enthusiastic, as they thought that P&G was finally renewing interest in the operation, and that I was a forerunner of good news with bags of gold to retrieve their fortunes.

I quickly disabused them of this and met the current plant manager. He was a youngish man (thirty-five to forty years old) trained in mechanical engineering and clearly a product of the revolution. He outlined how the economic pressures resulting from the Russian withdrawal in the early nineties had impacted the soap and detergent industry. By 1993

there was a question as to whether either of the existing seized facilities (both that of P&G and long-time competitor Colgate) could continue to function. Finally, the P&G plant was picked to keep going and is now the only government operation making washing powder. He quoted a volume of production that translated roughly to an amount I estimate was produced by P&G alone some fifty years ago.

One of the efforts to indoctrinate visitors was a trip to the Cuban National Assembly and a one and one-half hour meeting with one of its leaders. The Assembly rep was a fit and trim man about fifty years old dressed in Fidel-style army fatigues. He started off with a long and involved explanation of the selection and membership of the Assembly. It's all based on the current Cuban Constitution, which is a close facsimile of the Soviet Russian one of 1936. Briefly, the pre-selected individuals from many specified sectors of the society as well as from geographical points are elected to this assembly. Only the Communist party can take part in the process. The final number is unwieldy - over sixteen hundred people. Its primary function is to name a political bureau of some 30 to 35 members, which is then responsible for drawing up legislation, administering the economy, and general political activity. The Assembly meets only two times per year for a brief period and then goes home. The members of the judiciary are also appointed by the Assembly from a pre-determined list, and can be replaced at any time the politburo so desires.

The interesting part of the session came when the speaker invited questions. Our group asked him to explain why the Cuban government had done away with freedom of speech, freedom of the press, etc. These queries were posed in a non-controversial manner, but they really set him off. He became very excited, raised his voice, and proceeded to enumerate all the supposed ills of previous Cuban administrations, laying the blame squarely on the American government. But he did not answer any of the questions. The final one

that excited him the most had to do with Cuba's abuse of human rights, as admonished by the United Nations. His response was either complete denial or a claim that in a selected case the complainant was really a crook seeking to feather his own nest with ill-gotten gains. At the start of this session some members of our group might have held some modest sympathy for the aims of the Cuban Revolution, but by the time the ranting and raving were over, there was no one who felt that this was a reasonable regime.

Sports play an important role in Cuban life, and also show the heavy hand of state control. We took in a baseball game one night. The stadium was large and well lit, and it compared favorably to any good minor league facility in the U.S. The government has kept the price of entertainment like this at a very low level (one peso or 5 U.S. cents). There were some 5,000 fans on hand to watch the Industriales play the Sancti Spiritu (Holy Ghost) team. The Industriales are one of the top teams in the country, and they made short work of their opponents. Their uniforms were almost the same as those of the New York Yankees - pinstripes and all.

An illuminating sideline to the game occurred when a member of our group who had come equipped with lots of Cincinnati Reds baseball caps and T-shirts started to hand these out to the kids who swarmed around us. Instantly, members of security appeared and admonished the youngsters to return to their seats. The word was passed that they could accept the items only after the game and only outside the stadium. Consequently, after the game, a mass of young Cubans followed us to our bus, and all of the items were distributed, although the police again intervened to tamp down their enthusiasm. This puzzling behavior was explained in one of the many books I later read on contemporary life in Cuba. The few political demonstrations against the Castro regime in recent years all started when a crowd got out of hand on some non-political issue. Evidently, no chances were being taken that the over-

enthusiastic acceptance of Reds' memorabilia might turn into an anti-government riot.

Another example of the fear factor for an average Cuban took place one morning in the lobby of our hotel. My brother and I had decided to again opt out of the regular tour to see the city on our own. Prior to the trip we had received the name and phone number of a guide who was reputed to be one of the best in Havana although he did not speak English. As that was not a problem, we phoned him one evening and got a woman on the line. She said that she represented this individual and that he would be in the hotel lobby to meet us the next morning, presumably to work out details for a trip. But when he appeared, he said that he no longer had a car available. This seemed strange, but we offered to hire a taxi so he could accompany us to selected spots. He became very nervous and indicated he really didn't want to participate on this basis. Then he turned to my brother and said in words to the effect that "Are you the people I was supposed to meet with airline tickets and money to help secure my passage out of the country?" He said he had been waiting for such a contact for a couple of weeks. We said we knew nothing of this, and he then grew even more concerned, afraid that we might spill the beans. An unauthorized departure is a sure jail sentence. We assured him that we would say nothing. It was a poignant moment to observe the anguish of an individual living under the constraints of the current Cuban state and his strong desire to escape.

Against the wishes of the government ministry facilitating our trip, our American tour leader scheduled a meeting with the woman who heads up the American Interest section. She truly serves as the U.S. Ambassador, but the two countries have not agreed to use this title for their respective representatives. She is a career foreign service officer and, intelligent, knowledgeable, and very articulate about Cuba and its leadership. After cocktails, she invited us into a large room where our group sat informally in

a semi-circle. She spoke some twenty-five minutes on the Cuban political and economic picture, and then opened the floor for questions. She answered these in a forthright manner and left the majority feeling better about the current U.S. policy.

One tidbit we took away was that in 1998 the American Interest section invited any Cubans desirous of migrating to the States to send in a written request. The replies were overwhelming, and the effort was discontinued when the total quickly reached 500,000. Considering there are some 11,000,000 people in the country and that each request conservatively represented three individuals (the applicant plus either a spouse, parents, or children), this rough survey showed that 14% of the population wanted out. The figure is most likely much higher, since any written document to a U.S. government office was apt to receive more than normal attention passing through the Cuban mail system. For reference, the current quota for regular migration from Cuba to the United States is 20,000 a year. These numbers put a new light on the frantic pressure to escape from the island at all costs.

I returned to Cincinnati with mixed emotions on the two outstanding issues for U.S.-Cuban relations. The first is the appropriateness and wisdom of the U.S. embargo.

The major argument for ending the embargo, assuming this action would be politically acceptable in domestic politics, is that further contacts and trade would hasten the breakdown of the rigid dictatorial Communist rule and promote moderating political influence. While alluring, this approach would strengthen the economy (more tourists equal more hotels equal more dollars) and embolden the government. There is good evidence that Castro and his group have used better economic times to promote revolution and chaos in other parts of the world, i.e. Venezuela in the sixties, Angola in the seventies and Nicaragua in the

eighties. Thus the embargo seems an effective rein on the adventurism of Cuba in foreign activities contrary to American interests.

Another rationale to end the embargo is that the U.S. is actively pursuing economic and political contacts with Communist China, so why not treat Cuba in the same way. I incline to the view of the great difference in the two cases. While China does present ongoing problems with its bellicose attitude toward Taiwan and human rights record, it does not have a history of subverting free regimes in our hemisphere whenever it gets the chance.

It is too easy to advocate an end to the embargo on the basis that a flood of Americans and their dollars will solve the Cuban problem. Like a festering boil, Cuba has been sealed off to prevent its toxins from infecting the rest of the world. Since the state is Castro, no real chance of change seems possible until he exits the stage.

And this brings up the second major issue, "What happens after Fidel?" While I posed this to many individuals during our seven days in Havana, no Cuban wanted to give a straight answer. It is evidently too dangerous a subject to discuss, even one on one. The presumptive heir is Raul Castro, Fidel's younger brother. But he is younger by only four years, which makes him part of an aging bureaucracy. He seems an unlikely successor, lacking the charisma and oratorical skills of his older brother.

My conclusion is that when the aging dictator hands over power, either voluntarily or due to infirmity or death, the changes in the society will be gradual and bloodless. The regime has an iron hold on the population. The average Cuban is exhausted with the strain of existence in the present bankrupt and hopeless milieu. The most likely scenario seems to me the emergence of a Gorbachev-like figure with enough clout with the party hierarchy to be able to institute

gradual but effective reform. It so, that will be the time to play the embargo card.

Finally, one personal comment. As my birthday approaches each year, I'm always curious to identify the rap stars and Hollywood types who share my natal date. It's with a twist of irony I am always reminded that Fidel and I do have one thing in common. We were born the same week in August of 1926.

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