

NOTES ON THE CUBAN REVOLUTION

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I

I recall standing high on the tribune in the Plaza of the Revolution on January 2, 1961¹ just as I did twenty-eight years later and straining my neck unsuccessfully to see the end of the crowd. And Fidel, with five microphones, the number he still uses to ensure that his words will reach even the far end of the rally, denouncing the imperialists with the same **fervour** and some of the same language as he used on December 5, 1988.

So much in Cuba has changed in thirty revolutionary years. Fidel at 62 and gray in hair and beard no longer shows that spontaneous grin of wonder. The casinos, beggars, sex shows and aura of free and dirty third world capitalism remain only in the film archives, captured on celluloid.

So much remains the same, not just the same as before the revolution, but the same as the 19th Century, and even before. Cuba is Spain and Africa, the old world and the new. It is U.S. gangsters and gamblers, baseball players and novelists. A little of Cuba is the Soviet Union, much of it is Caribbean and Latin American. It is culturally diverse and provincial. It is also, in Fidel's mind, the last bastion of socialism left in the world. The visitor sees the superficial, members of the Cuban militia – more than a million strong throughout the nation – fastidiously dressed, occupying the front position of the crowd, the crack troops, including the Special Forces marching by with precision movements, as they do every five years. Under thousands of the neatly pressed military blouses militia members wear *santeria*² beads.

In the countryside new homes for peasants dot the landscape, some of them five story apartment buildings. But try, as I have done several times, to use the bathroom in one of the new peasant flats; inevitably the peasant will regret that the facilities are not working. I discovered after several rural refusals that breakdown is a result of the pig being illicitly kept there, despite clear 'health' prohibitions.

Bohios, the thatched huts that Columbus found and that the settlers copied because they kept out heat, still remain in the countryside. In the Plaza of the Revolution the cold and white architecture (built before the revolution) presents a facade of European civilization. Watching the goose-stepping troops or

the **MIG's** flashing by overhead, one would not think that Cuba is just out of underdevelopment.

The mass meeting on December 5, 1988, marked the thirty second anniversary of the landing of the *Granma*, the yacht on which Fidel and 82 guerrillas embarked from Mexico to Cuba to launch their war against the Batista regime. Normally, every five years missiles and tanks pass under the reviewing stand. Not in 1988. They were not necessary. Cuba had won major battles against South Africa³ in Angola, and 500,000 Havaneros showed up to watch the troops march and listen to Fidel speak – for four hours, the last one in a pouring rain. The parade and the people were symbolic reminders to the White House and Pentagon that an incursion against Cuba would be costly; and to Soviet President Gorbachev that Fidel's brand of socialism – not *glasnost* or *perestroika* – has wide popular backing.⁴

Underneath the display of military power, the symbolic demonstration of support for the Commander-in-Chief, lies a complex, troubled, confused and still superstitious population. The Cuban Revolution is, on the one hand, a glaring success. Compare Cuba's current health and education statistics to those of the Dominican Republic, or to pre-Castro years. Or consider the foreign policy accomplishments of an island nation of ten million people. Cuba today has relations with more than 110 nations, including most from Latin America, which the United States has tried to prevent for twenty five years. Beneath the surface, however, the revolution is in trouble.

The economy is not performing as Fidel expected. Although some sectors remain productive, others falter. The distribution of goods and services to the city dwellers is a source of despair, both for those who must wait for hours for buses, months or even years for certain home repairs, and those who have organized the economy. Fidel knows and feels the pain when the Cienfuegos oil refinery due to be finished in 1985 is still not finished in 1989, or when a Pinar del **Rio** hospital takes eleven years to complete, because of forms of economic organization and use of the labour force that would drive an ordinary person to madness.

Construction enterprises would contract with other parts of the economy to build an edifice, which is to cost, say 5 million pesos. The housing is pronounced completed, the construction firm declares itself to have made a profit of say 3 million pesos and the recipient of the housing declares that its plans have moved ahead. In reality, the housing is inadequate, and therefore useless. For purposes of show, however, both the construction firm and the recipient declare success.

On other occasions, construction enterprises begin operations and then cease. The excuse may be lack of necessary parts, or tools. Half-done structures became common from the mid 1970s on. And with this kind of systematic fraudulence, which the Soviet **Union** knew too well, and which in part it had exported (the system) to Cuba, comes demoralization, corruption and the variety of cover-up schemes that inevitably accompany crime. The

system breeds contempt for the kinds of ideals that Fidel has proclaimed, for the image of a self-sacrificing Che Guevara. Yet, the managers and executives of the companies that perpetrated fraud were often in the vanguard of slogan shouting and outward displays of revolutionary fidelity.

Sectors of the labour force work in ways that would make efficiency experts despair. I witnessed a team of sweepers at an outdoor site at the Cienfuegos oil refinery. From afar I saw them sitting in the shade of a storage tank. When they saw the film crew approaching they became very busy sweeping dirt from one place to another. The wind would come up and blow it back, but they kept sweeping.

At stores a passive-aggressive attitude often characterizes the personnel. In December, 1988, I stopped to film a long line of people, waiting to buy green vegetables. At the front of the line sat two lethargic clerks torpidly making change with computerized cash registers. A woman shopper noticed the video camera and shouted at me in Spanish: 'Look at the **crap** we have to put up with.' I asked the cameraman if he had caught it, but since he spoke no Spanish he didn't see any significance. I asked her to repeat what she had said. She asked me if I was with Cuban TV. When I told her I was a foreigner she said forget it. 'I wanted Fidel to see what we have to go through to get a few greens. For foreigners, no.'

Like other Cubans I have talked to, this woman is defensive before outsiders. If proof were needed that Fidel has at least brought a feeling of nationalism, pride in country, experience of the collective '**we**', just try to get critical Cubans to voice their complaints to the outside world. And it is not for fear of repercussions so much as it is fear of revealing the depth of the problems after thirty years of revolution. Cubans have long pretended that the problems didn't exist or were easily soluble. In fact, such a **façade** worked to confuse their own situation.

Who or what is to blame for the fact that goods don't reach the stores, that people have to stand endlessly in line, especially for transportation, that home repair is almost impossible to get in a short time, for the low quality of parts of Cuban – produced goods, and for the amount of corruption that people privately acknowledge? The CIA can no longer be held responsible.

Cuba's enemies have begun to call it the Albania of the Caribbean. That is unfair, given the immense international connections that Fidel has forged. But the odious comparison contains a germ of insight about the inflexible nature of the Cuban revolutionary government. While hierarchies break down even inside some multi-national corporations, they maintain their rigidity inside the Cuban bureaucracies. Cuba at the end of 1988 is not experiencing the information revolution. Only the top is let in on information; even minor decisions are made **at the** highest levels.

When I landed in Cuba, in late Novémbre, 1988, I had already read in the Miami press that Fidel would attend the transfer of presidential power in Mexico. But members of Cuba's Foreign Ministry did not – or they lied – have

that information. It had not appeared in Granma, the official Party daily. In Cuba, routine information exists on the street, in buses and barbershops, but not in the media – unless it is officially authorized.

While routine information – much of it idiotic – floods the rest of the western and considerable areas of the third world, and Soviet leaders encourage it, Cubans operate on war psychology – need to know. The notion that information-sharing will aid the enemy still dominates the consciousness of revolutionaries. And Fidel use military language when he talks about the obligations of the Cuban work force. 'Cada **trabajador** a su puesto de **trabajo**,' Fidel exhorted the half million people.

At certain ministries the telephone is answered 'Ordenes.' Cubans remain suspicious of all non-routine activities. For twenty years I have had similar experiences filming on the streets of Havana. A citizen spies the camera, calls the police and I am told that I need official permission to film on the street. At first, I accepted this, but was told by a government official that there was freedom to film.

So, in 1974, when a policeman asked me for my authorization document, I asked him what law said that I needed one. He replied that everyone knew about the law requiring permission to film on the street. I persisted, so he went to his patrol car and asked the sergeant, who told him to tell me that there was such a law and that I had better obey it or else. I demanded that the sergeant read me the law. Exasperated, he radioed to headquarters, telling the lieutenant of my absurd request. Some thirty minutes after all this trouble began, the policeman approached me and ordered: 'Film,' making a motion with his hand and arm as if to start the cameras rolling.

A similar experience occurred in 1988 outside a suburban supermarket, with the police and citizenry gathering around the film crew angrily demanding to see our filming permit and finally having to retreat in sullen defeat when a patrol car unit affirmed the right to film on the street without permission.

In June, 1987, I requested to film Cuba's nuclear facilities, due to go on line in 1990. The foreign ministry official assigned to the film crew laughed at the idiocy of my request. 'No way,' he told me. When Fidel met us on the day of the interview, he asked if we had filmed the nuclear plant. Upon hearing that it was off limits to cameras, he **frustratedly** replied: 'What idiocy. With the cameras on the satellites, the CIA can photograph an individual hair on my beard, and yet with your primitive equipment you are denied access. Well, these ways of thinking, derived from earlier periods, are hard to break.'

One of the roots of Cuba's difficulties is the reign in certain sectors of a kind of military stupidity, founded on experiences of the 1960s. Workers have learned that safety and job security lie in not taking initiatives. A dramatic case occurred, while oil was being pumped from a tanker to the land storage tanks of the **Cienfuegos** refinery.

The monitoring operator noticed indicators of a spill and tried, unsuccessfully, to find his supervisor. So, he waited, as the oil leak into Cienfuegos Bay increased, until, hours later, someone with authority ordered him to turn off the pump. By that time 1,200 tons of fuel had seeped into Cienfuegos Bay, doing immense damage to the flora and fauna. In an ensuing trial, revelations emerged about a work process that lacked the soldier's attention to duty, but did imitate the military establishment's (anywhere) propensity for waste and bureaucracy.

Fidel, initiative-taker par excellence, has taught that each worker should be in his work post and follow orders, while at the same time he has tried to encourage the people to use their common sense, when such incidents occur. Fidel, who makes all the key decisions, is acknowledged throughout Cuba and much of the third world – even begrudgingly in the United States – as a political magician, having survived thirty years of U.S. aggression. Fidel is the commander-in-chief of the armed forces, and everything else. He has made Cuba into an important player on the world stage. But the proverbial military mentality, a direct opposite of Fidel's flexible and imaginative thinking about foreign affairs, prevails as a kind of left-over from the days when a U.S. attack may have been imminent.

Guards with rusty old rifles patrol buildings that once may have been military targets. Cuban citizens assume that saboteurs and subversives from the CIA are ever present and intend to destroy their revolution. The CIA has obligingly provided ample evidence for that assumption over the past thirty years.' As Cuban counter intelligence continues to play its spy games with its counterparts at the CIA, that conspiratorial world outlook will retain credibility.

Throughout **1987** and **1988** the antagonistic yet strangely symbiotic CIA and Cuban counter-intelligence played out this spy silliness. A Cuban DGI official stationed in Eastern Europe defected, along with a decorated Air Force general, who was a hero at the Bay of Pigs.⁶ Both defectors offered stories about Cuban intelligence's penetration of every nook and cranny of the 'free world.' They also described the 'totalitarian horrors' of life in Cuba. The Cuban government responded by defaming their characters and presenting an embarrassing TV show, filmed by hidden cameras, that portrayed much of the activities of the U.S. Interest Section in Havana, as being devoted to planting high tech gadgets to spy on Cuba, or paying off Cuban agents to do this or that piece of naughtiness. The faces of some 70 current and former State Department officials were held on the TV screen and identified as nefarious CIA officials. The programme lasted an entire week, and while much hoopla was made about the infiltration by DGI of CIA activities, the foreign media's **response** was a loud yawn. Cuba lacks the kind of spin doctors that attract the press to such stories. Had the CIA carried off a similar coup, would the journalists have been so cavalier?

Cuba's spy concern arose because of a real need to protect its revolution

against the plotting 90 sea miles away. From the first days after the triumph, the best and the brightest of Cuba, not counting those who left or whose loyalty was thought to be dubious, found themselves involved with one or another form of Cuban defence. Fidel developed intelligence and counter-intelligence agencies. By 1960, he began to fashion a formal military force to replace the guerrilla army. Those smart and revolutionary youngsters from the university, even teachers' **schools** and high schools, from government ministries and from the professions, were recruited into the defence establishment. By 1962, as Cuba became dependent on the Soviet Union for its defence supplies, Cubans routinely went to Moscow for formal training.

Instead of the best minds working on planning, culture and education, they were put to work in the less productive, but obviously necessary and murky field of national security. Cuban intelligence probably saved the revolution from destruction and its leader from assassination on numerous occasions. The best and the brightest also cleverly designed the reproduction of their agencies and, like national security bureaucrats everywhere, help to maintain the aura of emergency and crisis, the *sine qua non* for spy vs. spy atmospherics. They did not put their intelligence toward the positive and difficult task of building a socialist society with strong spiritual values. They became the core of the repressive apparatus.

After 30 years, symbiotic links exist between the prestigious political leader of the island and the majority of the Cuban people. The ties have withstood the test of time, sacrifice, and much joy, pain, success and failure. The ritual of Fidel interacting with hundreds of thousands of Cubans has remained intact. As has the ritual of great expectations and daily sacrifice, the promise of utopia large and small and the delivery of a bureaucratic quality of equality that meets the letter but not the spirit of Fidel's promises.

In October, 1987, Fidel offered in a speech to a Cuban congress of workers his ideas on the virtues of eating vegetables. He extolled the health and nutrition qualities of vegetables, and then proceeded to offer recipes on **how** to prepare them. Castro wanted Cubans to discard the habit of eating greasy and fried foods and instead enjoy healthy and tasty vegetables. Fidel went through some twenty varieties of green and other crops grown in Cuba, paying special attention to broccoli and egg plant. The audience responded with good humour and seemed genuinely impressed with Fidel's knowledge. An elevator operator was talking about the speech later with another hotel employee, both amazed at Fidel's comprehensive knowledge not only of vegetables, but of cooking. 'The only thing he didn't tell us,' she said, 'was how to get the vegetables.'

Distribution problems have plagued Cuba, as they have other socialist countries. Most of the city dwellers are convinced that the goods exist, but are either rotting in some warehouse, **or** being hoarded by some corrupt officials to sell later on the black market. The ubiquitous bureaucracy is blamed. And, logically, Fidel has decided periodically to launch campaigns

against bureaucracy and inefficiency. These campaigns appear to alleviate some of the popular anxiety, but have not resulted in serious improvement over the past decade.

In late 1986, he declared that there must be a massive rectification. The Cuban economy, he acknowledged at a Communist Party Congress, required serious reform, and, he emphasized, 'there is a lot that needs correcting.' No more half-done jobs, mindless bureaucracy, wasteful habits. No more institutionally condoned stupidity. Wage rates should be decided according to actual work, not some abstract design hatched in a Planning Ministry. Equality and justice must be the actual rules at work, not slogans that bear no relationship to the reality of daily work.

Everyone agrees. But, warns Fidel, the campaign will not lead to a loosening of socialist principles, to revisions of Marxism-Leninism, to a permissive atmosphere that would allow elements of capitalism to enter the Cuban economy. No way. Cuba does not need glasnost or perestroika, said Fidel. There is a story making the Cuban **rumour** rounds. Fidel supposedly visits the same barber each week, and while seated in the chair, he is asked: 'Fidel, what do you really think of glasnost?' Fidel does not respond. The barber repeats the question each week, and finally Fidel responds annoyedly, 'Why do you keep asking me that question?'

'It makes your hair stand on end,' replies the barber, 'and it's easier to cut.'

The Rectification Campaign, however, is taken as Fidel's substitute for the Soviet reforms. Each Cuban, by following the example of the legendary Che Guevara, will help to solve Cuban's problems. Some Cubans told me that they could not believe their ears when they heard Fidel in October 1987, twenty years after Che's death in the Bolivian mountains, call upon Cubans to imitate the Argentine martyr, to think and act as he did, to emulate his behaviour at work and as citizens.

'Che was a saint,' one government functionary confessed to me. 'I am not a saint. I can work hard, but I cannot do what Che did. Anyway, I have been working overtime most of the last twenty nine years. I am tired. All that extra **work has** not made me more efficient. I have attended endless meetings where we discuss and agree that steps must be taken to make sure that Fidel's programme of rectification is carried out.'

By 1986 few in Cuba would disagree; something must be done. Words of solid support ring out from every corner of Cuba. We must rectify. Slogans are prepared, posters are painted, commentators analyze and exhort on TV and radio. The rectification campaign is on. But what is done? The sloppy work continues, the bureaucracy remains in its comfortable and mean mode, the goods that are produced somehow do not reach the stores, transportation is worse than ever and idiocy continues to **rule** in many work-places as a daily norm.

After thirty years of revolution, the economy does not function as Fidel expected. The pieces are in place. The roads and dams built. the people

educated and healthy, high levels of skill and technology abound. factories are in place, energy sources produce, the trains run through the island, but somehow the pieces do not fit together. Cubans see all this, participate in their own way in the malfunctioning of the system, complain about the imbecility, and feel compassion for Fidel, who must bear the weight of imperfection – not failure. Yet, in daily life it is the Cuban people who suffer from the poor bus service, the difficulty of obtaining goods and services, the bureaucratic nightmares involved in transactions that require official seals.

The apocryphal joke made about other socialist countries has made the rounds in Cuba as well. There's no unemployment, but no one works. No one works, but everyone meets his quota. The quotas are met, but there are no goods in the stores. The stores are empty but everyone seems to be well fed and clothed. People have what they need but gripe constantly about the poor leadership. Yet, when Fidel speaks people pour out in droves and applaud everything he **says**.⁷

Fidel refuses to concede that the form of socialism as practised in Cuba, not all that different from the form practised in the Soviet Union, has inherently impossible features. Never has a massive state bureaucracy been able to manage with efficiency a small restaurant or barber shop, provide for the kind of distribution in which capitalism by its very nature **specializes**. Nor is there space in Cuba for public political opposition to positions announced by the Party or government.

Cuba's incapacity to embrace glasnost, however, derives not from a particularly sectarian or rigid party but from the nature of its leader. Fidel Castro is not just the President of Cuba, the head of the Communist Party and the Commander-in-Chief of the armed forces, militias and the public in general. He is also the living myth or legend, treated as if he were the redeemer and Saviour. How can free discussion take place when such power resides in one man – and with the apparent consent of the majority of Cubans?

Thus the handle of reform in Cuba is elusive – or perhaps illusory. The system that was imported from the Soviet Union, mostly during the Brezhnev era, and modified by Cubans to conform closer to their reality, is not one with great flexibility built in. The central state controls all the outlying areas of the economy and **politics**.

Cuba has more pressing reasons for fearing reforms that would allow for the re-entrance of capitalism. The United States, one of the few countries in which capitalism has performed for a substantial sector of the population, held Cuba as an informal colony for some sixty years, and should Cuba make itself vulnerable to the repenetration of U.S. economic power, its independence, sovereignty, might also falter.

Fidel and other leaders as well as rank **and** file communists are well aware that capitalism has not worked well for the majority in most of the world. Latin America not only staggers beneath its immense debt, but is unable to

feed, clothe, house, educate and provide medical care for a substantial part of its population. In most African countries, capitalism has become a sick joke.

Socialism, a young and inexperienced way of organizing resources and people, has had to operate in limited space and with undeveloped resources; it has also had to face counter-revolutionary attack and war—and the fact that it developed in the European nation least suited to experiment. The model that **Stalin** developed became the only one available to nations like Cuba, whose precious independence, fought for over a period of more than 100 years, demanded that it extract itself from the clutch of U.S. domination. When nationalists in Cuba or elsewhere in the third world sought language to elaborate their goals of sovereignty and social justice, Marxism-Leninism appeared as the one mode of discourse available that encompassed the national needs and the social demands.

Fidel told me that he began to revere Marxism from the time he first read the *Communist Manifesto*, when he was 18, a university freshman. But he was not a communist then, or immediately after the triumph of the revolution. He believed that revolution could accomplish nation-building goals, and allow for necessity to determine the economic and social policies. So, Fidel, who told Jean Paul Sartre in 1960 that the Cuban revolution would function on the basis of providing for people's needs, as they arose objectively and subjectively, was expressing his own wish, to bring a classless utopia to Cuba. Sartre approved of this existential experiment that would not fall into either the U.S. or Soviet camp.

But Fidel found that Soviet aid did not replace **U.S.-managed** capitalism, and that unlike the market system that prevailed under capitalism, the **Soviet**-based aid model offered little room in which to manoeuvre. The resource restraints under socialism put fetters on Fidel's ambitious and urgent development plans. He hoped to gather capital by using the Cuban labour force for an extraordinary effort: producing 10 millions tons of sugar cane, a quarter more than had ever been refined.

The failure to meet his goal of 10 million tons in 1970 was also a symbolic end to Fidel's 1960s utopianism. Fidel had no options. The Soviet system could provide expertise in military and educational affairs, set up accounting systems that would facilitate the new trade links between the countries, provide Cuba with energy supplies, wheat and the infinite amount of needs that Cuba had as a nation. Individual need had to be delayed indefinitely. Socialism as it was used to develop Cuba had a national priority. The Cuban people appeared to have understood this, made the sacrifices necessary and postponed their individual appetites. But for how long can such a delay be justified by appeals that this is the necessary cost of development?

After seventy years, the Soviet leadership declared that its system suffered from major inherent defects – some **that had** been exported to Cuba – and that major reforms were needed. Fidel must have feared that such an admission in Cuba, and the allowance for private capital's entrance into

the island economy, could have put in jeopardy the core of the revolutionary programmes. So in 1989, as the Soviet intellectuals experience an opening somewhat akin to what the West went through in the 1960s, Cuba remains under the informational and ideological harness of the hierarchical and inflexible system that the Soviets helped implant there.

II

Revolutions begin as liberating acts. In January 1959 Havana rocked with a sense of free rhythm. Celebrations marked the overthrow of a nasty dictatorship and the expectations of eternal democracy and freedom, although few had any notions about what forms the new order would take. I recall a funeral procession in the summer of 1960 on the day the telephone company was nationalized. Workers **carrying** a coffin with a phone on it cha cha cha'd down the street and dumped the box into the ocean with great fanfare. How many of the demonstrators were thinking that ITT had invested heavily in Cuba as its third world communications experiment centre, and that its executives would never forgive or forget the impudent challenge to its property, its power?

In 1959, Fidel nationalized the Mafia-owned hotels and casinos, another bold and popular move that would have serious repercussions for the revolution. The Mafiosos, like their corporate colleagues, did not look kindly on acts that dispossessed them. It was not only the lost money, but the example-setting that bothered the criminal and corporate dons. Shortly after the expropriations, ITT and Mafia executives cooperated with the CIA in attempts to destroy the revolution and assassinate Castro and other revolutionary **leaders**.⁸

One of the nationalized hotels was the Havana **Hilton**, renamed the Havana **Libre**. In the late 1970s, Paul Jacobs, a reporter, fresh from a two-week trip to Cuba, chanced upon the **Hilton** heir, Baron **Hilton**, at a dinner party and described to him, much to **Hilton's** dismay, how the hotel had changed since the days when the **Hilton** family owned the Havana franchise.

'The place is full,' Jacobs informed **Hilton**, trying to disguise his glee. 'Maybe the clientele has changed a little, but every room is taken. And you should see the way they've maintained the place. The logo HH is still on the door, and some of the glasses still have the old markings.' Baron **Hilton** was not enjoying this as Jacobs sang the praises of the hotel workers who had taken over the management. 'The casinos are shut down of course, but the big sign over the hotel is still lit up. But your name isn't on that one anymore.'

Baron **Hilton** could stand no more. 'Well, one day our name will be back up on that sign. You can bet on that.'

'You may be right,' Jacobs answered, 'but I think you might have to change your name to **Baron Libre**.'

Jacobs was right. The Cuban revolution is thirty years old and no one expects the **Libre** to be renamed **Hilton**. Castro did to the American property owners what no one had dared do to them in this part of the world. He took away their property without asking permission and didn't pay for it. He stuck out his tongue at them and for thirty years at the powerful in the U.S. government.

I first went to Cuba in June 1960, when the revolution was still in its pachanga stage, a feeling of dancing and party, of mind-bending change and continuous excitement. No one knew what was going to happen **next**.⁹ Cuba and the United States were well along the road of hostile relations. The tit for tat behaviour had already produced considerable nationalization of U.S. **property**.

U.S. officials did not find this behaviour the least bit amusing. In fact, the rapid unfolding of the Cuban Revolution after January 1959 brought a sense of rising panic to national security officials in Washington, months before Fidel had opened diplomatic relations with the Soviet Union. Revolution, even without fundamental change in property relations, had caused alarm bells to ring in Washington's national security circles. The Cuban case involved basic economic reorganization, a clear claim to national sovereignty, and a direct poke in the eye to U.S. power. In just the first few months of revolution, Castro made it clear that the revolution would be run for the majority of poor Cubans, not for U.S. interests, or for that matter, to please U.S. public **opinion**.¹⁰

By 1960, Castro brought most of Cuba's labour force, non-land resources, and markets under state control, and some under state ownership. With each diplomatic move by the State Department, the Cuban leader intensified his anti-Yankee rhetoric, and action. 'Cubans,' he announced, 'shall own Cuba, and Cubans shall dictate what becomes of the resources and wealth on the island.'

The state 'intervened' in those **U.S.-** and Cuban-owned enterprises that were reportedly violating the new revolutionary rules on labour relations, resource utilization, and marketing. Some firms and lands were nationalized outright, with agrarian reform bonds offered as partial compensation. In 1959 and 1960, Cubans held street celebrations whenever the government announced that it had 'intervened' in a **U.S.-owned** enterprise. 'Intervention' was the legal name given to the transition stage between private ownership and nationalization, used to justify state **intervention** while proceedings took place to determine whether or not the targeted company had violated revolutionary laws. Most of them, of course, had. The most important political fact on the island changed on January 2, 1959. From that point on, the U.S. Ambassador could no longer consider himself the most important man on the island. ■■

In 1989 a U.S. Interests Section sits in the place where the U.S. Embassy once housed over 400 functionaries. The lonely handful that now occupies the building overlooking the sea on one side has to look at a poster on the other side. A bearded cartoon character is advising Uncle Sam: '*Señores Imperialistas*. We're not scared of you one bit.'

It does bother the senior staff at the U.S. Interests Section. Mr. John Taylor had served a term in China before moving to the island enemy as Chief of Mission. From his office, he can see the **colourful** poster, which lights up at night. In the space between the Interest Section and the billboard, kids play baseball. The Marine guard looks through the blinds and indicates that the pitcher and centre fielder are considerably older than the other players. 'They're DGI [Cuba Intelligence],' he confides. 'We've seen them before in other costumes.' (When the interview with Taylor was over we tried to photograph the ball game below. The pitcher grinned at the camera, but the centre fielder glared and with his hand indicated no picture taking).

Mr. Taylor likes the Cubans he deals with, finds them quite Spanish, 'not really third world at all,' and clearly would like to see a return to formal relationships. He is treated like the ambassador at diplomatic functions, but does not bear the title since the U.S. Interests Section in Havana is formally run by the Embassy of Switzerland. (In Washington, Czechoslovakia plays that role for the Cubans.) He takes some credit for the improvement in human rights in Cuba, the release of hundreds of political prisoners, who were allowed to emigrate to the United States, and a general routinization of relations.

Like all those who have met Castro, Taylor thinks that Fidel is special, but that this sway over the masses and his extraordinary abilities, have not produced anything to gloat over. The revolution, Taylor says, really hasn't accomplished anything. If one compares Cuban health and education statistics from 1958 with those of Costa Rica, one finds that both nations developed at approximately the same rate. So, he concludes, with or without the revolution. Cuba would still probably have the lowest rate of infant mortality and the highest literacy **rate**.¹² This approach to the Cuban revolution – grant them nothing – may serve as more of an answer to the anti-Yankee sign below the U.S. Interest Section building than it is a statement of **truth** or belief. Taylor's remarks may respond more to the childish poster, than to Cuba's reality, or to serious interests of the U.S. government. The Cuban revolution is not only permanent, but has created a nation out of an informal U.S. colony, a unified and coherent state that plays a world role far beyond that which its size and economy should permit.

Cuba has proved vulnerable in the human rights area, especially as defined by the western media, whose definition of human rights usually refers to the procedural, not the substantive freedoms laid out in the United Nations Covenants. Reagan's Assistant Secretary of **Státe** for Inter-American Affairs, Elliot Abrams, pushed the line that Cuba was a prime human rights violator, and gained considerable international attention on this issue. After Cuba

released most of its political prisoners by mid-1988, Abrams picked up another line. that the revolution was a failure in all areas. A position that is designed to undermine Fidel's most recognized accomplishments.

Since the mid-1960s. Cuba's number of political prisoners has decreased from perhaps as high as 20,000 down to less than 150 by 1989, according to monitoring organizations like Americas Watch and the UN Human Rights Commission. The limits on speech, press and assembly, the power of state security to deprive citizens of liberty without due process, and some cases of unusually harsh treatment that remain in Cuba's prisons continue to draw the legitimate fire of human rights watchers. These critiques of Cuba are rooted in-fact. But Cuba **allowed** a U.S. team to inspect six of its prisons, without restrictions, while the United States denied Cuba's reciprocal request to look at U.S. prisons. No human rights team, nor journalists have inspected U.S. prisons and jails and then compared the abuses in them to those found in Cuban penal institutions. None of the human rights agencies however, compares Cuba to the United States in relation to human rights like housing, **medical** care or right to a job, areas where Cuba would win **easily**.¹³

Most European governments and even intellectuals appear to accept the Cuban Revolution as one more fact in the long dewlonizing process of the 20th Century. In Latin America, Fidel and the revolution are seen not only as possible development models, but as symbols of Latin courage and will. In Quito, for the inauguration of Ecuador's new president, Fidel was treated with reverence by **the other** heads of state and by the media. In Mexico at the transfer of power from de la Madrid to **Salinas**, Fidel was a conquering hero, with heads of state and media trying to be near him, with crowds on the street trying to touch him and get his autograph. In Caracas, in 1989, Fidel held discussions with several leaders from around the world.

In much of Africa, Fidel Castro is not only a hero for saving Angola from the clutches of South Africa, and Ethiopia from a Somali invasion, but for having the courage to send some 60,000 troops, a good part of them black, as an act of international solidarity.

While Europe uses Africa as a dumping ground for toxic waste, Cuba sends people to help defend, educate and cure the sick of the world's sickest continent. And Mr. Abrams also understands that Fidel has been able to keep those troops in place. defeating the mighty and arrogant South African forces in the battle of Cuito Cuanavales, sending the blue eyed, blond haired youth to a humiliating retreat – many of them in body bags. Castro calls the battle the Bay of Pigs of Africa.

By 1989, the United States. which refuses to recognize its island neighbour, appears petulant to much of the world diplomatic community. The reasons behind U.S. intractability bear some scrutiny.

Throughout 1959 and 1960, **Castro pushed** radical reforms: he slashed rents. nationalized utilities, and carried out a massive agrarian reform, which resulted in the expropriation of more than six million hectares by mid-1963.

These moves violated a rule that Secretary of State John Foster Dulles enunciated to an oil company executive in 1956: '. . . the United States would not acquiesce in the rights of nationalization' because of an 'international interest [which] goes far beyond the composition of shareholders alone, and should call for international intervention.'

By 1960, despite the rapid deterioration in relations, American investors in Cuba still clung to the notion that the United States would not permit expropriations of its citizens by an upstart nation. Dulles' Doctrine was well known to those who had made investments abroad. Dr. Rene Vallejo, a Cuban **gynaecologist** who in 1958 had joined Castro's **guerrilla** force in the mountains, was subsequently appointed to direct the Agrarian Reform Institute in Oriente Province. In this capacity, in 1960, one of his tasks was to deliver the order nationalizing the King Ranch, whose thousands of acres were located in eastern Cuba. The Cuban government offered agrarian reform bonds as symbolic compensation. The U.S. could have decided to honour the bonds and thereby offer the Cuban government credit, or not honour them and thereby render them worthless.

Vallejo described the attitude of disbelief on the part of the Ranch manager, whom Vallejo had known and whose wife had been a patient of his. At first the American thought the Cuban doctor was playing a practical joke, but when he realized the seriousness of the mission, he told Vallejo: 'You can't do this, you know. You are taking away property of U.S. citizens and every time that has happened the U.S. marines come in and get it back. And that's the way it's going to be again.'

From late 1959 on Castro's policies became an area of national security 'crisis.' Since there was insufficient public support for direct **intervention**, Cuba became the concern of a secret task force set up under Vice-President **Nixon**, whose job was to destroy the revolution and replace it with a pro-U.S. government.

But unlike other nationalistic reformers who thought they could bargain with the United States, Castro assumed that Washington would meet the Cuban revolution with implacable hostility. He armed the populace by forming militias, and quickly **carried** out the basic reforms, guaranteeing job and wage security and offering education and housing programmes that gave millions of Cubans a material and moral stake in their revolution.

As the United States cut off its trade, commercial and military relations, Castro reformed links with the Soviet Union. By early 1960, it appeared clear to American political leaders that Castro was trying to prove not only that revolution could succeed on the U.S. doorstep, but that it could be done with Soviet aid. In July 1960, Washington threw down the gauntlet by encouraging **U.S.-owned** oil refineries in Cuba to **refuse** to process Soviet oil, and by cutting off the Cuban sugar **quota**.¹⁴

No one who had followed the unfolding conflict was surprised by the invasion of the island in April 1961. The strike force was composed of Cuban

exiles trained, financed, and controlled by the CIA. and launched from the east coast of Nicaragua with the full support of Nicaraguan President Luis Somoza. But after less than 72 hours. the Cuban exiles that had landed in the Bay of Pigs on the south coast of Cuba had either been killed or captured by the country's volunteer militia and army.

Castro had proven false two of Latin American revolutionaries' absolute truths: 1) Revolution can be made with the army or without the army, but never against the army; 2) Successful revolution can never be made without U.S. permission. The Batista army was leaderless, without morale and easily dispersed. Those who retained the will to counter-attack joined the **CIA's** Bay of Pigs army. and found themselves either dead on the Giron or Largo Beach or in prison.

Castro later traded most of the prisoners to President Kennedy for some medical supplies. Today, when he is attacked by the U.S. government for being a human rights violator he recalls the treatment of those prisoners.

'The mercenaries that invaded us in The Bay of Pigs, almost fifteen hundred mercenaries, were paid and directed by the CIA, in the service of a foreign power. They came here to bomb, using the Cuban flag to attack us traitorously and they took the lives of dozens and dozens of companeros, hundreds of injured and we took more than one thousand prisoners at the Bay of Pigs.'

Castro's eyes reflect his grappling with memory, searching for details that will dramatize his point. 'The mercenaries were all over the place and had to be rounded up. One troupe fought for almost seventy two hours straight, saw its compaineros die, and then they caught the invaders one by one and took them prisoners and didn't even lay one finger on them. When we brought together all the captured mercenaries from the Bay of Pigs not one of them could accuse us of any human rights abuse.' Castro hits a righteous stride and continues with his factual analysis.

'We took them prisoners despite the hatred which the people held for them. This is one irrefutable proof of our correct conduct, because our men were in the heat of battle and we could have finished off many of them as soon as the battle ended. They wouldn't have had time to surrender; yet we captured some one thousand two hundred and most of them are still alive and healthy in the U.S.'

Twenty eight years have gone by since the Bay of Pigs fiasco, as the Kennedy historians name it. That fateful April date is frozen in the memory of many of the Miami-based veterans. In the coffee shops, bars and restaurants, at dinner tables and on Miami's Spanish language radio, the Bay of Pigs veterans relive those fateful 72 hours. Fidel Castro to them is more than a man. He is a mixture of God and Satan. Hercules and **Attila**. Hundreds of the now late middle aged men continue-to vow that 'one day' they will. . .

The Bay of Pigs marked the first defeat of the United States in its dealings with the lower continent. The scars have not healed among those who took

pride only in victory: to the ageing CIA crowd, to the men who lost estates and sugar mills, to the ideologues of U.S. supremacy and to the anti communists. Fidel Castro turned history. After the Bay of Pigs, the U.S. suffered its agonies in Southeast Asia, watched scores of countries turn socialist in Africa, Asia. and even in our own backyard the Sandinistas dared to pronounce that Nicaragua was free from Yankee control, and that the Yankees were 'the enemy of humanity.' President Reagan could not even force a U.S. puppet, Panamanian strongman, General Manuel Noriega, from his post of **power**.¹⁵

A critical factor in determining policies in Cuba and the United States involved the refugee population. The United States, from the day the revolution triumphed, has opened its doors to anticommunist Cubans, who sought refuge in the United States, secure in the knowledge that the marines would land, overthrow the bearded **guerrillas** and reclaim the seized property. In a period of less than two years Castro had exported his enemies to the United States, thanks to the welcome mat offered by Washington, and had transferred thereby the centre of counterrevolution from Cuba to Florida.

III

Castro has built an island power in three decades, with the **single-mindedness** of a Napoleon or a Simon Bolivar. He has been firm, tough, decisive. The entire politicized world thinks of him as a Jack the Giant Killer. He has watched seven U.S. presidents pass through the White House, while he retains a quantity and quality of power that no person should be allowed to attain. Some Cubans argue disingenuously that they are fortunate that Fidel has presided for so long, and that if Mexico had been lucky, Fidel would have been born there. Fidel, as most of those who have associated with him would have to agree, has not abused power as the traditional *caudillos* did, but rather, because of the amount of authority he possesses, has undermined all other potential leaders and institutions – even ones he has created. The view from Washington, under at least three presidents – Eisenhower, Kennedy and **Nixon**, who authorized assassination plots – has been that Fidel is a serious enemy, without whom the revolution might disintegrate.

If Fidel was a petty man, he might have felt some sense of satisfaction in knowing that while Kennedy tried to assassinate him, an assassin's bullet **struck** Kennedy instead. Yet, his feelings for Kennedy are quite the opposite. In 1974, Fidel described the events, from his perspective, surrounding the Kennedy assassination, and of one particular meeting that was happening at the very moment Kennedy was shot.

'I was meeting with an emissary that Kennedy had sent when the news came over the radio that Kennedy had been shot in Dallas.' The messenger was French journalist Jean Daniel. **who** had brought to Castro a list of subjects for possible discussion with the U.S. president. Castro said he felt profoundly upset when he heard about the news, and some concern about

his being accused of responsibility for the deed.

He told about how Lee **Harvey** Oswald was denied a visa to come to Cuba before the assassination. 'thanks only to bureaucratic routine.' He explained how he was philosophically and morally opposed to assassination. 'It would have been much easier to try to assassinate Batista than to wage a guerrilla war in the mountains for more than two years. But when you assassinate a figure you remove only him. but do not change the system that he represented.'

Castro paused. lit a Cohiba, and continued: 'Kennedy was a known adversary. We had confrontations with him at the Bay of Pigs and during the Missile Crisis. We knew how he thought, how he behaved. indeed, what to expect from him. Why should we trade a known adversary for an unknown one?'

Warming to the subject, Castro talked about the consequences of getting caught. 'The repercussions, should we have actually perpetrated such an act and been discovered, would have been horrendous. The United States could simply destroy us. In short, we had nothing to gain and everything to lose from the assassination of Kennedy.'

Fidel continues to hold a special place for the Kennedy family and even granted an interview to **NBC's** Maria Shriver because, although undistinguished as a reporter, she was a member of the clan. 'Kennedy was a brave man,' Fidel stated, 'one who accepted responsibility for the Bay of Pigs, instead of trying to put the blame on others.' 'Victory,' John F. Kennedy had declared, with both resolve and sadness in his voice, 'has a thousand fathers; defeat is an orphan.' Courage is a subject Fidel likes to discuss. and he claims to hold no grudge against Kennedy: rather he praises him as being a model of a courageous man. 'Courage in politics is the ability to change your mind. to admit that the investment made in this or that direction was a wrong one and to admit it and alter one's course.'

In Fidel's hierarchy of values, bravery stands above competence. And that has been one of his criteria for selecting leadership during thirty years of revolution. It has also been one of the revolution's major problems. Those who performed with valour and courage on the battlefield, those who could endure the incredible **rigours** of guerrilla life. those who had an intuitive **sense** for battle. could not convert those extraordinary qualities into administrative skills and managerial wisdom. On the contrary, the men who landed with Fidel on the Southeastern shore of Cuba on December 2. 1956. aboard the yacht Granma, from Mexico. have distinguished themselves by failing to run their ministries efficiently or fairly.

Yet. Fidel continues to transfer them after ministerial failures to head yet another ministry. In all fairness. these once great guerrilla fighters should not bear all the blame. Who could successfully run a major government department with Fidel's shadow cast **over** the daily work plan? Fidel, not government bureaus. is the repository of political legitimacy: he. not the lesser known figures. owns the monopoly on authority.

Fidel is one of the few genuinely charismatic leaders that the world has known in this century.¹⁶ He is endowed by many Cubans with extraterrestrial qualities. He is called 'the horse,' in street conversation. This reference is to his religious incarnation. Fidel is seen as the redeemer, the Saviour, the man who, if he wills it, can solve impossible problems, perform Herculean tasks. And he has. He is not only the most powerful, once in a Century character to have appeared, but he has used his position to make himself relatively immune from the resource constraints on all other individuals and institutions on the island.

This has been a blessing and a curse for the Cuban people. Fidel has used his attributes to build a viable political organism: a nation.

Building a nation in the mid and late 20th Century is a different task than in the 19th Century. The Garibaldis and Bolivars, who brought the masses to **consciousness** of national identity, did not face the technological chasm that 3rd world leaders encounter 150 years later as they attempt to mould colonies into coherent entities, whose people share fealty to common symbols and **abstractions**.¹⁷

The Cuban revolution has been a mamage between Castro and the masses, for the purpose of building nationhood, and, for those that stayed, a social system rooted in the quest for equality. Underneath the layer that Cubans have placed over their revolution for a variety of purposes, there exists a profound historic and religious drama, whose unfolding involves heroes of almost God-like proportions. Fidel is such a hero. Fidel is *obatalá*. The faith of the Cuban people is not Catholicism, as even the Cuban priests will admit, but *santeria*. Fidel's role in this African-based religion is **little** known outside of Cuba.

Cuban santeria is mysterious, exotic, compelling as is Haitian voodoo and other Caribbean rites and rituals that have been made into religions over the nearly 400 years since Columbus happened upon the temtory generically known as America. *Obatalh*, is one of the messengers of a deity that would be sent to save the island. The messenger would have unusual, almost super-human qualities. He would possess the strength and stamina of the horse, the determination and presence of a stallion. The figure would be a spellbinding orator who could lead Cuba from its demoralized, discombobulated state into unity. power. greatness on the world stage. *Obatalh* would redeem the island's people. save its soul and dignity, forge the populace into a mighty engine of moral force.

Fidel's ways, secretive, single-minded, firm, unflappable, determined, brilliant, invincible, fit the description that the *santeros* had passed down – or perhaps some of this was invented post hoc.

How much of Cuba practises *santeria*? No polls have been taken, but estimates run to as high as one quarter of the population. Another 25% may believe, but not practise. After 30 years of revolution, Cubans of all colours and classes visit the healers. often after or before they see the doctors.

In Guanabacoa, a predominantly black neighbourhood of Havana, a *santero* sang and spoke his polyglot of Arabic, Swahili, Latin and Spanish in a minor key. The woman he was treating had a pain in her chest. The doctors said exploratory surgery was indicated. She went to the *santero*.

On the wall of the modest apartment hung photos of Michael Jackson, ET, Che Guevara, Christ and Fidel. An African deity, a burning candle and a display of fruit and beads adorns a makeshift altar. The *santero* puts the burning end of a cigar in his mouth and blows smoke over the woman, now wrapped in a white sheet. He rhythmically intones as great gusts of smoke pour from his mouth. The woman is touched and gently massaged – not erotically.

Some phrases from Catholic mass are spoken, admonitions to the evil spirits, encouragement to clean karma and a few Arabic phrases complete the final stage of the healing ceremony before the coconut is thrown onto the floor and cracks open. The woman told me that she believed in the power of the *santero*, but that she also had faith in the doctor. She saw *santeria* as her chance to avoid the surgery.

Cuban doctors, now 25,000 strong, the majority of the new graduates women, tolerate *santeria*; the more experienced ones try to cooperate with the *santeros* in certain cases. Indeed, there are Cuban doctors who wear the telltale beads under their white coats. It is widely rumoured that Fidel's long time close companion, Celia Sanchez, was involved in *santeria*. Rene Vallejo, sympathetic to the religion, told me that *santeria* had to be studied because it had produced remarkable results in healing, when traditional medicine failed. Vallejo himself was a spiritualist. Like Celia Sanchez, he was closer to Fidel than anyone else during the difficult years of the mid and late 1960s. Vallejo died in 1969, Celia in 1982.

Without Vallejo and Celia, his constant companions, Fidel has been alone and perhaps quite lonely. His intimate personal life is not a subject he discusses. It is presumed that he has a *compariera*, but the depth of relationship he shared with Vallejo since 1958 and Celia since the guerrilla days, cannot be **replaced**.¹⁸

Fidel the lonely messenger of African and Caribbean deities, the world acknowledged **stateman** and strategist, finds himself in 1989, at age 62, with ever more levels of responsibility, commensurate with ever greater personal power.

IV

THE CULT OF CHE GUEVARA

It was the summer of 1974. We were riding in Fidel's black Soviet limousine and Kirby Jones had asked Castro what **had** gone wrong with Col. Camaaiio's plan to retake the Dominican Republic. With Cuban backing, Camaaiio and his guerrillas left Cuba to attempt to reclaim power in Santo Domingo. Fidel

attributed **Camaaño's** rapid demise to recklessness. 'He took his **troops** to the highway.' Fidel **said**, almost sneering.

Then he turned to a more important subject. '**Che** was *temerurio* (reckless).' Fidel explained. 'It was his one flaw.' Fidel admitted. 'He was so brave that he would stand up in the middle of a fire fight. I told him that his value was inestimable and that it was irresponsible to behave that way. I believe he was wounded on several occasions, precisely because of that reckless quality.' Fidel said that one reason for Che's demise in Bolivia was his lack of concern for safety and security.

In the summer of 1968 Fidel blamed the Bolivian Communist Party for having betrayed Che. He insisted that guerrilla warfare was the only means by which Latin Americans could liberate themselves. He blamed the Soviet line for diluting revolutionary thought, insinuating that the orders to sabotage Che's mission came from Moscow, not La Paz.

The ensuing years, however, had changed his perceptions. Cuban foreign policy by 1974 no longer focused on extending the Cuban guerrilla war model to all other Latin American countries. Events had overshadowed the model that Fidel had proved in practice, but that no one else, including Che Guevara, the ablest revolutionary, could repeat.

The death of Che Guevara, Latin America's most romantic martyr, in a remote Bolivian ravine in October **1967**, meant more to Fidel than the loss of a close comrade and friend. Fidel had staked Cuba's foreign policy, its posture before the world, on the belief that the guerrilla *foco* could serve as the source of revolution throughout Latin America. And what better emissary, what more imaginative lieutenant, than Che Guevara to carry it forth?

Che had written his guerrilla diary during the two plus years with Fidel in the mountains of Oriente Province (as he wrote one in Bolivia as well). He had continued to make his notes as he led the **200-man** column down from the Sierra and through the centre of the island to inflict upon the Batista army the coup de grace in the battle of Santa Clara during Christmas 1958.

During the first five years of revolutionary power, Che played decisive roles, both institutionally and ideologically. In 1960, when Fidel had to appoint a new Bank President, a popular joke began. At a meeting of the rump cabinet Fidel inquired if there was an economist in the room. Che responded affirmatively and Fidel appointed him. After the meeting Fidel said: 'Che. I didn't know you were an economist.'

'Economist?' replied Che. 'I thought you said communist.'

In 1960, Fidel had not yet acknowledged publicly that the Cuban revolution had a socialist character, and some members of the 26th of July Movement, the broad coalition that collaborated in the cities with the mountain guerrilla warriors, still denied that **Marxism-Leninism** could take over the free and democratic spirit of the Cuban Revolution. In that year, two books, one by C. Wright Mills and the other by Jean Paul **Sartre**, affirmed the non-communist

nature of the zany Cuban experiment, and of its leader, who spent several days with each author in Cuba.

Che had the reputation of being the hard liner, the real communist, although he had no known affiliations with the Communist Party (PSP). Fidel's younger brother, **Raúl**, had ties to the Cuban Party and had attended several international communist youth meetings. But these formalities effectively ended when he accompanied Fidel on the 1953 assault on Fort Moncada. The Cuban Communists called Fidel a *golpista*, a *putschist*. Che boasted that he was a communist, but not a Party member. He was thought to be more a Luxemburgist or some sort of purer breed of revolutionary than those found inside the Moscow-dominated structures.

As President of the National Bank and Minister of Industries, Che Guevara set out to make socialism – and maybe even communism, in his lifetime – function in Cuba as it had not elsewhere. Che wanted to see every Cuban worker become an active participant in the great transformation that Marx and **Engels** had predicted and that **Lenin** had launched in 1917, but not lived to see actualized. Che wanted a socialism that elicited from each individual a spiritual effort, not the imperfect model of massive state bureaucracies that characterized the model from the USSR and Eastern Europe. It was not the nationalization of property that Che faulted, but the cold divorce between Party and masses that existed in the Eastern Bloc countries, the impersonality of State managerialism.

Yet, the only models available to the head economist and planner of Cuba, were these imperfect ones developed in the grim days of **Stalin**, and modified in the ten years after his death. Borrowing pieces from the Soviet, Czech and East German planning systems, Che helped create a melange, one that probably could have worked had all of the administrators and middle level personnel been like Che himself. Che dramatized the notion of voluntary work, or real social work. He became the living example of sacrifice by the individual for the collective. He himself chopped sugar cane, seemingly tireless for a long day, or days. He spent his Sundays in the factory, observing, working, talking with the proletariat that he believed would become the agency of social transformation from capitalism to socialism, of psychological change from individualism to collectivism.

Che was convinced that Cuba could both industrialize and diversify its agriculture within a short period of time. Fidel's experimental boldness and Che's utopianism, were based on logic and the intuitive impulse that Cuba had to get out from under the curse of single crop sugar cane. In a 1962 experiment to convert sugar cane acreage to other crops, and simultaneously to initiate light industry, and expand nickel production, Che and Fidel discovered that what looked **promising** on paper did not correspond to Cuban reality. The skills, coordination and levels of infrastructure that Western Marxists assumed – and convinced the Cuban leaders of – did not

exist. The experiment damaged the economy and weakened Che's ideological position with the political elite in Cuba.

Che became, for Fidel, a model of the thinking man who never flinched from doing an efficient hard day's worth of labour. He was medical doctor as guerrilla fighter, polemicist as cane cutter; commander of troops as President of the national bank. Che was the poet administrator. He drove his own car, lived modestly, uninterested in worldly possessions.

Almost any system could work if manned by Che Guevara clones. What worker would not feel the innate sense of satisfaction of falling into the rhythm of Che on the job; what administrator would not welcome his rational, just and confidence-giving presence in an office or ministry? What young revolutionary, would not find his romantic model in this modern version of Quixote with 20–20 vision?

But since there was only one Che, the diversification effort failed initially. Farmers did not have experience growing diverse crops. Some destroyed too much of the cane fields. And, in addition, there developed an acute labour shortage in the countryside, since people flocked to the cities to take advantage of the new opportunities offered to citizens by the socialist revolution. And Cubans did not have easily transferable skills sufficient to make new industry work on the first try. Most of Cuba's educated and professional population had fled to the United States. No matter how hard Che worked, no matter how much confidence he inspired, he could not by himself, or even with Fidel's mighty assistance, transform Cuba miraculously from an underdeveloped country, whose economic system had suffered a severe warp over the past centuries, to a developed one in a few years time.

What a loss when Che left Cuba to act as Fidel's chief missionary abroad! In the Congo, in Vietnam, as proving grounds, to make one, two, many Vietnams! Fidel blessed Che's mission, agreed to finance his revolutionary expedition to Bolivia, and thus to sacrifice his most ardent revolutionary, his most brilliant aide, the man of wit and charm, who dared to speak out against stupidity, banality, violation of principle when others held their tongues for fear of annoying, angering or disappointing *el maximo lider*. Or for fear of risking their jobs – although these same *barbudos* had risked their lives.

Che understood that it is easier to risk one's life, a simple, singular act of commitment, the ultimate male act, the bonding experience par excellence, than it is to risk the less tangible, less noble, less dramatic elements that revolve around position, status, prestige and, of course, the quickly acquired habits of comfort and pleasure, the security of routine – even revolutionary routine.

Che was to Fidel what Sucre was to Bolivar. Che was Lord Byron, a rootless, cosmic man, who could never feel at home in provincial Cuba. Few foreigners with a global communist **vision** could co-exist with the venality of the Cuban Stalinists whom Fidel appointed to fill the gaping holes inside the fledgling administrative apparatus of the revolutionary state. Che found it

easier to relate to the dock workers. most of them deeply involved in *santeria*, than to engage in the dull bureaucratic infighting with the elusive old guard of the PSP.

Che believed in debate. in free discussion among comrades, in the free and frank exchange of views and counter views. The old PSP had learned differently. Those who taught them the texts of the Little Lenin Library did not believe as Lenin did in the need for open discussion: such notions became. under Stalin. bourgeois at best: perhaps even Trotskyite. But the aura around Che. the halo that seemed to radiate from his face, did not afford the plotters a clear target. Che was too popular, too many people seemed to want to protect him. and understand revolution from his words and **deeds**.¹⁹

For Che, the Soviet notion of material stimuli being offered to the agency of social and moral change was a negation of the working class role in the great scheme of revolution. And he wrote, in *Cuba Socialista*, cogent arguments for rejecting the Soviet and East European models of bureaucratic administration and material manipulation of the work force. Che was a democrat. a bit of a Trotskyist, a smidgen of a Maoist, a Gramscist, and a Fidelista. His thinking and being was much closer to Fidel's than any of the old Communists. The other noble samurai who attacked Moncada, washed ashore on the *Granma*, and fought valiantly in the Sierra did not publish their thoughts, or make them known in speeches or public gatherings.

From **1959** until he left Cuba to become the apostle in **1965**, Ernesto Che Guevara epitomized the beauty and purity of Cuba's revolutionary experiment. Like Fidel, whom he always understood to possess, in his character, the seed of Latin American destiny, Che saw the Cuban Revolution as a step toward making a hemispheric revolution. In this process, he accepted his role as lieutenant to the commander-in-chief, to the one whose vision was matched by the qualities needed for the most detailed planning and calculation. a mind that could analyze and compute each and every specific, human and natural, that could enter into any given situation, a battle plan or a conception for a national economy. Che could understand, discuss and help to carry out even the most complicated of political and military schemes, but his egalitarian impulses, his inability to overcome his natural valour made him less than able to carry on as the maximum leader. Che understood the qualities that were unique to Fidel, and recognized in his goodbye letter to his comrade that 'my only serious fault was not to have trusted in you more from the very first days in the Sierra Maestre, and not to have understood clearly enough your qualities as leader and revolutionary.'

In death, Che Guevara has become not the wonderful but flawed warrior. the doctor who used medicine for revolution. the man who could not be tied to family or nation. but the virtual saint of Cuban revolutionary lore. Revolutionary youth make pilgrimages to the site of his death, although the Bolivian forces. commanded by CIA officials. made sure that there would be no body or grave **marker**.²⁰

In October 1987, in Pinar del Rio. Fidel delivered a three-hour speech on the virtues of Che Guevara. Some twenty years earlier, just after Che's death, the slogan 'Be like Che' dominated walls and billboards throughout Cuba. If the words were taken literally the slogan could paralyze the average citizen. Who could hope to aspire to Che's level of achievement. discipline. commitment. determination. intellect? Surely, when Fidel urged the people to think like Che and model their lives after him he was only using a metaphor – or was he?

After thirty years of revolution, Cuba had a Constitution, an electoral system, a penal and judicial system, a developed Communist Party, and mass organizations, designed to mobilize the population around work and defence tasks. Yet, Fidel stood for three hours urging each individual Cuban to reform himself to be like Che. The President of the Republic and Commander-in-Chief of the Armed Force, The Secretary General of the Communist Party and universally acknowledged leader of the revolution continues to use his charisma to mobilize, inspire and mould the population. And the crowd responded, with applause, cheers, occasional slogans. They stood for three hours and listened, signalling their agreement. Then they returned home and continued to behave in exactly the way they had before the speech. Their work habits were often inefficient and careless. But each one would take up arms to defend the revolution, or stand endlessly listening to Fidel's speeches. On their walls they might very well have Che's picture hung, with the slogan, 'Be like Che.'

In 1968, I travelled for nearly a week with Fidel through the mountains of Oriente. I sat in his jeep by day; at night we dined in his tent. The entourage that accompanied him, and the film crew, consisted mainly of comandantes and other leaders. By experiencing the underdeveloped conditions of the island, talking to the local inhabitants of villages and farms, Fidel was demonstrating a method of governance, one in tune with the model dramatized by Che's life. But Fidel had more endurance, not just for the difficult and often tedious daily jeep treks through rocky and muddy roads in intense heat, but for the methodical discovery process about the multiple layers of underdevelopment.

'Underdevelopment,' Fidel explained to me in 1968, as the jeep bounced and squirmed through rut and mud, 'is first an economic problem. The nation lacks the infrastructure, the industrial underpinning. Cuba also lacked the trained, educated, confident people necessary to develop.' And, Fidel added, 'underdevelopment is a psychological problem. The population needs to be able to believe that it can accomplish tasks that seems impossible.' Fidel's method of forging a nation included forging confidence, and mass meetings, at which upwards of a million bodies could congregate and generate that sense of strength and **possibility**.²¹

The light in Fidel's tent stayed on late each night. He was reading textbooks on agricultural sciences, history books, biographies. Almost twenty

years later. in 1987, we travelled together for a day around the outskirts of Havana. He had the same insatiable curiosity, the same pace and rhythm, getting out of the jeep quickly, chatting with people, and rapidly reentering the jeep for the next location. He controlled, or tried to, every detail of every operation. His mind was like a strategic computer. He was surrounded by people – there was no longer an entourage of comandantes – who treat him as if he was his Babyship, a kind of obsequiousness that seems to irritate him; and yet he has permitted or encouraged it for more than two decades.

In 1989, Fidel holds more power than ever. He works longer hours, oversees more operations and acts not only as Cuba's beloved, revered and legendary-in-his-own-lifetime ruler, but as trouble shooter, chief ideologue and long-term planner. The mature Cubans that have grown up with Fidel understand that the institutions and Constitution that he created and shaped will not function until he is gone from the scene. Without wanting to, he undermines all other leaders, all institutions, all decisions that are not his – because he can, at will, change a law, a ruling, an economic plan – or the design for the construction of a house for the family doctor.

Fidel hears the complaints of the populace, sees some of the malfunctioning parts of the system, and observes the repeated failures of his guerrilla comrades and old Communists to run ministries efficiently. He also knows that revolutions break more than eggs, and that socialism is a young system, one which is intimately linked to Cuba's future. Socialism cannot fail in Cuba, without having the long hard years of struggle by so many millions of people dissipate. Fidel feels this responsibility and lives each day to see his work and his aspirations realized by a people. Yet, as long as he, and he alone, must bear this responsibility – and assume the power that goes with it – the Cuban people and their institutions will not have a chance to test themselves.

Fidel, said one Cuban official, is not of the same species as the rest of us. He introduced us to socialism when neither he nor anyone else on the island understood much about what it was. He led an experiment with most of us consenting. Sometimes it worked; sometimes not. He has led the Cuban people to nationhood and as soon as he is gone, we will see – whether we have the cohesion to stay together without him, whether we can have a discussion about how we want to live together. He has done a monumental job. When he leaves – we will see.

NOTES

1. His speech on that balmy winter day in Havana provoked President Eisenhower to break diplomatic relations. Fidel demanded that the United States reduce its Embassy staff from over 400 down to **11**, the number of Cubans operating at their Embassy in Washington. Fidel strongly implied that the U.S. diplomats were CIA and added that 'if all of them want to leave, let them go.'
2. Santeria is a form of religion developed from African and Catholic heritage, but far more pagan than Roman. Variations of African gods are objects of worship, but they take on the names of Catholic saints. On this subject Nelson Valdes is preparing an original and insightful essay and has shared some of his immense knowledge with me. Miguel **Barnet**, a Cuban writer and anthropologist, has also enlightened me on this theme, as have several santeros.
3. To compare revolutionary Cuba with the United States or the Soviet Union makes little sense - with one exception. Cuban military forces have remained in Angola for more than **13** years, out-doing the U.S. in Vietnam or the Soviets in Afghanistan. And, unlike the super powers, Cuba has apparently been able to force its version of peace through negotiations on South Africa. In **1988** Cuban troops, **MIGs** and artillery routed South African forces at Cuito Cuanavale in southeastern Angola. The victory helped push South Africa into accord. The Cuban public has supported the expeditionary forces since the Fall of **1975**, when Fidel made public the decision. He explained in March of **1977** how he made the decisions. With maps in front of him, Castro took Bill Moyers and myself through a **step-by-step** process, from the time that Angolan Prime Minister **Augustin** Neto appealed to Cuba to send forces to stop invasion by Zaire from the East and South Africa in the South. Castro, as he told it, convened the Politburo and obtained unanimous agreement to try to honour Neto's request immediately. The logistics problem required imagination: how to get Cuban planes, loaded with troops and weapons, to Luanda. Fidel telephoned Jamaican Prime Minister Michael Manley, who offered full support for the Cuban expedition, but **refuelling** at the Kingston airport didn't gain Fidel much advantage because of its proximity to Cuba. But, with Manley's help, Castro did get Guyanese prime minister. Forbes **Burnham**, to offer his airport for Cuban refuelling, and thus the Soviet made jets could ferry the troops into Angola. Next, Fidel dispatched his brother, Raul, to Moscow, to alert the Soviets of Cuban plans and to get Soviet moral and material support for the effort. The Soviets approved Fidel's move, after the Cuban victory over Zaire's army. By December, **1975**. Cuban troops stopped the South African advance, routed the **Zairean** forces, and then protected Gulf Oil properties in Cabinda, which had been under threat from **Zairean** troops. Thirteen years later, on December 5, **1988** Fidel declared that Cuba was prepared to remain in Angola five, ten, fifteen even thirty more years, if necessary to the independence of Angola and its security from a South African invasion. 500,000 people stood in a pouring rain, in Havana's Revolution Plaza, applauded and chanted appropriate support slogans. Neither U.S. Presidents nor Soviet Premiers have been able to marshal such public backing for overseas undertakings.
4. There is also considerable opposition to the path chosen by Fidel, and Cubans tell a joke, which, although ostensibly about the Soviet system, is meant to describe conditions in Cuba as well. Former Soviet Premier Brezhnev is finally persuaded to meet an elderly peasant woman who has been waiting for months to ask him a question. 'Comrade General Secretary,' she asks. 'you people who made the

revolution. were you revolutionaries or were you scientists?'

Brezhnev laughs and exclaims. 'We were revolutionaries of course, why do you ask?'

'Oh,' says the woman. 'that's exactly what I thought, because if you had been scientists you surely would have tried this experiment on rats first.'

5. The CIA operation against the Cuban revolution was the largest ever mounted, and it was done from Miami. Hundreds of houses (safe houses) were bought, a massive payroll (thousands of anti Castro Cubans) was recruited, most to join the invasion brigade, but a considerable number to do more dirty operations. Under Jimmy Carter, the Agency refrained from violent clandestine operations, but certainly excelled in the disinformation category.
6. Valentin **Azpillaga**, the intelligence official, stationed in Prague, revealed some 500 names of Cuban intelligence operatives throughout the world – a remarkable feat of memory for any person. General del **Pino**, who accomplished heroic feats during the Bay of Pigs invasion in 1961, stole a plane and flew it to the United States, where he made across the board denunciations of the Cuban Revolution. A U.S. intelligence officer of many decades responded to these events to the author: 'Intelligence and military people defect for three reasons: because they made serious errors and would have received poor fitness reports that would damage their careers; because they are offered some immense sum of money; or young nooky – usually provided by rival services.'
7. The revolution has transformed the island, built thousands of schools, through university and medical schools, (Cuba claims **25,000** doctors in 1988, compared to **6,000** in 1959, of whom **3,000** fled to the United States) hundreds of clinics and hospitals, roads, day care centres, factories and apartment houses. Because of Fidel and the revolution that he has led since he first launched a daring raid against Fort Moncada, Cuba's second largest army base, Cuba is a physically and psychologically new country. It is not only a young country but an ardently communist one – at least as far as Fidel and the members of the Party are concerned.
8. The assassination attempt that came closest to success, according to Castro, involved a 'pernicious poison.' Castro admitted, in 1974, to have been almost addicted to chocolate milk shakes, and the best ones in town back in 1960 and 1961 were made at the Havana **Libre** hotel. The CIA, as Castro told it, smuggled this venom into the hands of the ice cream **scooper** at the hotel, who hid the chemical in the freezer, next to the chocolate ice cream container. As luck would have it – and Fidel has had his share – the poison container froze against the inside wall of the freezer, and rather than risk alerting Fidel's body-guards, the would-be assassin did not insert the material into Fidel's milk shake. Soon after, through infiltration, the assassin was caught, confessed and the poison was sent to a laboratory. 'It was quite a clever concoction,' Fidel commented. 'I would have become very ill, my beard would have fallen out, and the poison would not be traceable in my body.'
9. By the end of 1%5 more than **500,000** Cubans had fled the island, most of them settling in the Miami area. With exceptions they shared a collective expectation that the U.S. marines would oust Castro and reinstate a regime that respected private property.
10. Just as U.S. citizens were unaware of the role of their country for the past sixty years in Cuba, Cubans were super aware of U.S. intervention in the **1895–98** war of liberation against Spain, the imposition of the hated Platt Amendment, giving the Americans unilateral intervention rights, the Marine occupation of the island for six years before 1920, and other abuses of Cuban independence. ranging from U.S. sailors urinating on a Jose **Marti** statue to the U.S. backing of Batista. In March, 1960 some 500 former Batista military and police officials were shot

after a Kangaroo Court convicted them of having committed horrible crimes. The Castro government said that some 20,000 Cubans had been slain by the Batista apparatus. These summary trials and firing squads turned the U.S. media, hence U.S. public opinion, against the revolution.

11. Before the revolution the saying went that Batista was the second most important man on the island, next to the U.S. Ambassador.
12. This view of the revolution is disingenuous at best. Costa Rica has a different history, a population of less than 3 million (compared to Cuba's 10 million) and is home for many thousands of retired Americans, who insure a constant inflow of dollars into the country. It has not been the object of U.S. attack for thirty years and is a recipient of U.S. aid. Its revolution did not change property relations, nor bring about the kind of counterrevolution which creates a need to invest in a military establishment to protect itself. Costa Rica is the one fortunate nation in Latin America to have escaped the pestilence of an on-going military apparatus. A more accurate comparison could be made with the Dominican Republic, like Cuba a sugar-based island, with a similar history. It had a dictator, Trujillo, who like Batista was a long-time darling of Washington. After Trujillo was assassinated, and the Dominican people elected a leftist government under Juan Bosch there was a military coup and when the Dominicans rose up to defend their elected government, in 1965, President Johnson sent 22,000 marines onto the island to ensure that no repetition of Cuba would take place.
13. The Western media assume that the definition of human **rights** is restricted to the political and legal, or procedural questions, regarding free trial, maintenance of minimum prison conditions, freedom of speech, press and assembly etc. . . The Cubans, like most of the socialist bloc, emphasize the economic and social or **substantive** clauses in the UN Human Rights documents, which list as fundamental rights food, shelter, education, medicine etc. . .
Cuba, lacking the public relations apparatus necessary to respond to the State Department's spin experts, inevitably fares poorly in the media, although not necessarily with the international diplomatic community. When Reagan appointed **Armando** Valladares as the U.S. Ambassador for the UN Human Rights Agency in Geneva many allied and friendly diplomats were horrified. Valladares apparently used threats and intimidation as tactics against other diplomats.
Valladares had been arrested in late 1960 on charges of terrorism. The evidence presented showed that he had been in possession of explosives, disguised as cigarette cartons. He was tried and convicted by a revolutionary court and sentenced to twenty years in prison. Upon his release, he published a book about his prison experience which Cuban writers questioned, speculating that someone had ghosted it. Valladares had worked for the Batista security forces, up to January, 1959. The revolutionaries reviewed his file and found him fit for employment. At the time of his arrest, he was working for the Post Office.
14. The Soviets had made their first official visit to Cuba just ten months after the triumph of the revolution, and, after the United States and its allies, under U.S. pressure, had refused to sell arms to Castro, offered Fidel both arms and oil, if he needed it. Both offers were accepted by Spring, 1960.
15. A reporter asked Fidel if he considered Noriega to be an honest man. 'General Noriega,' Fidel replied solemnly, 'is a very brave man.'
16. I mean what Max Weber meant by the word charisma, God-like, special qualities, ones that differentiate the leader from all the rest. Modern use of the word often refers to anyone who is a good public speaker, or appears strong and determined, people in general with leadership qualities. Fidel, of course, possesses all of those attributes - and much more.
17. Fidel has fought his share of the age-old Cuban struggle with the demons. holding

reason aloft against superstition, even as the leaders of organized superstition declare him one of their own. indeed, the highest of the order of living Gods. While Fidel was making a speech in Havana shortly after the triumph of the revolution. two white doves perched on his shoulder. This seemingly miraculous occurrence made the *santeros* (faith healers or priests of the *santeria* religion) believe that Fidel was a messenger of *obatalá*, the African God that has survived in Cuba long after the abolition of slavery.

Tomas Gutierrez Alea made a film in 1971, *La Pelea Cubana conrralos Demonios*, which lays out the contemporary struggle of reason against superstition against the backdrop of such a battle in the 17th Century.

18. Those who now accompany him on his rounds, **Pepin Narranjo** and Jose Chome **Millar**, do not possess the special qualities of Celia or **Vallejo**.
19. After two hectic months of activity by Fidel and his *barbudo* lieutenants to reorganize the state, Che fell ill, and became the subject of a veiled attack in a gossip column, printed in *Carteles*, a popular, but decidedly capitalist magazine. The columnist said that 'Comandante Guevara has established his residence in **Tarará**', a resort area outside of Havana. Che wrote a letter to the editor of *Revolucion*, to 'inform the readers. . . that I am ill, that my illness was not contracted in gambling dens or staying up all night in cabarets but in working more than my constitution could take for the Revolution.'

Che also made public his salary as an officer of the rebel army, 125 pesos a month, which did not allow him to rent a house large enough to house his entourage, work team and body guards; so the Rehousing Agency lent him one that was deserted by a Batista follower because the doctor ordered him to rest. 'The fact that this is a house belonging to an old Batista follower makes it **luxurious**; I chose the simplest one I could, but even so it is an insult to the people's sensibility. I promise. . . the people of Cuba that I shall abandon it as soon as I am recovered.' Letter from Guevara to *Revolucion*, 10 March, **1959**.

20. Che was murdered by orders of a U.S. adviser, Felix Rodriguez, the man who later emerged as a CIA player in the Iran contra scandal.
21. Fidel spoke of underdevelopment as he gave me an illustrated tour of what it looked like, how it smelled and sounded. By day we bounded through the rutted tracks, sloshed through the sometimes flooded dirt trails that the people of the Sierra Maestre called roads. We met peasants coming down the hills with burros loaded with coffee beans. Parasite-infected children, twenty-five year old women who looked sixty, illiteracy, tuberculosis, severe gastro-intestinal disorders – this was life in the mountains before the revolution and for at least a decade after it as well.