

Journey to the Heart of Cuba

Life as Fidel Castro

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THE INSURRECTION

The U.S. embassy and the labor organizations were alarmed by the overthrow of Prío, while for similar reasons the comrades of the Marxist *Partido Socialista Popular* (Popular Socialist Party) entertained certain favorable illusions. They all thought that, with Batista, the Communists would return to power—at least as minor players—as they had during his first government. But it didn't happen that way.

A realist and a pragmatic man, he discarded any vestige of subordination to principles. Batista had taken note of the existence of the Cold War (actually, in Korea, very hot)—and he hastened to assure the U.S. State Department of his absolute support in its war against Moscow and against its proponents within the Cuban Communist Party. That was not entirely accurate description, because the Cuban Communists, victims of a certain inferiority complex, were quite dependent on the *American Communist Party* and were convinced that the Bolshevik Revolution could not arrive on the island until the proletariat of its great neighbor to the north broke the chains. That thesis, a type of leftist Plattism, was called *browderismo*, because it was related to the North American Communist leader Earl Browder.

After guaranteeing Washington that his government would be as anti-Communist as Prío's—which three days before the coup had signed a treaty with the United States to coordinate the anti-Soviet strategy—he soon proved it by allowing some of the planes that were to bomb Arbenz's Guatemala to take off from Cuba. After coming to an agreement with union leaders, assuring them that they would not be persecuted and the labor gains would not be annulled, Batista left the door open to political evolution within his regime and proposed to hold elections in 18 months. This clever maneuver immediately divided the opposition—of every shade in the country's political rainbow—into two camps that persisted throughout the next seven years: the electoralists and the insurrectionalists.

There were electoralists and insurrectionalists in every party, so that a bitter division arose within the anti-Batista ranks. Debates erupted between the “traitors” who would dare to negotiate with the tyrant and the “irresponsible ones” who were ready to drive the country into a violent revolution without pondering the consequences. That dispute, however, did not appear to affect the bulk of a mostly apathetic citizenry, who, looking at the neighboring states, did not see a substantially different picture. Practically all of Central America was living under military control. In Venezuela, Pérez Jimenez ruled; in Colombia, Rojas Pinillas; in the Dominican Republic, the bloody Trujillo. In the 1950s, it seemed as though democracy had not been conceived for the delight of the afflicted Latin American people.

Batista's papers, from the days after his military coup, make for interesting reading. He and his top aides suspended the Constitution of 1940, putting in its place several statutes in which they proclaimed a historical affiliation to what, at certain moments, had also been called a “revolution.” The revolution of March 10, 1952 was supposed to have taken place in order to pursue the ideals of the *mambises* and of the Revolution of 1933, to end the gangsterism and the corruption, and to establish a regime of social justice. There was talk of agrarian reform, and of building thousands of houses for the poor. There were promises of more public beaches and a profound educational transformation. In addition, certain salaries were increased, starting, naturally with that of the military men. At the same time Marta Fernández, the dictator's second wife, a tall and elegant lady, tried to imitate Evita Perón, handing out thousands of donations and food packages to poor families.

Fidel Castro was not satisfied with the agreement and he denounced it, on the pretext that it had not included the Communists. The truth is that he had been preparing a group of followers for some time, to try to overthrow Batista through an armed uprising. It was not convenient to have one of the centers of the opposition, in which his fledgling and fluid organization had no influence, come together in strength. Officially, he was still a member of the Orthodox Party, as were 90% of the young men he had recruited; but his secret objective was to take over the militant young Orthodoxy, which as at that time under the influence of a high-minded journalist named Mario Rivadulla, and to set up a separate camp, very far from the Chibasista leadership (which didn't think much of him). Intuitively, Fidel Castro understood that he was the only figure in the Orthodox Party with the guts to lead an armed insurrection, and he did not plan to share the leadership with politicians who were less prepared for revolutionary violence.

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From Mexico to the Sierra Maestra

In reality, Castro continued to pursue the possibility of insurrection, and the bulk of his negotiations were directed toward creating in Cuba a network of support for his next adventure. His plan, communicated to very few people, consisted in going into exile in Mexico and organizing from there an expedition similar to the one that the journalist Sergio Carbó had launched twenty years earlier against Machado, in the coastal town of Gibara. The difference would be that the earlier attempt had not been coordinated with a general uprising, whereas Castro had in mind a multi-pronged revolt and perhaps even a massive general strike. In search of collaborators for this task, he had made contact with student leaders at the University of

Havana and the University of Oriente. He found a sympathetic echo among the latter, especially in a brave young man named Frank País. Frank, a teacher, Protestant, a kind of hybrid revolutionary and anti-Communist militant, promised to help Castro if he fulfilled the promise of disembarking in Cuba. José Antonio Echeverría, the popular leader of the Federation of University of Havana Students, Catholic and anti-Communist, was the most reticent. Among his closest collaborators were several students who detested Castro. One was Joe Westbrook, the others Faure Chomón, Jorge Valls and Fructuoso Rodríguez. They still saw him as a gangster. He was not even much liked by his two old compatriots in the UR, now close to *Manzanita*, as Echeverría was called: Juan Pedro Carbó Serviá and Jose Machado (Machadito). It was Castro's good luck that with the exception of Chomón and Valls, the rest of the audacious revolutionaries of *el Directorio* (the directorate) had been assassinated by Batista's police. Some, by the way, had been denounced by a Communist of obscure psychological motivation named Marcos "Marquitos" Rodríguez.

Once in Mexico, Castro quickly started preparing the "invasion," and he announced the name of his party: *Movimiento 26 de Julio*, the 26th of July Movement. He felt he had already gotten all the men and women of action available from the Orthodox Party—among them Martha Frayde, a dynamic and combative doctor—and incorporated them into his group, and now he wanted to put some distance between his group and the rest of the opposition. This was the moment to make official his rupture with the Orthodox Party, even if he tried to maintain good relations with its leadership. He met a former general from the Spanish Civil War, Alberto Bayo, better known for his defeat at Baleares than for his victories, but someone who, nonetheless, had some combat experience and could train the soldiers whom Fidel was recruiting, along with his ex-compatriots from Moncada, who secretly begin to regroup in Mexico to prepare the expedition.

However, the most important relationship would be with a doctor, an adventurer who arrived in the aftermath of the failure in Guatemala. This was Ernesto Guevara. From their first meeting, the Argentine fell under the Cuban's spell. Fidel talked for hours, as always, and explained his dreams for changing the country. Guevara quickly realized he was not dealing with a deep intellectual but an audacious man of action who, from his point of view, combined the perfect elements to achieve the right outcome. He was a leftist bourgeois, radical and antiimperialist, with a nearly Marxist interpretation of world events. He had no respect for the market economy or the Yankees, whom he detested, while he quietly admired the Russian Revolution. His diagnosis for the world was chaotic and disorderly, but it coincided with the Third World analysis of Guevara. In addition, he was ready to resort to violence, as much as necessary, because he had no bourgeois scruples. His brother Raúl, on the other hand, shared with Guevara a more structured (if sketchy) Marxist vision and even had a curious contact at the Soviet Union's embassy in Mexico: the agent Nikolai Leonov, who very soon came into contact with the three.

Guevara started to think that destiny had presented him with a character who was superior to Colonel Jacobo Arbenz. Fidel was a true leader, who could be forgiven for the superficiality of his analysis or the tiring loquacity he employed to convince his interlocutor of the most diverse theories. So, the Argentine revolutionary, ascetic and ironic, a bit disheartened by the lack of cultivation among the Cubans he had met, accepted Castro's leadership and agreed to accompany him on the adventure. He humbly joined the team. After all, maybe it would be possible to carry

out a Communist revolution in Latin America. He could not lead it, himself. All he could do would be to subtly lead Castro, and contribute to giving the group a coherent ideological orientation. That would be very difficult to carry out because any effort at manipulation would have to be conducted from a position of subordination. Lucky for him, he could count on Raúl's complicity, as an expert in the difficult art of handling his brother while appearing to be submissive, agreeable and obedient.

The same amnesty that gave Fidel Castro his freedom allowed Carlos Prío to return to Cuba—with the will to strengthen the electoral cause. If Batista could not be ousted by force, they would have to settle for the ballot box. Prío's objective, and that of all the democratic opposition, was to have Batista accept the legitimacy of elections in November of 1954 and call another election, this time free and with guarantees in every aspect. Castro and the students had formed an organization for the armed struggle called *Directorio Revolucionario*, Revolutionary Directorate, open to anyone who wished to participate, even if they were not university students. They and the other Insurreccionalists were tenaciously opposed; Batista would have to be removed from power by force. He who lived by the sword would have to die by the sword.

In any case, the electoral cause was revived when an old and honorable colonel of the Independence War, don Cosme de la Torriente, took the initiative. At the age of 83, he dared to ask Batista to engage in a “civic dialogue”, to bury the hatchet and start negotiations. But his effort was in vain: it ran up against Batista's stubbornness; Batista who did not perceive how the various sectors of Cuban society had inexorably closed ranks against him. And it also ran counter to the groundwork done by Castro, who was bent on winning, arms in hand. The civic dialogue, then, drowned between the monologues of those who were excluded: the ones who had taken power by force and felt secure, and the insurgents who planned to take it away from them by the same violent means.

That double intransigence did not seem to be reflected in the social arena. The economy was doing well, the flood of tourists was increasing, and development was on the upswing in cities like Santa Clara and Holguin. Skyscrapers were going up in Havana; but none of that had any bearing on the society's feelings for the government. Indeed, the largest share of Batista's detractors were in the middle and upper classes, while what feeble support he could muster was located at the lower social levels.

A strange form of this division could be observed between Catholics and practitioners of the Afro-Cuban religions. The Catholic church, which since the 1940s had developed an extensive secular structure committed to social action, used its entire array of organizations to confront Batista's government: the JOC (Juventud Obrera Católica, Young Catholic Workers), the JEC (Juventud Estudiantil Católica, the Catholic Student Youth), the JAC (Juventud de Acción Católica, the Catholic Action Youth), and the ACU (Agrupación Católica Universitaria, the Organization of University Catholics). These institutions were predominantly “electoralist”, and they participated actively and openly in the civic and political confrontation with the dictatorship. Some of their young Catholics became well-known and respected: Angel del Cerro, José Ignacio Rasco and Andrés Valdespino—but some of the leaders later joined the armed struggle when it was evident that an end would come only by force. While this was the position

of most militant Catholics, the *santeros*, *abakuas* and other believers in AfroCuban rites did not seem to feel uncomfortable with General Batista. After all, most of the army's rank and file were blacks who found the military to be a way to escape extreme poverty, and Batista was seen as a *mestizo* anyway, a man of mixed race and humble origins who had been able to climb to the highest position in the country.

The “civic dialogue” failed. Fidel saw this as an open door to insurrection, and he was not alone in reaching that conclusion. A group of professional soldiers, all of them trained in North American academies, tried unsuccessfully to stage a coup d'etat under the leadership of Colonel Ramón Barquín. They were known as “The Pure.” In those days, the anti-government actions and the bombings had multiplied, and some of the bombs were placed in public places, an even graver crime. The chief of the army intelligence services, Colonel Blanco Rico, was killed by two students, Rolando Cubelas and Juan Pedro Carbó Serviá, while leaving a Havana nightclub; a woman also was injured in that episode. The police responded to those events with more crimes and torture. A group of Authentic Party members led by Reynol García tried to take over the Goicuría garrison in the province of Matanzas; several assailants died in the attempt or were executed after being captured. After the failed attack there was an exponential increase in official repression. As the English expression goes, politics made strange bedfellows: in the Dominican Republic, Prío's Authentic Party members had established a strange complicity with Trujillo and were preparing an expedition led by Eufemio Fernández, one of the people who, years before, had tried to topple the same Trujillo with the invasion prepared from Cayo Confite.

After several run-ins with the Mexican police, Fidel finally managed to pull together some arms and a few dozen men to set sail for Cuba. The last push came with \$100,000 given by Prío, \$15,000 of which were set aside to buy a boat, the *Granma*, an old, 20-meter recreational yacht bought from a “North American”. They set out on the night of November 24, 1956.

Castro had already declared that soon they would become either heroes or martyrs. “Soon” was not a slip, but a sign of his conviction. He was certain that upon his arrival, there would be an uprising all across the nation. A few weeks before setting out, he had signed the Pact of Mexico with José Antonio Echevarría—which almost failed, because Fidel insisted that Communists be included, a condition Echevarría did not accept—and he received a visit from Frank País, who had in mind taking up arms in Santiago de Cuba. The prospect of a long guerrilla war was not to Castro's liking. His intention was to disembark at Niquero, advance toward Manzanillo (which should already be in rebel hands), and triumph in a short period. To wage ongoing guerrilla warfare was not in his equation. He did not have the necessary infrastructure to furnish weapons and ammunition for such a campaign. A great optimist, he was looking for this operation to last a few days or weeks, at most.

On the 30th of November, Frank País showed that he was serious when he committed to taking the city of Santiago de Cuba. With some 300 young men, all of them from the upper and middle classes of the city (a fact that later worried the government), he occupied some public buildings and set fire to others, and he machine-gunned the garrisons before the police, overcome by panic, could figure out how to quell the insurrection. Santiago's youth supported and admired him;

Fernando Bernal, Fernando Vecino, Jorge Sotús were with him. All of them later took to the hills: the Sierra Maestra Mountains.

His revolutionary onslaught lasted just two days and, miraculously, caused few deaths; but the example was not replicated as Fidel had expected, and the labor leaders close to Castro were not successful in their attempt to call a general strike. Echevarría's Directorate showed no signs of life—for which Fidel would later blame Jose Antonio—so that on December 2, when the *Granma* carried Fidel and another 80 expeditionaries to the southern shores of Oriente (not very far from where Martí had disembarked 60 years earlier), Batista's government had recuperated from the close call it had suffered a few days earlier in the province's capital.

The disembarkation could almost be classified as a shipwreck. They arrived at an inopportune place—the beach not suitable for such tasks—and they were immediately spotted by an old frigate, which opened fire. They quickly gathered what supplies they could and headed for the mountain range of Sierra Maestra. Now they had no game plan. There were no guides or maps. Then began a series of clumsy improvisations, comparable only to those conducted by the highly-divided upper ranks of the adversary. Batista himself, in his palace in Havana, asked for a map of the zone; he was brought one of the kind that are given away at gas stations—not exactly a military chart. But then, he wasn't Marshal Erwin Rommel. He had never been in combat and had no tactical formation. But none of this kept him from deciding the initial strategy: to send army units after the expeditionaries, following their tracks from the point where they disembarked, up into the mountains. One bureaucrat suggested the opposite: drive them from the mountains down to the sea, to herd them into one place with no exit. It was logical. Pushing them further into the mountains would send them to a natural hideout. Pushing them to the sea would mean driving them into a trap.

The Opposition Gets Tough

Batista smiled; he liked cat-and-mouse games. For him, it was a political episode. He knew that at that the invaders were only a few dozen young and inexperienced men, led by “an Orthodox gangster known for his craziness,” as described by one of his assistants. Some of the expeditionaries had been captured and it was perfectly well known what scarce armaments the insurgents carried. What risk did Batista's government run if the expeditionaries managed to reach the Sierra Maestra and stay hidden for a while, in those remote and inhospitable places? It could even be beneficial. That “live” guerrilla, in the Sierra Maestra, far from the urban centers, served him well—it divided the opposition and justified his staunch position in postponing the anticipated elections. How could anyone expect him to engage in a political negotiation with the opposition when the country was in a state of war? Even more: Castro's guerrilla threat fit the bill for two other reasons, as well. Now Batista could suspend the constitutional guarantees as he liked, evoking an exceptional emergency; and it also allowed him to approve special budgets for the war, without submitting to the scrutiny of the General Comptroller of the Republic. Castro, then, also gave him the means to steal. Batista and many of the military men in the inner circles found that useful, indeed.

This attitude of neglectful complacency lasted a few months; there was little combat and minimal persecution. That was sufficient to allow the survivors of the *Granma* to avoid capture. Some 20

of them regrouped and acclimatized themselves, created a supply network and expanded their ranks with new fighters. Meanwhile, an important correspondent for *The New York Times*, Herbert Matthews, turned **Castro** into front-page news in the United States with a series of articles in which he introduced the Cuban leader as a reformist democrat without totalitarian intentions. That phenomenon, with the mere survival of **Castro** and his group and the simple fact that the army had not destroyed them, had a galvanizing effect on the opposition. First, it shifted the equilibrium of force in favor of the insurrectionalists. Second, it destroyed the old political dictum that assured that “a revolution could be fought with or without the army, but never against the army.” **Fidel Castro** and his improbable guerrillas showed that a revolution could be made *against* the army, especially against Batista's, which (even if it included a few valuable and well-trained officers) was little more than an empty repressive machinery. It was led by dishonest chiefs, capable of such low conduct as selling their offensive plans to the enemy or covering up deaths in their own ranks so they could keep on receiving salaries for soldiers who had died.

After the consolidation of the guerrilla front in the Sierra Maestra, the insurrectionalist opposition became bolder, establishing a climate of competition among the anti-Batista groups who were worried by the prominence **Fidel Castro** was acquiring. This was the time when the Revolutionary Directorate and the Authentic Party groups combined efforts and launched an attack against the Presidential Palace, with the goal of executing Batista. The military expert in charge of the event was a young Spaniard, veteran of the Civil War and exmember of the resistance in France—his tank was the first to enter Paris after the liberation. His name was Carlos Gutiérrez Menoyo and he was exiled in Cuba with his family a little after the end of World War II. Gutiérrez Menoyo, like other exiled Spaniards, had ties with Prío's followers and it was through those connections that he obtained funds for weapons. Second-in-command was Faure Chomón, one of the Directorate leaders. Also participating in the attack was José Antonio Echeverría, whose mission it was to take over a popular radio station and to spread word of the demise of the tyrant, and to call for a people's uprising.

The attack failed and 35 revolutionaries died—among them Carlos Gutiérrez Menoyo and José Antonio Echeverría—while only five soldiers fell. The government, irritated and fearful, took the dangerous step of finishing off the electoral option. That night, a group of policemen kidnapped and assassinated Pelayo Cuervo Navarro, President of the prestigious Orthodox Party, with whom it would have been possible to work toward a peaceful and honorable solution to the country's conflicts. In a sense, Batista had stepped over the line. For surviving members of the Directorate, the failed experience of the attack on the palace led them to an inevitable conclusion. The most effective armed opposition, and to some extent the most secure, was not clandestine confrontation in the cities, always within reach of the repressive apparatus, but guerrilla combat carried out in the mountains, just as **Fidel** was doing. And those who would later form the guerrilla front of the Directorate were Eloy, the younger brother of Carlos Gutiérrez Menoyo (a brave young man of barely 22), Faure Chomón and Rolando Cubelas. Cubelas, a medical student, went on to become one of the most famous guerrilla chiefs in the Escambray Mountains in central Cuba.

When **Fidel** found out about the attack on the palace, he reacted angrily and classified the action as dangerous and reckless act. In reality, he realized that if the *Directorio* had been successful,

the most probable scenario was that the Authentic and Orthodox parties would have dominated the political scene once again, relegating the 26th of July Movement to second place. For him, it was obvious that Batista's death in those circumstances would have meant, if not his own political death, at least a notable dimming of his lucky star. And the Communists thought more or less the same, but with even greater concern: the Communist Party was keenly aware that those who had assaulted the palace were fundamentally anti-Communist, so that the dictatorship would have been replaced by people who were in fact their not-so-hidden enemies.

After the attack, there was a striking increase in clandestine operations in the cities, but now they were masterminded by people using a new code name: *el llano*, the plains—to distinguish them from those who fought in the mountains—and they organized themselves to aid and supply the guerrillas. The urban conspirators no longer formed groups to head the fight but to support the insurrection, which was now unquestionably led by the man in the Sierra Maestra. That's how the Civic Resistance surfaced, a vast group of professionals in all fields, led by Raúl Chibás (an educator and the younger brother of Eddy) and later the engineers Manuel Ray and Enrique Oltusky. The Civic Resistance grew rapidly and efficiently in every province, recruiting personalities like the young lawyer from Camagüey, Carlos Varona Duquestrada and the filmmaker and publicist from Havana, Emilio Guede, the propaganda chief. They all shared a clear passion for democracy and a vocation for public service. They were generally anti-Communists and they were upset when they started to hear that a Marxist faction was growing in the Sierra Maestra, outstanding members of which included an Argentine named Guevara, now known as *el Che*, and even Raúl, Fidel's own younger brother.

This was about the time when the friction more or less openly began between the Communist and the democratic revolutionaries. An indignant Frank País, who led the 26th of July Movement in Oriente and the second leading figure in the group, discovered that a Communist named Antonio Clergé was distributing Marxist propaganda among the soldiers. He ordered for him to be eliminated. The execution did not take place, because a lawyer intervened. That was Lucas Morán Arce, an honest and even-tempered man who had close ties to Frank País; in the name of political harmony, he begged that the order be rescinded. País agreed but he explained his reasons for issuing the order in the first place: he was deeply concerned about the increasing filtration of Communists in the 26th of July Movement. He believed that the best way to avoid a major conflict later on would be to stem the tide immediately and provoke a confrontation between the two factions. Ironically, months later, when Morán met the guerrillas and found out the extent to which the Communists (linked to Raúl) had penetrated the movement, and was horrified to see how easily Raúl was executing suspected collaborators of Batista's army (a paranoid attitude that Morán suggested was Stalinist) it is he who became the victim—he was summarily tried and sent back to Santiago de Cuba in the expectation that he would be assassinated by Batista's police. That, happily, did not come to pass, because the regime unexpectedly fell.

After Frank País died, the man who succeeded him, Rene Ramos Latour (called “Daniel”, in clandestine circles), maintained an energetic dialogue with *el Che* on communism. Guevara, who made no secret of his inclinations, wrote an explicit letter, displaying a certain intellectual swagger, in which he says: “I belong, because of my ideological training, to those who believe the solution to the world's problems lies behind the so-called Iron Curtain; and I see this

movement as one of the many that have been provoked, by bourgeois zeal, to liberate themselves from the economic chains of imperialism. I always considered Fidel an authentic leader of the bourgeois left, although indeed his personal qualities of extraordinary brilliance place him well above his class.” Ramos Latour answered him in no uncertain terms. “This is not the moment to discuss where the salvation of the world lies. I only want to state our opinion, which of course is completely different from yours... We want a strong America, master of its own destiny, an American that proudly confronts the United States, Russian, China or whatever power tries anything against our economic or political independence. On the other hand, those who have 'ideological training' think that the solution to our problems lies in liberating ourselves from the noxious Yankee dominance in exchange for the less noxious Soviet dominance.” Shortly after he sent that letter, Ramos Latour was assigned to a suicidal guerrilla mission, and indeed, he died in combat.

In the Sierra Maestra, however, future political and economic projects were taking shape that were far from being Communist projects. Felipe Pazos, an Keynesian economist well within the CEPAL spirit of the era, but absolutely a democrat in his political dispositions, was the principal architect of the supposed platform of the 26th of July Movement.

Given the evidence that the electoral strategy and the political solution to the conflict were quite unlikely to succeed, the Cuban Communist Party (which naturally was no stranger to the conflict) opted to play the “Fidel” card, and started making contacts and preparing to place some of its leaders in Sierra Maestra. Meanwhile, it gives orders to other mid-sector operatives to create guerrilla units in the Escambray zone, independent of the ones already maintained by the Directorate and by the Authentics organization, another opposition group emanating out of Prío's followers. Even more clearly than Fidel's militants in the Sierra Maestra, the guerrillas in Escambray demonstrated what a false threat were Batista's forces. Here were just a few hundred men, divided and poorly-armed (Gutierrez Menoyo had split from the Directorate and created the Second National Front of Escambray), operating, basically, in a mountainous territory of barely 100 square kilometers, interrupted by towns and well-traveled hunting grounds, where there is always a telephone or an accessible road somewhere nearby. But the army did not come after them, or chased them half-heartedly—partly because they did not know how to pursue them more effectively, but more because they were growing more demoralized.

Batista and the Norteamericanos

One of the reasons why they were discouraged was the evident loss of North American support. Washington, which had accepted Batista in the same spirit with which Roosevelt had accepted Somoza (“he's a son-of-a-bitch, but he's *our* son-of-a-bitch”), was starting to revise its positions. Even while American society didn't have a clear idea of what was happening in Cuba, thanks to the press the powerful image of a bunch of bearded young idealists, led by a charismatic lawyer and fighting against a deplorable tyrant, had started to take hold.

To that simplification were added detailed descriptions of excesses committed by Batista's police, one of them committed in the presence of the American ambassador, Earl Smith. He was stunned to see the police in Santiago de Cuba violently clubbing a group of women, dressed in

black and demonstrating in a public street. They had been trying to reach the ambassador to give him a letter, begging his government to stop supporting the Batista dictatorship.

That episode came on top of the effective lobbying activity carried out by exiles in the United States. They were led by Ernesto Betancourt, an able economist and strategist with a fine instinct for political intrigue, with the cooperation of other notable exiles like Victor de Yurre and Manuel Urrutia (a judge who had to go into exile after acquitting several *Granma* expeditionaries). These efforts achieved a spectacular favor for the opposition movement: a weapons embargo. The Eisenhower administration would not sell arms to Batista, and it would not even deliver the ones that had been paid. Obviously, Batista could buy them in another country, but this was a tremendous psychological blow: Batista, in the eyes of society, had fallen from grace with the North Americans. This whetted the conspiratorial appetite of the high military ranks and demoralized Batista's politicians even more. All of his generation perfectly remembered what had happened to Machado when he lost the support of the White House.

In this climate of crumbling authority, in September of 1957, several units of the Marines at the port of Cienfuegos staged an uprising in a plot coordinated by Emilio Aragonés. He was a representative of the 26th of July Movement, and an ex-classmate of Castro's in the Belén school. Javier Pazos, a 26th of July chief in Havana, participated in the conspiracy, along with Julio Camacho and Justo Carrillo, a social democratic economist with an "Auténtico" pedigree who led a small and imaginative opposition group named the *Montecristi*. The plan, which involved several mid-ranking officers, was partially successful and the city was taken by the insurgents during several hours. However, but it did not convert into an insurrection by the higher naval units—a cruise ship and a couple of smaller ships—with which they had planned to bomb the military installations in Havana.

Shortly, an armored detachment sent from Santa Clara and a bombardment by the air force (armed with old but efficient B-26 planes from World War II) was able to defeat the insurgents in the middle of a blood bath that, as happened so often with Batista forces, was cruelly prolonged for several days, causing a great number of victims. How many? The U.S. ambassador estimated it at 300. Perhaps it was more like 51, but it was, without a doubt, one of the bloodiest episodes in the fight against Batista.

The next challenge to the dictatorship came not in the form of a military conspiracy but a general strike. It was launched on the 26th of July under the leadership of the movement's coordinator in Havana, Faustino Pérez, an expeditionary from the *Granma* who had been stationed to promote the struggle in the capital. Seconding him were David Salvador, a labor leader with the highest rank in the group, Manuel Ray, an engineer, Aldo Vera, an unremitting terrorist of the 26th, Nicasio "Nicky" Silverio and Pedro Luis Boitel, student leader. The strike was a complete failure, and was accompanied by numerous terrorist explosions.

The more observant members of the opposition became convinced that the fight against Batista had no real support at the class level. People were not rebelling against Batista out of their sense of working man's solidarity, nor because they saw the dictator as the representative of the oligarchy. And worse: the Confederation of Cuban Workers, the very powerful CTC, had an

agreement with Batista based on a type of *quid pro quo*: the government agreed not to harm the interests of the workers, and the organized union—at least the official one—would not interfere in the political conflict. Batista always presented himself as a man of the left, and he used to talk proudly of his presence in the city of Manzanillo in 1953 (he was just a humble water vendor for the railroads, at the time) when the Communist Party was founded. He did not feel any special hostility against the unions did not perceive them as adversaries; he always presented as his greatest achievement the sugar laws of 1939, which were a great advance in the interests of the workers.

After his victory in April, Batista decided, in May, at last to launch an offensive against Castro's guerrillas in Sierra Maestra. He lamented not having done it earlier, when they disembarked, because now he was confronting an enemy who knew the territory much better than his military chiefs did. That was a lesson that had served the dictator well, some time earlier, when he was quick to annihilate an expedition of Prío guerrillas who had arrived aboard the ship *Corinthia*. Could he wipe out Castro's men, almost 18 months after they had begun operating in the Sierra? He would soon find that he could not. Despite the fact Castro only had a few hundred gunmen and half a dozen real war weapons, with the help of a few well set-up ambushes, thorough knowledge of the territory and a constant flow of information received from the peasants, the bearded ones gained their victory.

A decisive contribution to that rebel triumph against the “big offensive” was a new and recent addition, who arrived in the Sierra Maestra from Costa Rica with the blessing of Jose Figueres. Huber Matos was a teacher born in Manzanillo, he was well linked to the Orthodox Party, and he had landed on an improvised airstrip in the mountains in a plane piloted by Pedro Luis Díaz Lanz. He brought with him a shipment of arms and ammunition that distinctly improved the capacity of the insurgents. Huber Matos quickly demonstrated that he was a formidable organizer and a military leader who could lead the troops on attacks against the enemy. Fidel took note and quickly gave him the rank of *comandante*.

After defeating Batista's offensive, Castro had to initiate a more delicate battle: to control the guerrillas of the Directorate at Escambray. To that end, he planned to send detachments of invaders who would travel to the other end of the island, and along the way—through the central Cuban mountains—would politically neutralize those potential adversaries, and if possible, recruit them for the 26th of July movement. With that purpose in mind, he used two of his most trusted *comandantes*: Ernesto “Che” Guevara and Camilo Cienfuegos. The two, with several dozen men for companions, initiated a long walk in which they avoided confrontations with the army (and bribed some of the corrupt Batista officials who were more interested in making money than in fighting). Finally, both detachments, one traveling along the northern coast, the other along the southern, arrived at their destination, and without having met any real resistance. They astutely complied with their assignment to politically and psychologically subordinate the other rebels, without officially absorbing them into their ranks—although they meet some uncomfortable resistance from the men of Gutiérrez Menoyo, whom they accused of being “sectarians” and “coweaters,” that is, of not fighting much—something that was surely unfair.

In mid-1958, Batista and his supporters were reasonably worried. The macroeconomic data was generally good: investments continued to flow, inflation was low, and the monetary value was holding up—despite a considerable reduction in the reserves—and the trade balance turned out to be favorable to Cuba. Many new buildings were going up, as well as middle-class neighborhoods. Cubans inaugurated color television. They were the first Latin American citizens to enjoy that technological advance.

Of course there was poverty, inequity, ongoing unemployment and shortages, but since the degree of development is always relative, workers elsewhere looked at Cuba as offering more hope than their own countries. At that time, 12,000 Italians and as many Spaniards had applied for immigration visas at the Cuban consulates. The problem was not in civil society. The problem was political. The biggest periodicals on the island, *Bohemia* magazine, the newspapers *Prensa Libre*, *Avance*, *Information*, the most accredited journalists—Agustín Tamargo, Humberto Medrano, Agustín Alles, Salvador Lew, Mario Rivadulla, Pedro Leiva, Luis Conte Agüero, Sergio and Ulises Carbó—denounced the brazen corruption and crimes of the government with as much vehemence as was permitted by the sporadic censorship.

A general clamor was running throughout the country — “Batista, leave!”. The Catholic Church added its voice, looking for some compromise that could save the institution of the nation. What became known as “the live forces of the nation”—the trade unions, the professional organizations, the most prominent personalities—joined in. The U.S. embassy also agreed with that sentiment, although quietly. It was dangerous to North American interests for Batista to continue in power, given that the enormous illegitimacy of his government could precipitate his violent fall and the triumph of Castro—a figure over whom the American policy-makers were divided. Some officials classified him as a dangerous Communist and others as an inoffensive reformist in the old populist tradition of Latin America. Whichever the real Fidel Castro really was, he was not a candidate suitable to Washington's interests.

It looked as though Batista might be inclined to leave, but not before he completed his mandate and left the presidency to an ally who would not persecute him and hold him responsible for the crimes and irregularities committed during his administration. That man was Andrés Rivero Agüero, a lawyer of humble origins, a minister in the cabinet and a person in whom Batista had total confidence. He did not have bloodstained hands nor was he perceived as a blatant thief. He could have preferred the opposition, in the person of Carlos Marquez Sterling, an Orthodox electoralist, a man of integrity and a politician who was amenable to going to the ballot box in the midst of the violent climate all over the country. However, Batista, who was never his friend—and who had a tribal outlook on public affairs—did not trust him. He feared Carlos Marquez Sterling and so he closed the door. Perhaps his last door. Perhaps, the last door of the republic.

The elections finally took place on November 3, amid a climate somewhere between terror and apathy. Several small towns were already guerrilla strongholds and Huber Matos's detachment had the army under siege in the outskirts of Santiago de Cuba. Radio Rebelde, the rebel radio station, was ably directed by Carlos Franqui (a former journalist and a former Communist) who had sided with Castro. He was worried by the influence of his old comrades. The station

launched harangues and rallying cries that electrified the population. The rebels threatened to punish harshly anyone who voted, denouncing the fraudulent nature of the elections—and thanks to Batista, they were right: voter turnout was very low, and there were all kinds of irregularities to guarantee the victory of the official candidate. Finally, after the routine recount, Andrés Rivero Agüero was proclaimed the winner — albeit without much conviction. In February of 1959 Batista was supposed to turn over the reins of power. Many people believed he would not do it; but no one could have predicted what did happen. At that moment, Castro was calculating that he would stay a few more months in the mountains before he would even come close to victory. Expecting a close ending, but not an imminent one, the 26th of July group had signed a political agreement with other opposition forces to form a type of governmental coalition. It was called the Caracas Pact.

But history surprised them. Here is what really happened. In early December, Batista received information that was a deep secret and a deep shock: his military chiefs in Oriente, especially General Eulogio Cantillo, were in discussion with Fidel Castro over the creation of a combined council that would oust him from power and prevent the transfer of power to Andrés Rivero Agüero.

There was treason on both sides: the Secret Services of the U.S. embassy had also contacted the generals and the rebels. Between the end of 1957 and the middle of 1958 the CIA, represented in Santiago de Cuba by vice consul Robert D. Wiecha, had given the 26th of July Movement some \$50,000 while maintaining fluid relations with diverse factions of the opposition. On top of the treason of the military and the U.S. double cross, bad news came from the front in Las Villas, the mountainous province where Escambray is located. An armored train packed with soldiers and military supplies, sent to fight the men of Guevara, Cubelas and Gutiérrez Menoyo, had been sold to the enemy by corrupt officials. Almost the entire army was rotten. Apparently, it was kept intact because the principal garrisons were all under the government's control and no large city had changed sides, but it was an empty shell, a sad mask.

In the midst of all this came the straw that broke the camel's back. In the middle of December, a special envoy from President Eisenhower came to the palace and bluntly told Batista that the White House no longer had any confidence in him and that he should pack up and go, after organizing a government of national salvation to avoid the triumph of Castro's rebels. Batista listened carefully, and mouthed a response appropriate for a wounded patriot, answering that Cuba had held elections and that Rivero Agüero had been elected, and that he would hand over power in February. When the troubled American left the room, Batista began to plan his immediate flight. He would escape from the country. He would not wait until February, nor run the risk of having his own soldiers, in cahoots with Castro, arrest him. He was filled with panic and he remembered the nightmare of the days following the fall of Machado, when some of his supporters were lynched by frenetic mobs. He had no intention of being dragged to death by mobs. And why not dump the problem in the hands of the U.S.? Hadn't they betrayed him? Hadn't the most powerful sectors of the economy, almost all of them *Fidelistas*, betrayed him? Whatever came next was their problem.

At the end of December, the first provincial capital, Santa Clara, fell to the rebels. Guevara and Cubelas were the heroes of that glorious event. Earlier, in the Sierra Maestra, two prominent members of the Catholic University Association had joined Castro's guerrillas: a charismatic doctor named Manuel Artime and a young lawyer named Emilio Martinez Venegas, who was known for his bold action and good organization skills. Shortly before, the Jesuit Armando Llorente, an old mentor of Fidel Castro's, had climbed the mountains to talk with his disciple. The church, discretely and unofficially, increased its commitment to the insurrection.

Batista had disappeared, and he planned to take advantage of the night of New Year's Eve to make his get away—when most Cubans could be expected to have something other than politics on their minds. In anticipation, one of his trusted men had flown to the Dominican Republic to negotiate the future (and costly) hospitality of Trujillo. Batista had sent part of his family ahead, to the United States, “for Christmas.” He had a couple of planes prepared, and at the last minute, abandoned a New Year's Eve party, just dropping a word in the ear of a few friends and trusted collaborators. He took off from a military airport. The great majority of *Batistianos* in positions of authority he left to their luck, without caring what would happen to them if the enemies took power. He felt he had been betrayed, and he reacted by betraying everyone.

The fortune he had accumulated outside the country apparently reached \$200 million. For him, exile would not be difficult; but for many who called themselves *Batistianos*, an epoch of disgrace and untold penury began. Some of his closest men were ruined, as happened to the minister of governance, Santiago Rey Perna, a cultivated and hardfighting man (who despite everything continued to show a moving loyalty for Batista). Others, less generous or more rancorous, cursed his name.

It is almost impossible for future history to redeem the memory of this ill-fated politician. It was true that he was not clumsy in the administration of the state. It is true that Cuba in the 1950s had reached a level of development that allowed it to look to the future with optimism. But that is only part of the truth. With the coup d'etat of March 10, 1952, Batista opened a Pandora's box. With his flight on January 1, 1959, he left the republic defenseless, without proper institutions and beset by demons whirling about the island.

