

The Rise and Decline of FIDEL CASTRO

An Essay in Contemporary History

2

The Opening Challenge

"Cuba's Good Fortune"

IN LATE FEBRUARY 1957 Fidel Castro was interviewed by Herbert Matthews of the *New York Times* at a remarkable meeting in the wilderness of the Sierra Maestra. It was Matthews who first provided Cuba and the world with solid evidence that Fidel was alive and kicking after the catastrophic invasion landing of the *Granma* on December 2, 1956, which only a handful of the eighty-two men aboard survived.¹ Matthews wrote, "The 26th of July Movement talks of nationalism, anti-colonialism, anti-imperialism. I asked Señor Castro about that. He answered: 'You can be sure we have no animosity toward the United States and the American people.'"² This was his first foreign policy statement after taking up arms. It was a prudent statement and less than candid, which was revealed the day after he came to power.

Batista flew off before dawn on January 1, 1959. Camilo Cienfuegos and Che Guevara, with a few hundred bedraggled and bearded fighters, marched into Havana on January 3 in the midst of a pandemonium of joy and celebration of practically the entire population of the capital.

Meanwhile, Fidel came down from the mountains and made a triumphal entry into nearby Santiago, some 500 miles to the east of Havana. Here, on January 2, he made his first postrevolutionary pronouncement and inaugurated his system of "direct government." From then on, he would converse with the masses in an incessant flow of extemporaneous and voluminous discourses. It was a system admirably suited to his temperament and his virtuosity, as well as to Cuba's splendid outdoor climate, the versatile syntax of the Spanish language, and the traditional Latin esteem for spoken rhetoric. With a national hookup of radio and television, he would soon be able to project his words and personality to the far corners of the island.

On this momentous day in Santiago, his speech contained what was in effect a foreign policy declaration and, in the context of the occasion, a significant statement. "This time," he declared, "it is Cuba's good fortune that the Revolution will really take power. It will not be as in '98 when the Americans arrived, took control of the situation, intervened at the last moment, and then would not even permit Calixto García, who had been fighting [for Cuban independence] for thirty years, to enter Santiago."³

This was, in fact, what happened in 1898. General García had bottled up Santiago and protected the landing of the Americans. When the Spaniards surrendered the city, the Americans marched in and prevented the Cubans from entering. For the Cubans it was an act of betrayal compounded with insult, and the memory of it had not faded, especially in Santiago.

Here was Fidel with his soldiers, the descendants of Calixto, in Santiago, and he gave it effective symbolic meaning. The presence of Camilo and Che in Havana would mark the transfer of power to the Revolution; but he, Fidel, the supreme commander, would first declare the independence of Cuba in the city where it would have been proclaimed by Calixto but for the American intervention.

If not a challenge, it was at least a warning to the United States and by ordinary standards would appear to be premature. True, any satellite, of any great power, that aspires to assert its sovereignty sooner or later runs the almost certain risk of colliding with the great power; but the circumstances and the costs of the collision are not predetermined. Hence, why the haste? Why look for trouble before there was any? Prudence alone would dictate verbal restraint on so dangerous an issue.

The explanation lies in the singular character of the Cuban Revolution, which is another way of saying the character of Fidel Castro; for it must be clearly understood that his personality, style, and leadership have dominated the Cuban Revolution as profoundly as Louis XIV molded the destiny of seventeenth-century France. In this sense he is Fidel I, and his Cuba can as well be described as a socialist monarchy as by any other nomenclature. Here the analogy with Louis XIV largely ends. The Fidelista style is the product of shrewd calculation and reckless plunging, of a disarming informality and a compulsive idealism, of an impish sense of humor and a great reservoir of personal courage, of an intense patriotism and an irrepressible urge to make history, and above all of a supreme confidence in one's own judgment.

Thus, to untangle the moods and motives that shaped Fidel's behavior on any given occasion can be an enormously complicated matter. In Santiago on January 2, 1959, Fidel Castro had indulged in a self-gratifying gesture with an eye on history; but there was undoubtedly more to it than that. He was banking on the appeal of nationalism to rally the widest sort of popular support, a matter of prime importance. In this respect his judgment was sound, for the response to his appeal was enthusiastic.

An Emerging Confrontation

Before the Revolution was a month old the theme of sovereignty and independence had become one of the important staples of the new political diet, and frequently it was seasoned with vinegar and red hot pepper. Thus on January 10, in a panel discussion on television, "Dr. Castro" (in Cuba all lawyers were called "doctor") was asked about a report from Washington that the State Department was prepared to withdraw the United States military mission from Cuba if the Cuban government would send a formal note requesting such action. Fidel's reply was not calculated to reduce tensions: "I don't think we need this mission. It trained Batista's soldiers how to lose the war, so we don't want them to teach us anything. [Laughter in the studio.] We don't need to send them any note. It is the sole prerogative of the Cuban government to decide on the presence of the North American Military Mission."⁴ The next day Fidel got word to the mission to pack up and go home.

While Castro was sometimes capable of generating international friction out of sheer delight in tweaking Uncle Sam's nose, it must be said that across the Florida Straits there was sufficient provocation to spur him on. Although there were cool heads in Washington, less impressed by Fidel's antics than by the need to move carefully in a delicate situation (one of them, Philip Bonsal, replaced Ambassador Earl Smith, who was compromised by his cordial relations with Batista), there was an instinctive and violent reaction among the influential die-hard conservatives, in and out of Congress, to the effect that any regime standing to the left of Batista was an enemy of mankind.

This was reflected in the media. A stream of wire-service dispatches, many of which were printed in the Havana press, harped on two themes: communism and the execution of "war criminals." In retrospect, it can be seen that these dispatches to a certain extent distorted the climate of opinion in the United States, including that of the establishment, a part of which, at least for the first five or six months, had maintained an open, if skeptical, mind on the Castro regime. The reports, however, were eagerly printed by the arch-conservative *Diario de la Marina*, in the hope they would stimulate counterrevolution, and by *Revolución*, the official organ of Fidel's 26th of July Movement, as proof of congenial Yankee hostility. In any event, they ended up as grist in Fidel's mill.

On the charge that he was a Communist, Castro could at the time truthfully say, as he did speaking at a Rotary Club luncheon on January 15, "I am not a Communist." Yet he did not stop with the denial, but used it as a springboard to counterattack: "Anyone who doesn't sell out or knuckle under is smeared as a Communist. As for me, I am not selling out to the Americans nor will I take orders from the Americans." Then, developing the theme further, he repeated an old adage of José Martí: "Without economic independence there can be no political independence."⁵

This was strong stuff only two weeks after taking power--and to the Rotarians, among whom were American businessmen, it was not very comforting. But again, Fidel was not only venting his feelings, which were genuine enough; he knew his words would carry to the Cuban people and reinforce his image as a fearless and dedicated champion of national dignity. It was, moreover, a true image of the man, and over the years the knowledge by the Cuban people that this was so helped him immeasurably in maintaining his sway over them.

The issue of the "war criminals" generated more heat because feelings in Cuba about the atrocities committed by Batista's police ran high. "The world has read about the assassination of prisoners," wrote the *New York Times* on November 8, 1957, "the torture and mutilation of political adversaries regardless of sex or age, the merciless bombing of the civilian population." On January 2, 1959, the day after Batista fled, the *Christian Science Monitor* reported that a "black-book file has been kept of all Batista police and officers who persecuted and tortured their fellow Cubans. . . . Many of these officers face the ultimate penalty for the cruelties they have inflicted. As a consequence, dozens of Batista Cabinet members and government officers have fled to Miami, New Orleans, Jacksonville and New York by plane and boat."

The Temperature Rises

In a matter of a few weeks, charges of a wild bloodbath in Cuba and countercharges of American complicity in the Batista terror mounted to the point where they touched off Fidel's first major broadside against the United States. On January 21, addressing several hundred thousand Cubans gathered in the plaza facing the Presidential Palace (*Revolución* in its exuberance estimated one million, that is, the equivalent of the entire population of Havana and its environs), Castro minced no words: "At Hiroshima and Nagasaki, with the pretext of hastening the end of the war and avoiding useless deaths, they killed 400,000 Japanese with their atomic bombs. Well, in Cuba we'll execute some 400 war criminals; one for every 1,000 assassinated in Hiroshima and Nagasaki." Why this campaign abroad? he asked. "They want to discredit the Cuban Revolution. They don't want the Cuban Revolution to be able to hold up its head," and at this point he added a new and significant dimension to the argument, "so that the rest of the peoples of [Latin] America will not raise their heads. . . . Ours is a people's revolution which must be a beacon of hope for [Latin] America," he exclaimed. "How badly the peoples of [Latin] America need a revolution like ours. . . . Because Cuba wants to be free . . . politically and economically, Cuba has become a dangerous example for all of [Latin] America. . . . We must defend our Revolution not only for the sake of Cuba but also for [Latin] America."⁶

As a matter of fact, the pot was already boiling. *Revolución* was carrying extensive and provocative coverage of the intolerable state of affairs in Latin America. Within four months, the Dominican Republic, Nicaragua, and Panama were to become targets of invasion (all unsuccessful) by expeditions mounted in Cuba. There was even a farfetched plan to "liberate" Spain, which was scotched by Fidel when he learned of it. On April 9, the first hijacked plane, proceeding from Port-au-Prince with six Haitian revolutionaries aboard, landed in Santiago.

For the sake of the record we must note that it was also at this meeting that Fidel named his younger brother Raúl, then twenty-seven years old (Fidel was thirty-two), as number two in the leadership of the movement and his successor if he were killed, with the warning that the enemies of the Revolution would have nothing to gain because "he's more radical than I am." Fidel was unquestionably wrong about "nothing to gain," for if Fidel were eliminated, neither Raúl, an intelligent enough and hard-working lad, nor anybody else at the time or for some years to come, could possibly have kept the Revolution afloat. As for Raúl being "more radical than I," this was conceivable at the time, since it was pretty much of an open secret that he had been a member of the Communist Youth for a brief period. Raúl, who like his brother had miraculously survived the *Granma* disaster, had in all likelihood been number two during the insurrection; and he remained heir apparent during the six-year process that metamorphasized the 26th of July Movement into the new Communist party of Cuba, of which he was second secretary in 1971. Raúl's special responsibility in the Castro regime was the armed forces, of which in due time he officially became minister. Though brothers have been known to betray each other, Raúl has been singularly loyal. With Fidel as the creator and uncontested military and political leader of the Revolution and his brother entrusted with the role of alter ego, the free-wheeling and hence normally vulnerable Fidel has been immune from the fate that befell the somewhat similarly disorganized and careless Ben Bella in Algeria. There could be no Cuban Boumediène, though there must have been times when sober members of the government, not to mention the Russians, regretted that the possibility did not exist.

The Venezuela Gambit

During the first decade of the Revolution, the extraordinarily mobile Fidel, who was constantly charging from one end of the island to the other unhindered by a fixed office or domicile, left Cuba only on the rarest of occasions. The first was a trip to Caracas, Venezuela, where he received a tumultuous welcome on his arrival on January 22, 1959. It was estimated that more than 100,000 people gathered in the vast Silencio Plaza to listen to his speech.

Almost a year before to the day, an uprising by part of the Venezuelan army with mass support supplied by leftist groups, including the Communist party, had swept away a much hated military regime. Fugitives from other Latin American dictatorships, including that of Batista, streamed into Caracas. Here, considerable amounts of money and arms were collected for the Cuban Revolution and made their way across the Caribbean to the Sierra Maestra.

Castro came to give his thanks, but also to have a strategic platform from which to speak to Latin America--and to size up the situation. Venezuela, more than Cuba, could be the key to the continental revolution that was already in the back of his mind. The masses in Caracas, the seat of power in Venezuela, had been radicalized, and nationalism was rampant. It was here that Richard Nixon, then vice-president of the United States, had been subjected to the greatest indignities during his ill-fated goodwill tour of South America in May 1958. Hooted, jostled, spat upon, and stoned, Nixon barely escaped serious injury. President Eisenhower had been on the verge of sending a task force to rescue him.

Venezuela is strategically located on the southern rim of the Caribbean Sea. Its western frontier adjoins strife-ridden Colombia, and directly to the south lies the increasingly unstable Brazil. Venezuela is one of the world's major producers of petroleum and a significant exporter of iron ore. Some 60 percent of all American direct investments in Latin America are located in Venezuela. Clearly, this country could play a role in a continental upheaval of far greater significance than could Cuba. Or at the very least, it could become a "second front" of sufficient magnitude to distract the attention of Washington from its Cuban problem.

All of this might well have crossed Fidel's mind, for he spent five days in Caracas, most of it in private conversations probing Venezuela's political complexities and potentialities. It was already clear that the Venezuelan revolutionary pattern differed in important respects from that of the Cuban. In Cuba Fidel Castro had, so to speak, thrust himself into a power vacuum. The collapse of Batista's army had also wiped out his entire police and administrative apparatus. Such political parties as existed were extraordinarily weak and could offer no competition, let alone resistance.

In Venezuela the armed forces and the administrative apparatus were intact. Political parties were well organized and had roots in the population. An election had taken place that had been won by Acción Democrática, a moderately leftist party. The president-elect, Rómulo Betancourt, an ex-Marxist who for years had engaged in a running battle with the Communist party, was to take office a few days after Castro's departure.

Fidel's First Pronouncement on Revolutionary Theory

The highlight of Fidel's visit to Caracas was the great mass meeting in the Silencio Plaza, where the Cuban spellbinder put on a performance long remembered in the city. One statement in his speech was particularly provocative: "It was commonly said and repeated that nowadays a revolution against the army was impossible, and that only when the revolution took place within the army itself could the revolution succeed, . . . that if there were no economic crisis and no hunger there would be no revolution. . . . All these concepts the Cuban Revolution has smashed to smithereens."⁷

This was a scarcely veiled reference to Venezuela's "unfinished" revolution. More important, as it turned out, it was the opening of the debate in a polemic that was to grow in intensity and geographic scope over the years--in fact, until October 1967, when the failure of Cuban armed intervention in several countries, and particularly in Bolivia, provided sufficient empirical evidence to place the dispute in a new perspective. The debate concerned the assessment of the Cuban experience as a model for revolution in Latin America. From the theoretical point of view, it involved a challenge to established criteria and principles, including those professed by the exponents of Soviet Marxism. From the practical point of view, it was related to the pressures that could be exerted in Latin America in support of the Cuban Revolution, that is to say, the national interests of the new Cuban state. On this last point Fidel in later years was silent, preferring the image of Cuba as a self-sacrificing champion of all downtrodden humanity. However, during this period, as for example in a television appearance on March 6, 1959, he was explicit about what was involved when he invoked the community of interests between Cuba and Latin America: We ask for the support of the peoples of Latin America, he declared, because "we are fully aware that in order to consolidate its victory, the Cuban Revolution needs the power of public opinion of these peoples." Che Guevara and the young French philosophy teacher Régis Debray⁸ were to join Fidel Castro in greatly expanding and embellishing the new theory of revolution announced in Caracas. However, that part of Fidel's thesis concerning the lack of economic crisis and hunger in Batista's Cuba had to be dropped when scarcities and production failures required the revolutionary regime to stress quite a different theme, what it claimed to be the appalling underdevelopment⁹ and privations that afflicted the people of prerevolutionary Cuba.

3

Complexities and Perplexities

The Moderates

WITH THE BENEFIT OF HINDSIGHT, it is not difficult to see that from the outset the Cuban Revolution had embarked on a consistently bold and aggressive foreign policy. At the time, however, a number of factors tended to becloud the view. With respect to Fidel, his close associates like Raúl and Che, and the leading spokesmen of the 26th of July Movement, one could not be sure that their bite would equal their bark. These were colorful, erratic, inexperienced young men, flushed with victory and power; but they had not yet had to face up to the realities of Cuba's dependent economy and its geographic proximity to the United States.

In addition there was the fact that, although he dominated the government, Fidel had, prudently enough, appointed moderates to important posts in the cabinet who, along with other influential supporters of the Revolution, spoke a more temperate language. These were men of an older generation, usually of professional distinction, who had honorable records of political opposition to Batista, had in one way or another cooperated with Fidel's movement before the fall of Batista, and were by and large intellectually committed to the social, political, and economic reforms Fidel had advocated during the struggle against Batista.

Men of this type Fidel had appointed to key posts, such as provisional president of the Republic, prime minister, secretary of state for foreign affairs, president of the Bank of Cuba, and secretary of the treasury. Either out of conviction or tactical considerations that normally motivate responsible statesmen, they expressed friendship with the United States. Hence, they tried to minimize and delay the friction over questions that would inevitably arise between the two countries, such as agrarian reform, regulation of foreign investment, upward revision of the Cuban sugar quota in the United States, and import duties on American products sold in Cuba-- questions that almost from the beginning were on the agenda of debate between the Revolution and the United States.

True, these men were in many respects the nominal government, but they might become the real government. Even after Castro took over the office of prime minister in mid-February 1959 (until then he was commander in chief of the armed forces and head of the 26th of July Movement) and after changes in June and July when militants such as Raúl Roa and Oswaldo Dorticós became secretary of state for foreign affairs and president of the Republic, respectively, spokesmen for the Revolution continued to speak in many tongues.

It was not until the end of November, when Ernesto Guevara was appointed president of the Bank of Cuba (banknotes printed during his term in office which he signed "Che" have become collectors items), that a good deal of verbal confusion was removed. By that time, other dismissals from office and important defections from the movement had occurred, counterrevolutionary activities had broken out, and whatever grounds for negotiation that had existed between Cuba and the United States had pretty much disappeared.

The Communists

There were other incongruities that made it difficult to evaluate the political scene in Cuba during the first year of the Revolution. In June 1958 Carlos Rafael Rodríguez, a leading figure of the Partido Socialista Popular (PSP), the nomenclature of the Cuban Communist party at the time, was sent as a representative of his organization to Fidel's headquarters in the Sierra Maestra, where by his own account a decade later, he grew a beard but did not take part in combat and remained until the fall of Batista.¹ The record shows that the PSP had rallied late to Fidel's insurrection. In its publications it had been consistently skeptical of Fidel's chances of success, disdainful of what it believed to be his political naiveté, and had dismissed him as an adventurer, albeit a well-meaning one. By one of those strange quirks of fate that are the despair of the historian who looks for a rational explanation of the course of human events, the Communists' erroneous assessment of Fidel's insurrection was an indispensable prerequisite for

its success, since Communist hostility provided Fidel with immunity from an early and very likely decisive American intervention.

The party had alternately opposed, supported, or been indifferent to Batista over a period of twenty-five years. A force to reckon with during its heyday in the 1930s and early 1940s, its influence sharply declined in the 1950s. When Batista took power for the last time in 1952, with an eye on Washington he broke diplomatic relations with the Soviet Union and illegalized the PSP. Relatively unmolested by Batista's police, it led a comfortable underground existence.

Why the party and Fidel decided to enter into a working relationship in June 1958 can be surmised. To begin with, despite the ideological and tactical differences separating them, there were areas in which their views were not incompatible. Looking ahead, Fidel could reasonably expect the Communists to support his radical domestic program and to back him completely in a confrontation with the United States. Also looking ahead, for the Communists Fidel's petty bourgeois radicalism--as they defined his ideological position--could create the conditions that would permit the PSP once more to participate freely and fruitfully in the political life of the country.

In the second place, by June 1958 it was not inconceivable that Fidel might win, though it was by no means certain. Perhaps the decision of the party, probably hotly debated, amounted to the purchase of an insurance policy to be paid for by sending money and supplies to the Sierra. No more than a handful of Communists participated in combat. Che Guevara at one time said he knew of only three.

As for Fidel Castro, the main engagements with Batista's forces were yet to come. To win the war he would have to send his guerrillas into the plains where he could scarcely anticipate an easy victory. In addition, in April he had suffered a serious political defeat when the nationwide general strike he had called for fizzled out ignominiously, in part because the PSP had failed to support it. Thus, on the eve of his pact with the Communists, Fidel's prospects were still in doubt. On the other hand, the risk of accepting Communist aid was small, since the agreement was to be secret. In addition it could in no way present a threat to the total control he exercised over the military and political operations of the insurrection.

With the fall of Batista, the PSP was again a legal party and immediately resumed publication of *Noticias de Hoy*, a daily newspaper that joined **Revolución** in giving full backing to Fidel. This development, which the new regime explained as the natural result of restoring political and press freedom after the overthrow of the tyranny, was, of course, more than that. In Washington, it was an early sign, among others, that Fidel would probably be a tough customer to handle. In Cuba, where anticommunism was the normal attitude of most of the population, whether through habit, conviction, or the belief it was necessary in view of the proximity of the United States, *Hoy* circulating freely in the streets and its support of the Revolution created mixed feelings, to say the least.

Although the PSP was much weaker than the 26th of July Movement, it was better organized and had an optimistic view of its potentialities. It apparently maintained discreet lines of

communication with Fidel, whose pragmatism outweighed whatever personal feelings he had about the party's past behavior, and with Raúl and Che who, though critical of its shortcomings, were from the beginning ideologically closer to the Communists than Fidel.

As a result, the party looked for opportunities to improve its position and extend its influence, which brought it both into open conflict with the bureaucracy of Fidel's movement and to a strange rapprochement with a former enemy, the anticommunist *Directorio Revolucionario Estudiantil*, a militant student revolutionary organization.

National Communism in Embryo

It is scarcely surprising that, for the observer at the time, unusual and bewildering complexities made political diagnosis and prediction uncommonly difficult. During almost the entire year of 1959, the PSP and the movement were engaged in a sharp dispute that was fully reflected in their respective daily newspapers. This, in turn, distracted attention from the fact that on most of the important issues of the day the two groups were basically in agreement. "To distinguish nationalists from Communists is difficult," wrote a more than ordinarily perceptive Associated Press correspondent from Havana,² although here again a puzzling element existed because *Revolución* was more aggressively, more impatiently, more flamboyantly revolutionary--hence more radical--than *Hoy*.

In its aggressive polemic against the Communists, *Revolución* constantly belabored the PSP for its one-time collaboration with Batista, for having climbed on Fidel's bandwagon very late, for its dogmatism and imported ideology, and for being power hungry. As the weaker party, the PSP had little choice on most issues but to remain politely on the defensive. The last blast, of limited scope, appeared in *Revolución* on December 15, 1959.

One of the sharpest and in retrospect most meaningful attacks on the "disreputable oligarchy of the PSP" appeared in an editorial in *Revolución* on September 14, 1959. How strange, it said, that Carlos Rafael Rodríguez, who once was a minister in Batista's cabinet and who was scarcely more than a tourist during the fighting in the Sierra, is still a leading figure in the PSP. "The Catholic Church was more sensible, removing from positions of leadership those who were too compromised with the recent past to be expected to go along with the current revolutionary process."

As for being a Communist, the article continued, there is no objection if one is a Communist "pure and simple," since it is one of the many ways of understanding reality; but "to be a Communist in a party that belongs to the Cominform is something else again, for it undoubtedly means adopting a type of Marxism compromised by the interests and needs of a metropolis that one blindly believes will bring about the establishment of socialism over the entire globe." What at the time could appear to be a subtle distinction in the argument on communism was in fact something more significant. It was the embryonic expression of a point of view that eventually gave birth to Fidel's national communism.

Conflict in the Labor Movement

One of the most important areas of friction between the two groups was the labor front. Here the PSP, with some strength and a good deal of experience, hoped to make its greatest gains. The result was a series of bitter conflicts punctuated by charges and countercharges of fraud, as the two organizations ran rival candidates in trade-union elections.

The climax in this running battle occurred toward the end of November 1959 at the first postrevolutionary national congress of the Cuban Confederation of Labor (CTC), whose leadership down to the level of union locals had by that time been purged of Batista appointees and their collaborators. Here the internal struggle reached the point where Fidel himself intervened to "suggest," as *Hoy* put it (November 22), that David Salvador, a stalwart of the 26th of July Movement since before the fall of Batista, be elected secretary-general to preserve unity. This ended the debate.

However, in less than six months, Salvador ran into trouble with the minister of labor over jurisdictional matters and was forthwith purged. Some time later he was caught trying to make his way from Cuba and sent to jail. In another six months the PSP was fairly well in control of the labor movement.

The Locus of Power

One of the issues that came up at the labor congress and that generated considerable heat on many levels was that of unity. Whenever "unity" was invoked, the opinion was unanimous that it was indispensable for safeguarding the Revolution. However, the term did not have the same meaning for Fidel's movement, which held power, and the PSP, which aspired to share the power. Whenever the Communists spoke of achieving unity through a "coalition" of revolutionary forces, the movement rejected this concept in no uncertain terms.

As Marcelo Fernández, at the time top executive of the movement, repeatedly argued, we need a "civic" (political) organization to guarantee the permanence of the Revolution. It must be composed of the most revolutionary, most honest and self-sacrificing elements, hence it can only be the Movement of July 26th. "Let all good and loyal revolutionaries join us. We welcome them. Unity under our leadership is the only way to achieve the solidarity of the Revolution."³

Castro himself rarely took part in the public debates on these matters. While *Revolución* fought the ideological battle, he assumed the position of the bearded patriarch, respected by all members of the revolutionary family whose quarrels he observed with patience until an issue arose that seemed sufficiently serious for him to intervene and provide "orientation."

It was thus significant that at one point Fidel felt compelled to express himself on the question of unity. Under the heading of "Why the Government Cannot Be Shared," he was quoted as having declared, "All revolutionary sectors must support the Revolution. To take part in the government, however, is another matter. We need to keep control in our hands or the Revolution will fall apart, as in 1933. *And nobody presented us with power as a gift.*"⁴

This may be the only time that **Castro** publicly expressed himself with such complete candor on this vital subject. With the exception of nationalism (and its paradoxical twin, internationalism), the locus of power has been the only permanent political feature of the Cuban Revolution since its inception. From humanism to orthodox Marxist-Leninism to national Marxism and back to neo-orthodoxy, from the first "integration" of the revolutionary organizations⁵ to the 1965 version of the Communist party of Cuba and beyond-- through ideological and organizational thick and thin-- "control in our hands" has not diminished. Thus, it later turned out that the new Communist party of Cuba was not the progeny of the PSP or even an amalgamation of revolutionary sectors, but a reincarnation of the Movement of July 26th, purged, toughened, polished, and streamlined, with Fidel Castro at the head and practically all positions of strategic importance occupied by veterans of the old movement.

The Directorio Revolucionario Estudiantil

A third revolutionary group in the early jockeying for power was the Directorio, as it was called in short. This was a student organization led by José Antonio Echevarria, who lost his life in a daring attack on the Presidential Palace on March 13, 1957. The assailants came within an ace of killing Batista. Had they succeeded, the history of Cuba would have been different; for Fidel Castro was still struggling to survive in the mountain wilderness of Oriente, far from the center of power, and Echevarria was an able leader not lacking in charismatic appeal.

In February 1958 some fifteen members of the Directorio led by Faure Chomón, who had been badly wounded in the attack on the palace and miraculously escaped with his life, opened their own guerrilla front in the Escambray hills of central Cuba. In December 1958 a number of this group joined Che Guevara's advancing column and fought in the last and decisive engagement against Batista's troops in Santa Clara. According to contemporary newspaper accounts, one of their number, Rolando Cubela, played an important role in the victory, although the official history of the event, written by the Movement of July 26th, leaves Cubela and the Directorio out of the picture.

Prior to Batista's fall, an alliance between the Directorio and the PSP would have been considered an even more unlikely combination than that of Fidel's movement and the PSP. Although the students in the Directorio were ardent nationalists, they had been even more hostile to the Communists than the movement, not only on ideological but also practical grounds; for the two groups had long been rivals in the student political battles at the University of Havana.

Nevertheless, the unthinkable again took place, precipitated by friction between the movement and the Directorio. Some members of the latter had emerged from the underground and others had rushed in from exile in Miami a few hours after Batista fled, and seized and fortified the Presidential Palace. A tense moment occurred when Camilo Cienfuegos' and Che's columns arrived on January 3, but the Directorio wisely capitulated.

When **Fidel** arrived in Havana, he publicly criticized Chomón, but since the latter was a hero of the attack on the Palace and the acknowledged head of the Directorio, Havana's largest revolutionary student organization, he had sufficient bargaining power to survive. As a result,

like the PSP, the Directorio became a junior partner in the Revolution, a situation that created common interests between them, until later events revived old animosities, as I shall presently explain.

For a long time the Directorio and the PSP carefully refrained from referring to their past quarrels and expressed common views on many issues, and in particular on those that concerned the larger role for the junior partners in the power structure of the Revolution. More surprising-- and disconcerting for the observer at the time-- was the fact that the formerly outspoken anti-Communist Directorio was almost from the beginning outspoken in expressing sympathy toward the Soviet Union and China at a time when the movement's lambasting of the PSP would occasionally spill over and include international communism in general and the Soviet Union in particular.

It can be suspected that tactics more than conviction motivated the attitude of the Directorio. However that may be, in mid-July 1960 Faure Chomón became Fidel's first ambassador to the Soviet Union. Chomón staffed the embassy with his own people, including the exceptionally able Orlando Pérez Rodríguez (who in due time was to zigzag his way to the top as president of the National Bank). In this manner, Fidel astutely threw a fair-sized bone to the Directorio while removing its leadership from the seething political cauldron in Havana and, at the same time, pleasing the Russians without sending a Communist who might be too easily swayed by the Kremlin to be a reliable envoy.

A short time later the wheel turned. Chomón was recalled early in 1962 when Fidel needed support in his first purge of the PSP, then technically nonexistent, which was caught flagrante delicto building itself into a position of independent power. Chomón became minister of communications (subsequently minister of transport) and an effective speaker throughout the island against the perils of "sectarianism," a euphemism for PSP ambitions.

Another Turn of the Wheel

Later, old suspicions and animosities were again revived. In 1964 the informer who, shortly after the event, had betrayed the hiding place of four survivors of the Directorio attack on the Palace was discovered. The unfortunate youths had been killed on the spot by the police, and after the fall of Batista their names had been placed on the official rolls of revolutionary martyr-heroes.

The informer, Marcos Rodríguez, confessed and was tried and executed. He turned out to have been a member of the Communist youth organization at the University of Havana who had infiltrated the Directorio. More significant, although suspicion had been cast on him much earlier, he had been protected by leading members of the PSP, in particular by Joaquin Ordoqui, a Communist party veteran of more than thirty years' standing and serving in 1964 as quartermaster general of the armed forces.

The scandal rocked the country, and it took all of Fidel's skill and authority to mend the rifts it created. Chomón, understandably deeply affected by the revelations, reopened the campaign against "sectarianism," whereupon Castro publicly reprimanded Chomón for pouring salt in old

wounds, thereby doing a disservice to revolutionary unity. He also reprimanded Ordoqui and his wife (the ex-wife of Carlos Rafael Rodríguez and in 1964 head of Cuba's official cultural organization) for carelessness and bad judgment; and finally he papered over the mess by giving a clean bill of health to the old PSP.

A few months later, Ordoqui and his wife were fired from their jobs and placed under house arrest. According to a persistent rumor at the time, they were under suspicion of having cooperated with American intelligence agencies. Years have passed and no word has been released concerning their fate.

Chomón, however, kept his job, henceforth carefully toeing Fidel's line, and in 1965 was appointed to the secretariat of the Central Committee of the new Communist party, a position that like all others in this "ruling" body is mainly honorary.

Faure Chomón had more bad luck the following year when Rolando Cubela--prominent Directorio veteran of the fighting at Santa Clara and later student body president of the University of Havana (and as such the leading representative of revolutionary Cuba at international student conferences)--was discovered plotting the assassination of Fidel Castro. Cubela was tried, confessed, and was sentenced to prison for twenty-five years after Fidel "asked" the court not to impose the death sentence.

The Cubela affair, in which no other member of the old Directorio was implicated, nevertheless did not help the reputation or fortunes of these once aspiring junior partners. No more than two or three, including the durable Chomón, were able to survive in the upper levels of the bureaucracy. (At the end of 1970, however, Chomón was dropped from the cabinet for undisclosed reasons, but retained his membership in the secretariat of the Central Committee.)

Every year since 1959, the anniversary of the aborted attack on the Palace is marked by fitting tributes to the martyrs and the Cuban dedication to revolution by armed struggle, and by a mass meeting at the university, broadcast and televised throughout the country. Faure Chomón is always among the notables on the platform, but it is years since he has been among the speakers, even those in the preliminary warm-up performances. The main event is the speech by Fidel.

