

ARTICLE APPEARED
ON PAGE 24

WALL STREET JOURNAL
7 June 1985

A Visit With Fidel

By ARTHUR SCHLESINGER JR.

HAVANA—He is older now—he will be 58 in August—and his black hair and beard are tinged with gray. I would guess that he has put on weight. He has been persuaded to give up the long thick Havana cigars that were once his trademark. Now he resorts to slim panetelas, and these sparingly. He thinks Cubans smoke too much and is reluctantly trying to set his countrymen a good example. "In this cause," he says, "I am even prepared to throw away my cigars. That will be my last contribution to the revolution."

His vitality appears as boundless as ever, and he remains the great survivor. With the death of Enver Hoxha of Albania, only Kim Il Sung of North Korea, King Hussein of Jordan and Alfredo Stroessner of Paraguay have been in power longer. Despite the CIA and seven U.S. presidents and what he now regards as the implacable enmity of the present administration in Washington, Fidel Castro seems totally confident about the future of his regime and of his revolution.

I saw him at the end of May. I had gone earlier in the day with three other North Americans to the Bay of Pigs, and we met, in a slightly augmented group, with Mr. Castro that evening. Life has its ironies: It was the day on which John Kennedy would have been 68.

The Full Treatment

Mr. Castro had spent a long day on the Isle of Pines with Javier Perez de Cuellar, the secretary-general of the United Nations. But he was full of energy and talk when he entered the conference room at 7 p.m. For the next four hours he gave us the full treatment—an endless, often brilliant, flow of argument, analysis, admonition, accusation, enlivened by jokes, parables, metaphors, statistics, historical digressions, all punctuated by flourishes of his (unlit) cigar and by a splendid repertoire of facial expressions. Whatever else may be said of Fidel Castro, he is a great performer.

He is definitely proud of his Soviet connection and of his commitment to revolutionary internationalism. He is deeply grateful for Soviet aid, now running at about \$4 billion a year. He uses the Communist Party to organize his country and communist ideology to organize his polemics. Yet his Cuba lacks the grimness and melancholy that pervade the communist satellites of Eastern Europe. His table talk is, on the whole, devoid of Marxist clichés. Perhaps communism is different in a hot climate. I was reminded of the French aphorism: "Two deputies, one of whom is a communist, are more alike than two communists, one of whom is a deputy." Two Latin American countries, one of

which is communist, seem more alike than two communist countries, one of which is Latin American.

One feels rather that nationalism—a passionate, romantic, anti-yanqui, macho Latin nationalism—is the mainspring of Mr. Castro's politics. North Americans, especially in the age of Reagan, should be able to understand this ardent and prickly national pride, even as we object when it is displayed by nationals of another country. Mr. Castro's hair-trigger nationalist sensitivity accounts, I believe, for the indignation he shows over Radio Marti, as it accounted for his indignation over the Soviet decision to withdraw its nuclear missiles in 1962 without consulting him.

Radio Marti began its broadcasts on May 20, Cuba's traditional independence day. Everywhere we went that week in Havana we encountered local wrath. It is hot, Cuban officials insist, that they are concerned about Radio Marti's programs. The people who operate Radio Marti, they claim, know only "yesterday's Cuba" and have nothing to say to Cubans today. Radio Marti uses the same frequency as the Voice of America and has, in the Cuban view, far less credibility. The Cubans disclaim any intention of jamming Radio Marti and indeed give it abundant publicity in their press.

The Cubans are mad because they regard Radio Marti as an insult to their national dignity. They especially resent the cynical exploitation of the revered national hero by politicians who had never previously heard of Jose Marti and still have not read a line he has written. (According to the useful Washington publication *Times of the Americas*, the first White House press release announced the intention of establishing a "Radio Joe Marti.") Jose Marti, who lived for many years in Brooklyn, had great affection for the U.S. But he was also eloquently fearful of the impact of North American power on Latin America. "Once the United States is in Cuba," he asked in 1889, "who will drive them out?" "The farther they draw away from the United States," he wrote in 1894, "the freer and more prosperous the American people will be."

Mr. Castro is angry, too, because Radio Marti has ended a hope he briefly cherished that Mr. Reagan in his second term might do for communist Cuba what Richard Nixon had done for communist China. Mr. Castro would admittedly like to normalize relations with Washington, though never, he emphasizes, at the expense of Cuba's collectivist economy or of its basic relationship with the Soviet Union. He had been encouraged by the progress in bilateral negotiations that culminated in the immigration agreement of last December. "Possibilities existed for further improve-

ment," Mr. Castro tells us. "The negotiations over the migratory persons agreement had shown flexibility and mutual respect." Cuba thereafter sent out signals indicating its desire for more discussions.

Then Radio Marti came like a harsh back of the hand from the U.S. "Why was this done?" Mr. Castro asks, pulling a crumpled copy of the official U.S. notification out of an inner pocket and waving it at us. "Why do they want to create a conflict now?" The explanation that Radio Marti had long been in the bureaucratic pipeline and that in any case it could be better understood as part of dramatic politics than of foreign policy does not satisfy him. We ask Mr. Castro how he now views the future of the relationship. "Prospects for improvement are nonexistent," he says flatly.

Not understanding how the U.S. government works, Mr. Castro assumes that Radio Marti is an element in a coherent plan, perhaps leading on to a new attempt to overthrow his regime. Cuban officials take every opportunity to stress their state of military preparedness. Weapons are stockpiled across the country. Citizens are trained to use them. "We have really become," Mr. Castro recently told a team from the Washington Post, "an invulnerable, unconquerable and unoccupiable country." This wide distribution of weapons does indicate the regime's confidence in the loyalty of the Cuban people. An unpopular dictatorship would not dare run such risks.

The Reagan administration, Mr. Castro concludes, interprets every Cuban gesture of good will as proof of Cuban weakness. When Cubans express interest in better relations, Washington says that the Russians must be preparing to dump them or that the economy must be in bad trouble. Lest a soft response to Radio Marti be taken as further proof of weakness, Mr. Castro struck back by suspending the immigration agreement. Machismo demanded a bold vindication of national dignity. The Cubans are determined, in the words of their own communique, to dispel all doubts "as to our resisting as long as is necessary." "The Reagan administration is absolutely wrong," Mr. Castro tells us, "if it bases itself on the idea that we are afraid."

He reaffirmed his readiness to pull the Cuban military presence out of Central America under third-party verification if the U.S. would do the same and repeated his warnings against U.S. military intervention. "The reaction to Reagan's embargo of Nicaragua proves that Latin America today is not what it was in 1961" when Cuba was excluded from the Organization of American States.

"The Reagan administration," Mr. Cas-

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tro continues, "seems to think that we need good relations with the United States. We see it the other way around. We think that good relations would do the United States a favor." On two past occasions, Carlos Rafael Rodriguez, the urbane Communist vice president, had told us in an earlier interview, relations appeared to be moving toward normalization: in the last months of the Kennedy administration, and again during the Ford administration. The first movement was terminated by Kennedy's assassination; the second by Henry Kissinger's sharp reaction to the Cuban role in Angola.

It is hard to quarrel with Mr. Castro's assessment of the immediate future. Mr. Reagan is far more of an ideologue than Mr. Nixon. The State Department automatically brushes off Cuban overtures. Leslie Gelb of the New York Times reports the comment of a senior administration aide: "Trying with Cuba isn't worth the problems it'll cause with the right wing. And besides with Cuba, Vietnam and the Sandinistas, you can't make agreements with them because they won't keep them." Such cracks enrage the Cubans, who point to the meticulousness with which they executed the immigration agreement until Radio Marti came along and with which they still observe the skyjacking agreement, even after it was annulled.

North American Popularity

There might well be advantages for the U.S., as well as for Cuba, in normalization. The opening of Cuba to U.S. trade and tourism could have far-reaching effects within Cuba, where we were told that North Americans are far more popular than the several thousand Russian specialists in the country. Better relations would reduce the Cuban threat as a Soviet military base and might lead to an easing of tensions in Central America, even in Africa. An imaginative policy might set in motion a steady dilution of Cuban ties with the Soviet Union and bring the Reagan administration what it has so long lacked—a diplomatic success.

Cuba will not disavow its Soviet connection or its commitment to revolutionary solidarity. But for reasons of his own, Fidel Castro has evidently decided to rejoin the Western Hemisphere. This new course has already carried him away from his old policy of revolutionary meddling in South America. In time it might carry him away from excessive reliance on the Soviet Union. The Latin American external debt gives his reentry both motive and opportunity. It has become the dominating theme in his discourse. Mr. Castro and the debt will be the subject of a second report.

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