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The World

Cuban Dignity Has Soared...

By C. K. McClatchy

...And Cuban
Belly Is Fuller

A former reporter for The Washington Post and now Associate Editor of the Sacramento Bee, McClatchy visited Cuba this summer at the invitation of the British Ambassador there and with the approval of the Cuban Government and the United States State Department. The following is a condensation of a series of articles he wrote about the visit for the McClatchy Newspapers of California.

CUBA TODAY IS not the island of misery, oppression and starvation pictured by many Americans. Neither has Cuba achieved the unity and economic success claimed by the supporters of Fidel Castro's revolution.

However, a 3½-week visit traveling from one end of the Communist outpost to the other suggests that the present reality lies closer to the Castro hopes. Basic to comprehending the Cubans' perspective is a knowledge of their society before the revolution.

The gap between the rich and poor was vast. For example, there was only one small strip of beach open to the public among the 22 miles of beaches surrounding Havana. Now all beaches are public and overflowing with thousands of carefree Cubans who are not concerned about the elimination of the free enterprise system. From their perspective, a great improvement has been made.

Cubans do criticize present-day life. But the criticism centers on food and consumer goods shortages rather than the absence of free speech and a free press. Satisfying the stomach has priority over nurturing the spirit.

Mucho 'Macho'

TO THE CUBANS, Castro embodies the male virtues, the "macho" qualities admired so much in Latin America. He is the Great Man: he can cut cane faster than any other man on the island, he can pitch like Juan Marichal and hit like Mickey Mantle, he can talk longer and more eloquently than any other human being.

To the Cuban, Fidel, as Castro is universally called, personifies the revolution. Throughout Cuba, unpopular actions are blamed on "incompetent subordinates" and people say: "This wouldn't have happened if Fidel knew about it."

Fidel's following was illustrated to me by a young Cuban woman who wanted to start a new type of child care center. She sought Castro out in a provincial town where he was playing baseball and found him willing to listen at length to her. Finally, he told her to try the idea out and passed

His popularity is immense. Through-

the word that she was to receive all necessary assistance.

His frequent slashing criticism of government inefficiencies pleases the people. It gives expression to their own irritations and seems to demonstrate that Fidel really is on their side. They still seem most interested in adequate food, decent clothing and entertainment and recreation. These things are not always so easy to come by under the revolution. Stores are poorly stocked, and when a shipment of needed goods does arrive from the Communist bloc countries, the supply usually runs out before the line of waiting housewives has been satisfied.

In the housing area, the government has invested heavily in constructing new apartments for workers in Havana and small single family homes for farm labor in the provinces.

The government also is trying hard to raise the Cuban cultural level, sending the National Ballet and symphony orchestras on frequent forays into the provinces. A company of folk dancers encourages pride in Cuba's mixed heritage by developing dances from special aspects of native life such as the voodoo practices still found within the Negro population.

Some Opposition

STILL, THERE are those who oppose the revolution, but they lack organization and leadership.

The strongest opposition is caused by religious beliefs and students who resent the tightening control over teaching and the opportunities for advancement in industry. This has been fortified by the recent purges of students accused of being counter-revolutionaries or homosexuals.

Meanwhile, the government keeps tabs on the rest of the population through its nationwide snooping organization, the Committee for the Defense of the Revolution. The CDR is organized down to the city block and rural neighborhood level, and its dedicated local committees keep a sharp eye on the actions and comments of their neighbors.

Shocking as this may sound, it should be kept in mind that the average Cuban does not feel that the present regime is any more repressive than the previous ones. And Castro's drastic renovation of the Cuban educational system remains the most popular reform undertaken by the regime. Almost everyone echoes the words of a Havana University student:



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Fidel Castro hasn't yet descended to baby-kissing in his camaraderie with his people, but this mascot dandling at a Havana baseball game last February is certainly the next thing to it.

"Before only the children of the rich could come. Now everyone who is qualified is admitted."

The basic reason Fidel and his revolution continue to be popular despite Cuba's many difficulties is that the people now have something of overriding value that they previously lacked—dignity.

Part of the Cuban resentment against the United States stems from the feeling that the Cuban dignity had been affronted and shabbily compromised by United States economic domination for generations.

Changes in the economy, education and social structure are radical, and in most instances, irrevocable. The backbone of Fidel's support comes from people who benefited most from the breaking up of the old social structure.

Negroes, some 30 per cent of the population, are particularly pro-Fidel. An unskilled worker in Havana said:

"Thanks to Fidel, there is real equality now . . . Even if food is scarce, I don't mind, because now I am part of my country. Now the fight for Cuban survival is my fight. If this is communism, I'm all for it."

Formerly landless farm workers who were given their own small pieces of land or who work with others on farm cooperatives are another source of total support for Castro.

A farmer in Camaguey Province said: "Before Fidel, what one did was worth nothing because it was sweating for somebody else. Now it is worth everything."

This farmer knows little about ideology but he knows he is better off now than he was before.

Before Castro, Cuban agriculture was dominated by immense sugar plantations owned mostly by foreigners, particularly Americans. Fidel instituted two basic agrarian reforms: In 1959, he prohibited private ownership of more than 1000 acres, and in 1963, he reduced the maximum to 170 acres.

Now, between 60 and 65 per cent of farm land is owned by the state. The rest is owned by small private farmers, cooperatives and agricultural societies. Much of the expropriated land was given to landless peasants and farm workers, with a minimum of 66 acres for a family of five.

State farm workers are given housing and medical care and receive a wage.

I visited a variety of farms during an auto tour of the six provinces. The wife of a private farmer in Camaguey told me, "We earned a little more before, but there is not much difference. We still have enough to eat."

Their produce has to be sold to the government buying agency

A cooperative farm in Havana Province includes 11 families on 150 acres. Corrado Avila, the co-op member in charge of culture and education, showed me the new housing which he said had been built as a reward for the "stalwart production" of the 11 families.

Comparing the old days when he was a day worker on large farms, Avila said, "Sometimes I got as much as five pesos a day, but then I might have no job for weeks at a time. Now I get three pesos a day plus my share of the profits. In addition, I get milk and some potatoes for my family. Things are better now by a thousand to one."

In Pinar del Rio Province, I visited a 15,000-acre state farm. There are 250 houses for the workers, new, simple and rough appearing. Each is surrounded by a tiny bit of land where workers grow crops to supplement their food supply. The farm includes facilities such as drug stores and social centers.

Whim Is Command

AGRICULTURE DOES not appear to be Fidel's Achilles heel. And saying "Fidel's" is right, because he runs the country as if it were his giant and exciting toy. He has the power to order any idea into being on the whim of the moment, and exercises it quite regularly. The government can dispense with the legislature because there is no room for debate on Fidel's plans.

But Fidel can't do everything and be everywhere, so he has a group of lieutenants who offer unquestioning personal loyalty. His brother Raul holds the key post of Minister of the Armed Forces.

Western observers think the Cuban army is well trained, excellently disciplined and solidly pro-Castro. Russia has equipped it and assists in training. Estimates of its size range from 100,000 to 150,000 men. When Fidel achieved power, he said he would never permit conscription, but this was forgotten in 1963 when it was announced that all youths would be required to serve three years starting at age 17.

The volunteer militia also is a source of Castro power. Its members, men and women, stand guard at public buildings day and night. It is a vehicle to keep alive the sometimes flagging spirit of revolution now that the days of counter-revolutionaries are gone.

Whenever and however Fidel changed his early hostility to communism and developed his present curious combination of Castroism and communism, his commitment to it is complete. If he were to die tomorrow, the change in Cuba would be vast and unpredictable. His departure would leave a tremendous vacuum. It could be expected that the single party, PURSC, would attempt to take control with collective leadership. But the party has no existence of its own; it is an instrument of Fidel.

Thus it would be tempting to a leader such as Raul Castro, who controls the army, to attempt to seize control.

The Challenge Now

BUT DESPITE THE success of the Castro regime, there are many opponents who feel that the improvements will be more than canceled out by the permanent loss of any hope of ever building a free society.

They are men who would have built the liberal, democratic Cuba which American policy-makers say we want. But before the revolution, they were unable to make headway, primarily because of the indifference and insensitivity of the American Government.

A basic lesson we must learn is that our primary problem in Latin America is not communism; it is meeting a growing demand for social progress and material improvement.

American policy in Latin America needs to be less concerned with the fact that the Cuban revolution became Communist and more concerned with what caused the revolution.

We must understand that it is in our national interest to encourage certain essential revolutionary changes, even when they include nationalizing American business holdings. If we attempt to block the needed changes, we may delay them momentarily, but they will inevitably come, dictated then by a new Fidel Castro.