

Cuba's Maximum Leader—twelve years after

FIDEL CASTRO. By Herbert L. Matthews. Simon & Schuster. 382 pp. \$6.95.

By William Attwood

"The Cuban revolution is Fidel Castro's revolution." Herbert Matthews's first sentence sets the tone of his book. What follows is essentially a well-documented if emotionally biased brief in support of this premise. I say biased only because Matthews so obviously likes Castro as a person even while conceding that he is a dictator who has embraced Communism and denied his people a good many basic rights and freedoms. Recalling that in 1959 he described Castro as "emotional, inexperienced, confused, amateurish, willful, arrogant, decent, honest, brave, sincere and idealistic," Matthews says today that he would now alter only two of these adjectives—inexperienced and amateurish.

But whatever his personal characteristics, Castro is worth reading about, because as Matthews rightly points out, he is "the first man in the history of Latin America to achieve worldwide fame and stature in his lifetime." "He has revolutionized Cuba" to such a degree that it can never again be what it once was, even assuming a successful counterrevolution. In Matthews's judgment, the revolution has brought a better life to a majority of Cubans—especially to peasants, factory workers, the poor and the young—at the expense of the middle and upper classes; it has produced the first non-corrupt government Cuba has ever had; it has greatly improved educational and public health services; and the Fidelista regime, even though proclaiming itself Communist, has never allowed itself to be dominated or manipulated by either Moscow or Peking.

So much for the plus side of Castro's ledger. On the minus side, Matthews lists the loss of freedom (even though this has meant little to the majority who never had much in the past); a general economic deterioration (even though everyone at least now gets enough to eat), and the folly of inviting the Soviets to install missiles in Cuba—and thereby risking the destruction not only of the revolution but possibly of Cuba itself.

No doubt Matthews's praise of even some of Castro's achievements will surprise American readers conditioned to think of Cuba as a kind of terrorized concentration camp. But these achievements are a reality, just as Castro's massive popular support is a reality—as the Kennedy Administration found out to its surprise at the time of the Bay of Pigs fiasco. For only recently has American reporting about Cuba become reasonably temperate and objective. Americans are now able to look at Cuba more dispassionately than when the threatening specter of "a Communist government ninety miles from our shores" was solemnly invoked in so many political speeches. As Castro pointedly told Matthews, "I say that the U.S. is ninety miles from Cuba, and for us that is worse."

What about Fidel's Communism? Was he always a secret Marxist who cynically betrayed the revolution which Cuba's Rotarians supported in 1958 as a decent and democratic alternative to Batista? Or did his ideology evolve as he began tasting and exercising power? The answers to these questions are the raw meat of Matthews's book, for they require of the writer that he know his subject, as Matthews knows Castro, and not merely that he has read the relevant documents.

It is Matthews's contention that Castro from the beginning had in mind a revolution which, like that of France in 1789, would overthrow the existing social

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structure and replace it—at whatever cost—with one that would guarantee a better life for the downtrodden majority of Cubans. Castro publicly embraced "Marxist-Leninism" only late in 1961—after the Bay of Pigs—and only because he decided that the Communist way was the quickest way of achieving his goal. "Communism was not a cause of the Cuban revolution," says Matthews, "it was a result." And he adds that as an ideology it remains "a superficial feature of Cuban life."

As for Castro himself, his drift towards his own brand of Communism was a gradual process set in motion by his long-standing anti-Yankeeism and intensified by his deep-rooted fear of U.S. aggression (for which the Bay of Pigs seemed ample justification).

My own brief acquaintance with Castro left me with the impression that he was and always would be too much of an emotional, pragmatic, opportunistic radical ever to have been (or to be) a disciplined Communist *apparatchik*. And our record of supporting more or less corrupt and dictatorial regimes in Cuba for half a century justifies some of Castro's anti-Americanism.

United Nations. Since I was directly involved in the preliminary feelers, I must disagree with Matthews's assertion that they were doomed to failure by Castro's unwillingness to make any concessions and by White House indifference. We will never know what might have happened, since Kennedy was killed a few days before Castro instructed his representative to begin formal discussions with me, but I do know that there was cautious but definite interest in normalizing relations on both sides.

My own view is that such a normalization, which would include resumption of diplomatic relations, is not impossible—if only because the present situation is so unnatural. The trade embargo has been a failure: not only the Soviet bloc but Spain, Britain, Japan, France, Canada and many other Western nations maintain active commercial relations with Cuba. Moreover, the word "Communism" no longer evokes the visceral reaction in America it once did—perhaps because we have learned to coexist peacefully if precariously with so many undisciplined varieties of what was once re-



Herbert L. Matthews, right, with Fidel Castro

The fact remains that Castro, as Matthews points out, did slam the door on the U.S.—but that we then turned the key with our trade embargo and forced him into greater economic dependence on the Soviet Union. This, in turn, led to their closer political collaboration which eventually resulted in the missile crisis. (One of the ironies of this crisis is that it weakened Cuba's ties to Moscow—partly because Castro felt the Russians let him down by pulling out and partly because the Russians subsequently decided that their own interests in Latin American countries would best and more safely be served by trade agreements than by subversion.)

What of the future? Matthews predicts that Castro will be around a long time and that "his voice" will continue to speak in the accents of "the restless young" of the world. Even Castro's death, he believes, would not greatly affect events in Cuba, for the "revolution" is today stronger than ever, its opponents are mostly in exile or jail and its effects on Cuban society can neither be reversed nor undone. Matthews also thinks that "foreign adventurism" will take up less of Castro's time, energy and resources, and estimates that even now he devotes no more than 5 per cent of his time to fomenting revolution abroad.

Nevertheless, Matthews sees little chance of Cuba and the U.S. normalizing their relations so long as Castro is in power. He also discounts the steps towards Cuban-American negotiations taken in the fall of 1963 at the

garded as either a sinister virus or a monolithic conspiracy.

So I would conclude—even after reading Matthews's book—that it is perhaps time for us to unlock the door that Castro slammed in our face and find out whether he wants to turn the knob on his side. If he wishes to come in for a talk, why shouldn't we be ready to respond? Does he really need to promote his brand of revolutionary Marxism in Latin America? Do we really need to maintain an expensive naval base at Guantánamo in the nuclear age? Would trade between Cuba and the United States not be mutually beneficial? These are some questions worth asking if we do not want to be forever frozen in a David-and-Goliath posture vis-à-vis Cuba.

The greatest value of Matthews's book is that it helps us to understand better the kind of man we may be one day dealing with. Castro emerges as "neither saint nor devil"—in Matthews's words—but certainly as a politician unlike any chief of state this generation has ever produced. All you need in order to enjoy this book—and to learn something from it—is an open mind about Cuba and the patience to hear Matthews's constant belaboring of his obvious opening line: "The Cuban revolution is Fidel Castro's revolution." I believed him the first time; who else but Fidel could have kept up such a psychedelic political performance so long, so brazenly—and, let's face it, so successfully? ✽