

THREE FOR THOUGHT
WHAT YOU NEED TO READ ABOUT . . . CASTRO

The enigmatic El Commandante

The man who has ruled over Cuba for almost half a century, **ROBERT WRIGHT** says, cultivated his own mystique

Last weekend's revelation that Fidel Castro was recovering from intestinal surgery and had ceded power to his brother Raúl put the world's Cuba-watchers on full alert. Speculation about what is really happening in Havana is running wild. Castro is dead or on death's doorstep, some observers claim. No, others say, he has merely staged a dress rehearsal so he can observe what will happen to his Revolution when he actually passes from the scene.

Even had Fidel not handed Raúl the reins, the pundits would still have been out in force this month, pondering the post-Castro future. That is because Fidel Castro turns 80 tomorrow. At least, that is what his birth certificate says. But historians now accept as probable that he was actually born in 1927, not 1926 as Castro himself claims, and that his father doctored his birth records to get him into prep school a year early.

The mysterious circumstances of Castro's birth are part of the larger enigma: The man has ruled Cuba for almost half a century, yet he remains virtually unknown to his own people and to the outside world. Fidel has always known the advantages of being a man of mystery,

book in Havana, with Castro dropping in on him and his wife from time to time, but the book was not "authorized" and neither the Commandante nor anyone in his entourage ever vetted it.

In contrast with the seemingly endless parade of books that superficially deify or demonize Castro, Szulc's *Portrait* offers a three-dimensional picture of the man over the first 25 years of his rule. Szulc's Castro is a complex figure: mischievous, prudish, secretive, self-important, vain, courageous and extremely lucky. Never fawning, Szulc is nonetheless capable of praising Castro's gifts as a great world leader. He is "immensely attractive and contagiously energetic," Szulc writes. He is a man of great intellect and "prodigious memory."

He is also a "perfectionist to the point of pedantry," spending hours and hours rewriting the lengthy speeches that seem so spontaneous when spoken. On the matter of Castro's iron-fisted grip on Cuba, Szulc observes that the Commandante "bristles at any suggestion that he is a dictator." But this does not prevent Szulc from offering his own poignant diagnosis of Cuba's political and economic ills: Castro's "psychological inability, rather than



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Photograph taken in 1958 during the guerrilla war against Cuban dictator Fulgencio Batista, with Fidel Castro at the top, second from the right, Raúl Castro at bottom, and Ernesto (Che) Guevara, top, second from the left: Happy birthday, Fidel.

ban American National Foundation.

What makes Bardach's book so engrossing is that her approach to the Havana-Miami story is not merely political, but deeply personal. "The Cuban Revolution has ravaged the Cuban family much as the Civil War in the United States ravaged American families," Bardach writes. To cite only the most prominent of the many family breaches to occur after 1959, Fidel Castro's erstwhile in-laws, the Díaz-Balarts, fled the Revolution and became his arch-enemies in Miami-Dade. The late Raphael Díaz-Balart, Castro's one-time brother-in-law, became a leading figure in anti-Castro political circles, and two of his sons, Lincoln and Mario, are today serving as U.S. congressmen.

Equally fascinating is Bardach's description of the non-Cuban family ties to this drama, which extend to the Bush family, the two Georges and current Florida governor Jeb. In 1999, five-year-old Elián González precipitated a war of words that struck everybody outside of Havana and Miami as inexplicably vicious. Few observers could imagine why Castro spent the better part of a year obsessing over this little boy. Bardach offers a convincing explanation: The struggle over custody of Elián tapped the decades-old reservoir of animus between Castro and the exile community, turning it into one of "the most transforming events in Cuban-U.S. relations since the Bay of Pigs."

which is why he has so assiduously cultivated his own mystique. (A curious mix of respect and fear prevents most ordinary Cubans from even referring to El Jefe by name.) It is not known, for example, how many children he has (estimates range from eight to 15), nor with how many women, nor whether he remarried after his divorce from Mirta Díaz-Balart in 1948. No one knows for certain whether Fidel's own birth was illegitimate, nor even whether Raúl is a brother or a half-brother.

Demystifying this enigmatic world figure begins, for me, with **Fidel: A Critical Portrait** (William Morrow, 1986), by the late New York Times reporter Tad Szulc. Szulc is the only English-language biographer of the intensely private Castro to have enjoyed unfettered access to him. Despite their "absolute" ideological differences — Szulc was a Kennedy liberal through and through — the Commandante agreed to be interviewed on one condition: "You may paint me as a devil so long as you remain objective and you let my voice be heard." Szulc researched and wrote the

conscious refusal, to let go of any power."

Szulc's book remains the best biography of Fidel Castro, for my money, but it has recently acquired another claim on my affections. As the intrepid New Yorker journalist Seymour Hersh discovered when conducting interviews for **The Dark Side of Camelot** (Little, Brown, 1997) — my second Castro pick — it was Szulc, of all people, who first came up with the idea for Operation Mongoose, a covert program of paramilitary operations against Cuba launched by the Kennedy administration in 1961. Mongoose actions included hotel bombings, the sabotage of industrial and agricultural sites, the contamination of Cuba's sugar crop and, most infamously, all manner of hare-brained schemes to murder Castro, including poisoned milkshakes and exploding cigars.

Szulc, Hersh reveals, not only suggested to Kennedy staffers that the United States embark on an aggressive policy of regime-change in Cuba, he discussed the matter privately with attorney-general Robert Kennedy and later acted as "the

linchpin" in a long-running CIA operation designed to foment discontent within Castro's military. (For Castro, the CIA has always been Public Enemy Number One. Presumably, Szulc's history as a CIA operative was not known to Castro when they were collaborating on his biography.)

The secret life of Tad Szulc is but one of the extraordinary revelations unearthed by Hersh as he began shaking the skeletons out of the Kennedy closet. Predictably, some of Hersh's more salacious discoveries in *The Dark Side of Camelot* concern president Kennedy's social proclivities, including his connections to the mob and his extramarital liaisons.

But the most interesting political revelations are those concerning the Kennedy brothers' fixation on Fidel Castro. Jack and Bobby were not merely aware of the CIA's plotting against the Cuban leader, Hersh writes, "they were its strongest advocates." In a short chapter, *Trapping Nixon*, Hersh explains how JFK used classified intelligence about the Bay of Pigs invasion

against Richard Nixon during the 1960 presidential race.

A chapter on Operation Mongoose, *Target Castro*, describes the Kennedys' obsession with eliminating the Cuban leader. Hersh, a writer not given to overstatement, writes bluntly of attorney-general Robert Kennedy that his "enthusiasm for the assignment" of murdering Castro made him "the most feared, and despised, official in the government — especially at the Central Intelligence Agency." Fidel Castro may have been an unusually paranoid leader but, as Hersh demonstrates, it was for the best of reasons.

My third pick is **Cuba Confidential: Love and Vengeance in Miami and Havana** (Random House, 2002), by Vanity Fair journalist Ann Louise Bardach, which chronicles the decades-old blood feud between Fidel Castro and his enemies in Cuban Miami. It is no secret that the Cuban-American émigré community has served as the wellspring of anti-Castro passion in the United States since at least 1981, when Jorge Mas Canosa founded the Cu-

Castro's convalescence continues to stoke the rumour mill but, in truth, there has been talk of the "post-Castro future" of Cuba since at least the 1970s. Speculation of this sort peaked after 1989, when the subsidy-dependent Cuban economy collapsed along with the former Soviet Union. Even Castro's apologists conceded at that time that his reign could not survive without the Soviets. But, of course, they were wrong. Castro not only persisted but found a new ally — and benefactor — in Venezuela's Hugo Chavez. The hope among anti-Castro types that the Commandante would be deposed by impoverished and disgruntled Cubans has once again given way to resignation to what they call the "biological solution" — the death of Fidel.

And so, the world continues to watch and wait.

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