Castro’s Staying Power

“I threw a rock at Castro!” my young friend beamed in our junior high classroom. He had recently migrated to Miami, part of a mass exodus fleeing the Cuban revolution.

Over the intervening years, many others have thrown rocks—real and figurative—at El Comandante. An Energizer Bunny of world rulers, he just kept on going. Only Britain’s queen and Thailand’s king had served longer as heads of state when Castro recently announced that, due to declining health, he would not continue his presidency.

Survivor

The aging socialist warrior has staying power. The *Guinness Book of Records* says his 4 hour and 29 minute UN speech in 1960 remains a UN record for length. His longest recorded speech in Cuba lasted 7 hours 10 minutes.

Castro counts 634 attempts on his life, ranging from poison pills to a toxic cigar. {1} Ten US presidents have served during his command. He survived the US-backed Bay of Pigs invasion in 1961 and the Cuban Missile Crisis the following year.

I remember as a child sitting on our living room floor watching JFK demand the Soviets remove their missiles. We were only 235 miles away, well within range. The world approached the brink, Khrushchev blinked, Fidel…and humanity…survived.

Several years later my parents’ airline flight was hijacked to Cuba. Their surreal night in the Havana airport included individual government interviews, genuine risk of not being allowed to return to the US, and relief at finally taking off for home.

The controversial dictator inspires affection from compatriots

who appreciate Cuba's high literacy and universal health care. Relatives of his political prisoners hold him in considerably less regard. And Cuba's economic woes are legendary.

He's Not Gone Yet

In stepping down, Castro emphasized he isn't planning to disappear: "This is not my farewell. My only wish is to fight as a soldier in the battle of ideas. I shall continue to write under the heading of 'Reflections by comrade Fidel.' It will be just another weapon you can count on." {2}

What reflections are in Castro's future at a frail 81? Even globally influential leaders must face life's finish line. Often spiritual matters creep into one's thoughts during autumn years. Castro has reflected on them in surprising ways in the past.

In 1985 he said, "I never saw a contradiction between the ideas that sustain me and the ideas of that symbol, of that extraordinary figure (Jesus Christ)." {3}

Certainly Jesus displayed compassion for the poor and oppressed, significant Marxist concerns. But it's hard to envision the one who said "You will know the truth, and the truth will set you free"{4} jailing folks for disagreeing with him.

Years ago, Fidel wrote about a fallen comrade:

> *Physical life is ephemeral, it passes inexorably…. This truth should be taught to every human being—that the immortal values of the spirit are above physical life. What sense does life have without these values? What then is it to live? Those who understand this and generously sacrifice their physical life for the sake of good and justice—how can they die? God is the supreme idea of goodness and justice.{5}*

Jesus, whom Castro admired, commented on this theme: “I am the resurrection and the life. Those who believe in me, even though they die like everyone else, will live again. They are given eternal life for believing in me and will never perish.” {6}

Fidel Castro’s physical life will, of course, eventually end. His ideas and influence could survive for generations. But as he approaches that personal threshold we all must cross, might thoughts of his own spiritual future intrigue him again?

Notes

1. Reuters, Weird and wonderful: the facts about Fidel Castro, The Independent tinyurl.com/24yqvn, accessed February 19, 2008.
2. Reuters, Text of Fidel Castro’s Announcement, New York Times, February 19, 2008; at www.nytimes.com/reuters/world/international-cuba-castro-text.html, accessed February 19, 2008.
3. Reuters, FACTBOX-Quotes from Cuba’s Fidel Castro, February 19, 2008; at in.reuters.com/article/worldNews/idINIndia-32028720080219, accessed February 19, 2008.
4. John 8:32 NIV.
5. Andrew Buncombe, When Castro believed in God: letters from prison reveal atheist leader’s spiritual side, The Independent, 26 February 2007; at tinyurl.com/36xnrs, accessed February 20, 2008.
6. John 11:25-26 NLT.

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