

# Cartoon Castro

The reality of the Cuban dictator bears little resemblance to his admirers' fantasies.

By Peter Hitchens

IN SOME COUNTRIES the visitor wishes for a mighty hand to reach down from the clouds and take away the tyranny and squalor he sees around him. Cuba is one such place. Havana is one of the loveliest cities on the planet, or would be if it had not been turned into the mother of all shanty towns by decades of deliberate neglect.

And the Cuban people seem to have a special talent for the arts of life, ignoring as far as they can the restrictions and the privations of a mad, dogmatic regime that sometimes expropriates ice-cream stands and sometimes launches schemes to feed the poor on rodents. It also keeps them under close observation through squads of inquisitive busybodies on every block. Nowhere on earth is speech less free or the home less private, except possibly North Korea. Nobody would wish their fate upon them.

I wonder what the generally heedless western tourists, for whom Cuba is now a fashionable destination, would do if they were expelled from their privileged foreigners' beach reservations, deprived of their special tourist banknotes, and set loose with ordinary Cuban money and ration cards to forage for food and shelter in the collapsing, ill-smelling, intrusively-watched, fly-infested streets of central Havana.

I doubt if they would accept the diet of rice and black beans, the cloudy rum that looks like nasty medicine. Nor would they spend very many nights in the tottering, smelly, crammed rookeries in which the victims of Castro's

dream must live, with their broken sewage pipes and their moody, expensive electricity supplied through ancient, fizzing cables.

But would it change their minds? Probably not. They would congratulate themselves on their fortitude and buy their Che Guevara souvenirs at the airport on their way home. They would continue to refer to the national dictator as "Fidel," as if they knew him, as if he were a friend or perhaps a rock star whose personality is so large that it belongs to the world. They are the latest victims of a strange delusion about this island, which has been far more important than the place or the people, for almost 50 years.

It is tempting to sympathize with the Cuban exiles of Miami, who cheerfully yearn for the death of Castro, describing this as the "biological solution" to the tragedy of the island to which they yearn to return. It is tempting to hope for an intervention, either by fate or by someone else.

But that is not really the point about Cuba. Mighty hands do not, in these prosaic times, stretch forth and pluck despots from their thrones. They do not even write upon the walls of their banqueting chambers that they have been weighed in the balance and found wanting. This sort of wishfulness, the blasphemous desire to stand in for an apparently absent and presumably wrathful deity, is the road to Baghdad and Fallujah and brings hell into the world. Indeed, it is American interventions in Cuba, from the Bay of Pigs to the crass

embargo, which many—including this writer—believe to have rescued and then sustained Castro. And America's lawless prison at Guantanamo Bay, part of another such idealistic enterprise, has disastrously drawn attention away from Castro's own grotesque repressions. Our assaults on our own freedom obscure the view of his far worse ones.

The regrettable truth is that Cuba's future—seen as a medium-sized island state in the Caribbean rather than as a playground for grandiose ideas—may not be all that much better than its past. The choice may not be as blunt as the Castro-worshippers would have you believe. They suggest it lies between Meyer Lansky and their tropical Stalin, between the casino and the commissar, which is an oversimplification. But it certainly lies between being a client of the U.S. or a client of somebody else, with that somebody else almost certainly hoping to use the territory to tease or annoy. China—which recently and rather cheekily sent a detachment of peacekeepers to Haiti—and Venezuela are currently bidding for the patronage, one with credits, the other with oil.

So let us not invest too much emotion here. Castro, at the time of writing, was being displayed, still living and still oppressing his people, garbed in strange red pajamas instead of his usual military dictator's outfit. He was presumably filmed in his personal hospital at Punto Cero, Siboney, a few miles outside Havana where he is recovering from an operation on what is described as an "intestinal crisis."

I was in Cuba when that intestinal crisis was developing, a Havana full of rumors about the Maximum Leader's approaching death. There had, at that moment, been no official announcement, though the robot media had begun to show deference to El Maximo's appointed heir, his brother Raul. But I was strangely affected by a disturbing display of dozens of black flags, caught by the ocean breeze on the Malecon, Havana's seafront.

The flags are actually there to block the view of an electronic news ticker in the windows of the U.S. "interests section," Washington's besieged embassy. In this they succeed. But they have the unintended and strangely unsettling effect of suggesting a place in mourning, like an ominous dream.

The city is also decorated with large posters of the leader, proclaiming *Vamos Bien*, "we're going well." But these portraits show a very old and rather pathetic Castro, grey and vague. This is because he is in rapid decline and it is futile to try to hide it. At his most recent public appearances, in Argentina and in Cuba, he has obviously been bleary, half-absent, and unwell, droning

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even more incoherently than before and repeatedly tugging uncomfortably at his own collar, as if in some kind of pain or discomfort. At one stage, the cameras swung away for a long view of the crowd, presumably on the orders of a director who feared that this display of decrepitude would weaken the regime. But it might have been Castro's own instruction. These days, he has a special monitor just in front of him, so that he can see exactly how his image is appearing on TV.

And who can blame him for his sensitivity? For Castro as a person is rather sordid, a life of bullying, selfishness, bigotry, violence, and vanity. As a Cuban politician he is a pitiful failure, the lawless betrayer of an originally liberal revolution, who has in 47 years transformed one of the most advanced countries in Latin America into one of the most backward, canceling elections and reversing the verdicts of trials. And now he is a physical shipwreck, still in charge of his country only because he has destroyed all legitimate mechanisms for a succession. Like several other idealist, "progressive" radical experiments, from Cromwell to Kim Il Sung, it has ended by resorting to succession by bloodline, so that his even more disagreeable younger brother, Raul, is the official heir.

His significance is spiritual, a potent brand with which millions of fools identify. It would be terrible for the cause of political vanity—and a sweet victory for the truth—if the image ever collapsed into the reality. There is a horrible Edgar Allan Poe story about a dead man kept alive for weeks by the power of hypnotism who, when the Mesmeric spell

breaks, instantly sinks into a revolting mass of corruption. It would be something like that.

This may be more important outside Cuba than it is on the island itself. Castro has for five decades identified Marxism with romance, sexual power, rebellion, and adventure. This figure, in reality a spiteful, vainglorious killer and military dictator, has been the political equivalent of Mick Jagger for a generation of bourgeois bohemians who should have known better.

The fun-revolutionaries of 1968, philosophically chaotic, sentimental, cruel, arrogantly obsessed with youth, unable to believe in their own inevitable old age, and startlingly violent, saw in these men their ideal made flesh. The cultural Marxists who would storm their way through the institutions of the West imagined themselves as inspired by Cuban guerrilla bands in the Sierra Maestra, and in some ways still do.

They were never really interested in the state Castro created, its dingy economic realities, its sinister Soviet sponsors, and its windowless dungeons. They simply refused to notice Castro's long loathing of pop culture and his persecution of homosexuals, since these things did not fit their false picture of him. If challenged, they still make much of Cuba's supposed successes in medical provision and education, as if a sufficient number of rural doctors could cancel out the puncturing of the genitals of political offenders, which might be said to be the opposite of medical treatment.

As long as Castro lives, thumbing his nose at the U.S. the global Left likes to loathe, the imagined U.S. that they think is a fortress of conservatism, his image will remain as a potent lie sustaining one of history's most dishonest generations in its ill-informed self-righteousness.

When Castro dies, it just may be that—even for a short while—the prisons and the archives will be thrown open, the press will be freed and all the silenced voices of 50 years will be heard for a little while leaving a whole generation of dupes bereft, at last, of an illusion that has sustained them for far too long. And then they may discover that they have been weighed in the balance and found wanting. That would be good. ■

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*Peter Hitchens is a columnist for the London Mail on Sunday. He is the author of The Abolition of Britain.*

# Trading Places

How to rekindle conversation between Left and Right

By John Zmirak

I REMEMBER WHEN liberals and conservatives used to be able to talk to each other. Sure, liberals had an important advantage, since they controlled most of the prestigious media. On the other hand, we conservatives had logic, tradition, and most of the facts on our side—which pretty much leveled the playing field. I was perfectly comfortable as a teenager taking up petitions for Ronald Reagan and ringing doorbells for the Right-to-Life Party candidate for NYC mayor. While it wasn't easy being the loudest (and almost the only public) conservative at Yale in the 1980s, I felt I had the Truth on my side—and was constantly subjected to criticism from the Left, which honed my ideas and arguments.

Things are different now. Those who call themselves conservatives have entire TV networks and chains of talk-radio stations on their side. They are able to preach to the choir—much as Pacifica Radio, National Public Radio, or campus newspapers in the Ivy League always have on the Left. Today's self-styled conservatives can go for months without encountering an opposing opinion—and if they happen to hit one, there are hundreds of blogs ready to dismiss the information or arguments they encountered as toxic byproducts of the "Mainstream Media" or "MSM." Likewise, the Left has plenty of comfy sandboxes where it can play, untroubled by alien ideas.

Indeed, there is little overlap between the increasingly polarized extremes of American discourse. The Left and Right

are barely on speaking terms. You might be pardoned for believing they live on different planets. For the sake of keeping the peace, and establishing inter-planetary harmony, I'd like to propose the following thought experiment. Let's play "Pretend." (This is gonna be fun, kids!)

Progressives, let's pretend that every single one of those fetuses aborted in America was an Iraqi civilian, killed by George W. Bush's failed policies.

Conservatives, let's imagine that each of those Iraqi civilians killed by George W. Bush's failed policies was a tiny, innocent fetus.

I told you this would be fun! Let's try again:

Progressives, every time you complain about the "Christian Right," just

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once plug in the "Jewish Left." Sounds kind of offensive, doesn't it?

Conservatives, imagine that it had been Arabs, instead of Americans, who killed 200,000 civilians in Hiroshima to save the lives of their soldiers. Then it would have been an act of terrorism.

Progressives, imagine if George W. Bush were using force trying to spread feminism instead of capitalism. Would you still protest his wars?

Conservatives, imagine if it were Bill Clinton trying to suspend the Constitu-

tion to protect us against white terrorists like Timothy McVeigh. Would you call reporters "traitors" for covering it?

Progressives, imagine if instead of fossil fuels poisoning the atmosphere that your children will have to breathe, that it was porn.

Conservatives, imagine if the cause of global warming weren't the use of big old American-made Humvees and SUVs but acts of sodomy. Would you be out there trying to do something about it?

Progressives, pretend that every time Madonna stages a mock crucifixion on stage to sell tickets to her shows, instead she's appearing in blackface.

Conservatives, imagine that every innocent person who gets executed in America is a cute little blonde girl murdered by Muslims.

Progressives, pretend that every illegal immigrant who crosses the border is a scab crossing a picket line.

Conservatives, imagine if every scab crossing a picket line were an illegal immigrant crossing the Rio Grande.

Progressives, imagine if Islamic extremists promoting theocracy around the world were Baptist or Catholic instead, trying to impose Christianity.

Conservatives, imagine if the Arab Lobby dominated our Mideast policy—thanks to the support of preachers like