

Carl Gershman

HUBER MATOS AND THE COMING CUBAN REVOLUTION

Our man in Havana is in Caracas.

Cubans opposed to Fidel Castro's rule say that he has made two costly errors during the past year. The first was his decision last April to remove the guards around the Peruvian Embassy in Havana, a move that led 10,000 Cubans to seek political asylum in the embassy compound. Castro had hoped to stage a confrontation between the Peruvians and the refugees as a way of forcing a number of Latin embassies in Havana to stop providing asylum to Cubans wishing to leave the country. But the Peruvians did not turn the refugees away, and the spectacle of thousands of Cubans storming the embassy shouting "Libertad!" proved to be an enormous political embarrassment for Castro.

Castro's second error may be even more costly to his regime in the long run. This was his decision to allow Huber Matos, one of the leaders of the Cuban revolution, to leave the country after completing a 20-year prison sentence. Castro may have calculated that the 60-year-old Matos was a broken man who would live out the rest of his life in seclusion with his family and who, in any event, could do less harm to the regime from exile than as a martyred prisoner and a symbol of unyielding resistance to Communist rule. But here, too, Castro seems to have misplayed his hand.

Since his release from prison a year ago, Matos has busily sought to build a political movement for the liberation of Cuba. He has travelled widely, visiting Cuban communities in the United States, Venezuela, Costa Rica, Puerto Rico, the Dominican Republic, and Spain. These efforts resulted in the founding of a new organization, *Cuba Independiente y Democrática* (CID), at a congress held in Caracas, Venezuela, over the weekend of October 17-19.

The meeting was scarcely noticed in the United States, but it aroused intense interest in Caracas and in other Latin

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capitals. The main reason for this is Matos himself, who commands immense respect in the Cuban exile community and throughout Latin America. A former school teacher, Matos joined the revolution against the Batista dictatorship and became, according to the *Caracas Daily Journal*, "the bravest of the guerrillas and their most effective leader." Following the overthrow of Batista, he was put in charge of Camaguey province but resigned his post when it had become clear that Castro intended to impose a Communist dictatorship upon Cuba. On October 21, 1959, two days after his resignation, Matos was arrested and charged with treason. Castro himself was the chief prosecutor at the trial, delivering a seven-hour harangue that was broadcast over the state radio.

Despite numerous appeals for his release and several offers for an exchange of prisoners (the Bolivian government offered to exchange Regis Debray for Matos in 1968), Matos served every day of his 20-year sentence. He spent most of this time in solitary confinement, including a full year in an underground concrete box. He was frequently beaten and in one instance,



in 1973, had several ribs broken and his left shoulder severely damaged when he was set upon by a dozen men carrying lengths of cable.

Matos emerged from this ordeal spiritually unscathed. He appears today, in the words of one Venezuelan journalist, as "the model of austere rectitude," a singularly dignified figure who remains a fervent revolutionary. He is hardly the first Cuban exile leader to have accused Castro of imposing a ruthless and economically unworkable totalitarian system in Cuba and of making the country a Soviet colony which now serves Moscow's imperialist interests. But when Matos says that Castro has betrayed the Cuban revolution, his words carry unique moral authority.

Matos' strategy is based first of all on the belief that the anti-Castro movement must have an unmistakable democratic orientation. "We must be clear about our principles," he told the Caracas meeting, "so that everyone will understand that if our struggle succeeds, it will result in nothing but a democratic state." The new organization did not endorse a particular ideology, but its declaration was social democratic in spirit, emphasizing political pluralism, social equality, and a mixed economy with a strong private sector and free trade unions. The declaration also stressed the need for Cuba to gain political independence and to revive its historic and cultural links with Latin America.

The democratic outlook of the new organization was underlined by the choice of Caracas, the capital of Latin America's leading democracy, as the site of the founding congress. (CID will also set up its headquarters in Caracas.) Venezuela's decision to allow the congress to be held on its soil was particularly significant in that its relations with Cuba have recently been strained. Just two weeks before the congress was to have opened, a lower military tribunal in Venezuela acquitted Orlando Bosch and three other Cubans who had been charged with blowing up a Cuban airliner off Barbados in 1976.

Though the case still had to go before a higher military court, Castro summarily withdrew his ambassador from Caracas and harshly attacked the Venezuelan judicial system. The Venezuelans responded by saying that Castro was hardly in a position to question a court decision in a democracy, and as if to emphasize that they wouldn't be intimidated, they let the Matos congress proceed on schedule. The Venezuelan secret service (DISIP) provided tight security throughout the meeting.

The alignment of the new movement with Latin American democracy was evidenced by the presence at the meeting of representatives of Venezuela's governing Social Christian party (COPEI), the socialist Democratic Action party (AD), and the trade unions. The Costa Rican government also sent a representative. The AD's support is particularly important in that the party has been divided over the Cuban issue. The leftist course of the Socialist International in Latin America, with which the AD is affiliated, has been supported by former Venezuelan President Carlos Andrés Pérez. Until now, the Socialist International has not criticized Castro's dictatorship. (At its Congress in Madrid last November, the International actually voted down an amendment calling for political democracy in Cuba.) But with the emergence of Matos as the leader of a Cuban "third force" in the spirit of the AD's founder Romulo Betancourt (who sent personal greetings to the congress), it may not be able to avoid the issue much longer.

Matos is well aware that the struggle to liberate Cuba must ultimately be waged

from inside the country. The role of the movement in exile, he feels, is to provide support for those inside and to promote the "ideological reorientation" of the Cuban people. He has already set up a radio station in an unnamed Latin American country and will be broadcasting daily into Cuba. He will also concentrate on publicizing the cases of some 200 *plantados*, Cuban prisoners who, like himself, have refused "re-education" and are subjected to torture and systematic abuse. The centrality in the Cuban struggle of the *plantados*, whom Matos views as the moral heroes of the democratic resistance and the heart of the Cuban nation, was highlighted by the appearance at the congress of Vladimir Bukovsky, the former Soviet prisoner who speaks on behalf of a similar struggle in his own country.

Ever since Matos left Cuba a year ago he has spoken of the deep discontents on the island which make an uprising inevitable if not necessarily imminent. When he visited New York in December 1979, he noted that there was already a widespread "spontaneous" resistance to the regime which had taken the form of industrial sabotage, stealing from the state, draft evasion, pervasive negligence, and lack of discipline. He especially emphasized the discontents among Cubans under 25, who make up more than half the present Cuban population and have no sentimental attachment to a revolution that was made before most of them were born.

Events over the past year have tended to confirm Matos' analysis. Castro himself, in

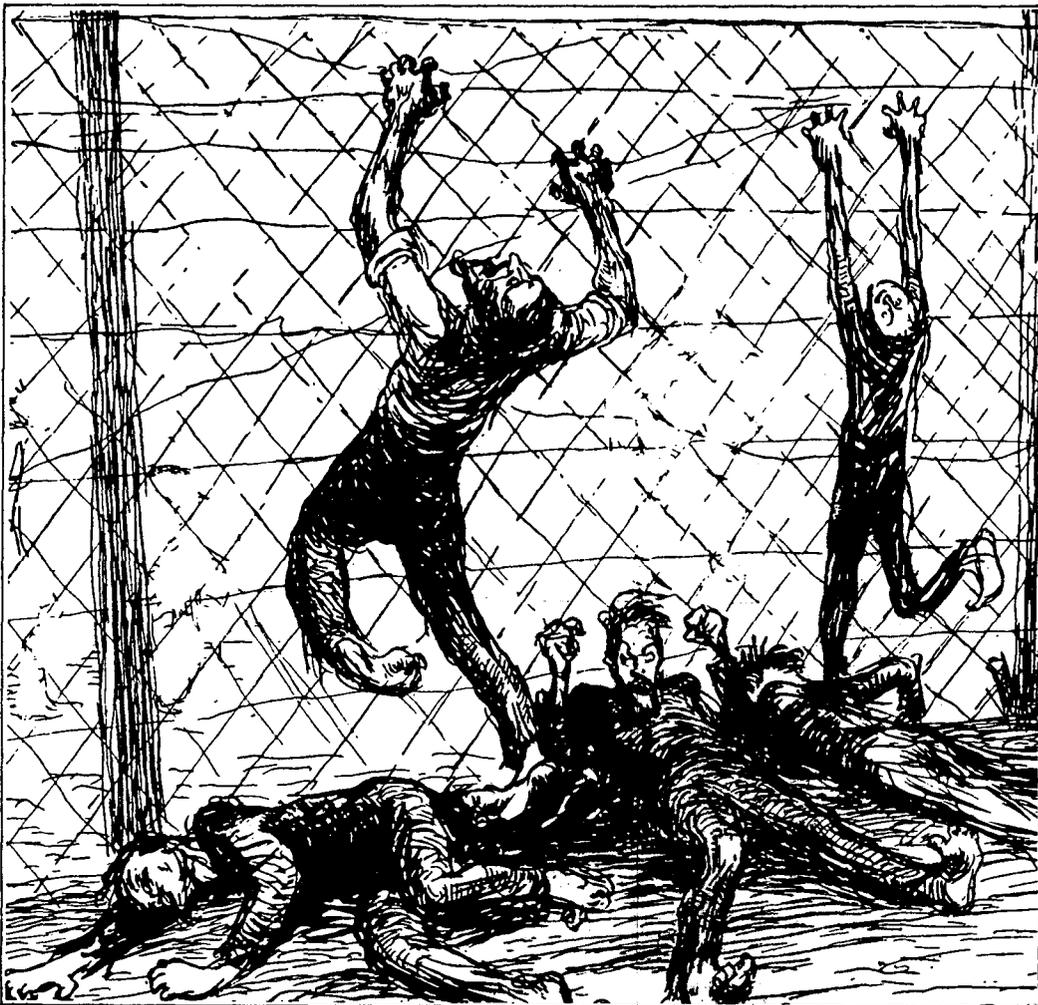
a speech before the National Assembly last December 27, warned that "objective difficulties and errors" by the regime had allowed "the counter-revolution" to make gains within Cuba, particularly among students and intellectuals. The affair at the Peruvian Embassy and the subsequent exodus from the island of over 125,000 Cubans suggested the magnitude of the dissatisfaction with Castro's rule.

Cuba's military involvement in Africa has compounded Castro's problems. Estimates of the number of Cuban soldiers killed in Angola over the last five years run as high as 3,000, which relative to the size of the population exceeds the number of American combat deaths in Vietnam. These casualties should continue to mount since the Cubans show no signs of being able to subdue Jonas Savimbi's UNITA movement which now operates in Angola as a regular fighting force. In order to avoid large public displays of grief that could turn into political demonstrations, the Cuban authorities have staggered the announcement of casualties. But a continuation of Castro's African wars must eventually have serious political consequences. A defeat in Africa could be fatal to the regime.

Not surprisingly, there is growing disension within the army. Exile-based groups operating clandestinely on the island report that they have had considerable success recruiting disillusioned African war veterans who face bleak economic prospects within Cuba. Matos claims that the regime's distrust of the army is such that the Soviet troops stationed on the island now strictly control the supply of weapons and ammunition to the home forces.

Matos is convinced, in fact, that the primary purpose of these Soviet troops is to enforce the Brezhnev Doctrine in Cuba. He maintains that there are 12,000—not 3,000—Soviet troops in Cuba and that they constitute the chief obstacle to a new Cuban revolution. He has urged the governments of Latin America to make clear to Moscow their vigorous opposition to the use of Soviet troops to suppress an uprising in Cuba. He also expects the United States to deter the Soviets—the only instance in which he is prepared to look to the United States for support. But given Cuba's immense value to Moscow and a world balance of forces that makes intervention feasible, it is hard to imagine that the Soviets would stand by if the survival of the Castro regime were threatened by anti-Communist forces.

Matos cannot be blamed for not having an answer to this problem, since deterring the use of Soviet force in Cuba is ultimately an American responsibility. Remarkably, however, this issue has hardly been discussed here. Last year's debate over the



Soviet brigade in Cuba focused almost exclusively on whether or not the Soviet forces posed a security threat to this country. But the relevant question remains: In the event of a Soviet attempt to suppress a Cuban uprising, what should our policy be?

The fact that we have not addressed this question may reflect the extent to which many Americans believe Castro's propaganda about the popularity and stability of his regime. It also suggests that despite Castro's challenge to the status quo

throughout Central America and the Caribbean, we are not prepared to challenge Moscow's intention to enforce the status quo in Cuba. Our tacit acceptance of this state of affairs may have been the price we paid to get the Soviets to withdraw their missiles from Cuba in 1962. It is now clear that this was a very high price indeed, since the effect was to free Castro at home so that he could engage in foreign adventures.

If Matos is to be believed, it is only a

matter of time before the crisis within Cuba comes to a head. If he is correct, then we will not be able indefinitely to evade the issue of whether we will permit a Hungary or a Czechoslovakia to occur 90 miles from our shores. Matos and other opponents of Castro frequently make the point that Moscow can't "roll tanks across the ocean." But this is ultimately a political and not a logistical question, and it should be addressed in Washington before we are overtaken by events. □

Stephen Miller

WALTER WHITMAN, ENTREPRENEUR

I am Whitman and I sing the song of myself.

When we think of great American success stories, of men who rose from obscure origins to successes that matched—or came close to matching—their ambitions, we tend to think of such political figures as Hamilton, Lincoln, and Truman, or such entrepreneurs as Edison, Carnegie, and Ford. But perhaps the most extraordinary American success story is that of a printer, schoolteacher, housebuilder, and journalist—one of eight children of a ne'er-do-well family—who in the early 1850s transformed himself from a hack writer (stories, poems, one potboiler novel) into a writer considered by many to be America's greatest poet. I am referring, of course, to Walt Whitman.

The story of how Walter Whitman, a relatively obscure journalist, became Walt Whitman, a major American poet, continues to exert its fascination because the transformation seems well-nigh miraculous. Walt Whitman came out of nowhere; the odds and ends of Walter do not prepare us for the glitter of Walt. As Justin Kaplan makes clear in his generally well-written and informative biography,* nothing Whitman wrote before he published *Leaves of Grass* in 1855 bears the slightest resemblance to the poems we find in that volume.

Where, we want to know, did Walt

**Walt Whitman: A Life*, Simon and Schuster, \$15.00.

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come from? Or as one critic recently put it, how did the author of *Franklin Evans: or the Inebriate*, the third-rate novel Whitman wrote in the 1840s, "levitate" into the author of "Song of Myself"? Like other biographers, Kaplan duly notes influences: the sermons of Elias Hicks, the prose of Carlyle's *Sartor Resartus* (one of Whitman's favorite books), the poems of Tennyson, especially "Ulysses," and the operas of Donizetti and Rossini. "But for the opera," Whitman said, "I could never have written *Leaves of Grass*." And Kaplan is especially good on the quackeries of animal magnetism and phrenology, current at the time, and their part in shaping Whitman's sense of himself as an American bard who was less a poet than a prophet with an important message for his readers. But ultimately the biographer is at a loss for words when confronted with what we embarrassingly call the mystery of creation.



If Kaplan can do little but wonder about the genesis of *Leaves of Grass*, he can describe Whitman's efforts to ensure that *Leaves of Grass* would be a success. Like many other successful Americans, Whitman was a brilliant entrepreneur in behalf of his "product," someone who did not mind bending the truth to make sure that his book got noticed. As Kaplan says, "the lessons of P.T. Barnum's American Museum, General Tom Thumb and the Swedish Nightingale had not been wasted on him." In art as well as in popular entertainment, the name of the game was always promotion.

And Whitman promoted his product shamelessly. In response to Emerson, who had written him a letter in praise of *Leaves of Grass*, Whitman said that the first edition had "readily sold" a thousand copies when in fact it had virtually gone unsold. Worse, Whitman repeated this lie in a letter to Emerson which he placed at the end of the second edition of *Leaves*, published in 1856. Whitman even took a sentence from Emerson's original letter—which was meant to be private, not a blurb—and had it stamped in gold on the spine of the second edition. (The sentence is: "I greet you at the beginning of a great career.") Moreover, throughout his life Whitman wrote and published anonymous reviews in praise of his own work. He sedulously cultivated his image as a common American—"one of the roughs," as he puts it in "Song of Myself"—when, in reality, he had always shunned physical labor. And, like Mark Twain, Whitman made sure that he was photographed, painted, and sculpted innumerable times.