

Fidel and his comrades.

them without frying them, Cuban-style, in lard. Fidel described all the varieties of Cuban-grown plants, especially praising anti-carcinogenic broccoli and eggplant. This speech drew wide attention. Afterward, I overheard two hotel employees discussing his recipes. "The only thing he didn't tell us," one said, "was how to get the vegetables."

A year later, I stopped to film some one hundred people waiting in line to buy greens. At the front of the line sat two lethargic clerks torpidly punching sales codes on computerised cash registers after weighing the produce on balance scales. A woman shopper noticed the camera and shouted at me in Spanish: "Look at the crap we have to put up with." I asked her to repeat what she had said. "Are you with Cuban TV?" she asked. I told her I was a foreigner, and her expression changed. "Forget it. I wanted Fidel to see what we have to go through to get a few greens. For foreigners, no."

How ironic that seemed: Fidel, of course, already knows about the lines, the bad distribution, and the inefficient clerking. And if I had filmed the scene for Cuban TV, it wouldn't have aired. The woman's instinct was protectiveness an effort to avoid revealing the depth of Cuba's problems to outsiders.

After the 1961 Bay of Pigs and the 1962 Missile Crisis, CIA-supplied counterrevolutionaries operated in the Escambray Mountains through 1966. CIA-funded exiles raided coastal installations and burned cane fields, and those who were caught were often shot.

The political police also crushed internal dissent. The practices once used to counter U.S. attacks turned inwards, blotting out disagreements. The Party was purged twice of factions found disloyal to Fidel. Homosexuals and other deemed socially "unacceptable" were placed in labour camps without trials. Until the early 1980s, Cuban prisons still housed more than one thousand political prisoners. Fidel the consummate communist, the redeemer, the dreamer also knew how to crack down hard on his domestic enemies.

Fidel trusts his old comrades, battle-tested and loyal for thirty or more years. The governing system that he created with local power centres, a national assembly, a council of state, plus the multi-tiered Communist Party organisation is impressive on paper. But without his charisma to guide them, and indeed decide for them, no one knows whether or not they will function including Fidel. There is no Fidel II, nor even a reasonable facsimile, waiting in the wings. Fidel's younger brother by three years, Raul, minister of defence and number two behind Fidel, is respected and feared, but he cannot claim his older brother's authority and legitimacy. Raul is a shy man, an unimpressive public speaker who has spent his post-revolutionary years as titular head behind Fidel of Cuba's military apparatus. There are those who worry that Fidel's passing would lead to more, not less, repression under Raul Castro.

Though the first stage of revolution liberated creative energies and celebrated spontaneity, offered utopian dreams and historic fulfilment, the following stage added contrary elements: repression, faceless bureaucracy, and economic folly. Revolution was beautiful, counterrevolution ugly; and the poets, teachers, and engineers who led their classes in high school, showing revolutionary pluck and character, became those on whom it fell to defend the



The beginning of the Cuban Revolution.

process that Fidel had initiated. The need to liberate the island transformed itself into the need to repress the enemies of the Revolution, a motif revolutions have known for two hundred years. Instead of creating a country where the best minds concentrated on planning, culture, and education, they instead fixed on the murky field of national security. Like any national-security bureaucracy, the Cuban state police with Fidel's blessing learned to maintain a crisis atmosphere, not an environment conducive to a socialist society with strong spiritual values.

Fidel, like Louis XIV, is the state. After visiting Cuba on a regular basis for more than thirty years, it seems clear to me that free discussion and sound development, including some Cuban form of political debate and economic restructuring, cannot take place when such power resides in one man with the apparent consent of the majority of Cubans. Fidel never tires of describing how the masses participate in defence, women's organisations, block committees, and so on. But participation without choice is a flawed political foundation.

This article was first published in motherjones.com