



## When Dictators Die

By Mark Falcoff

*The recent passing of Chilean dictator Augusto Pinochet and the events surrounding his last illness, death, and burial remind us that we are living through the last moments of a Latin American drama which began nearly a half-century ago with the Cuban Revolution. The only thing lacking to bring the curtain down once and for all is the disappearance of Fidel Castro, who began the whole business. Though no one knows precisely when that eventuality will occur, the Cuban strongman's unprecedented decision last July to transfer effective power to his younger brother Raúl and his failure to reappear publicly after abdominal surgery after nearly six months suggest it cannot be far off.<sup>1</sup>*

When dictators who have created regimes in their own image and likeness fall gravely ill, their political systems enter a curious state of uncertainty. The condition of the ailing one becomes a state secret. Rumors fuel speculation, hopes, illusions, and often—over the middle and longer term—release pent-up pressures for change. Portugal's Antonio de Oliveira Salazar, who had ruled his country with an iron hand since 1932, fell off a deck chair in 1968 and agonized in private until the end came two years later. During that entire period, ordinary citizens lived in a kind of political limbo. Then suddenly, four years later, the army overthrew Salazar's successor Marcelo Caetano and began a process that ended (in unexpected ways) with the restoration of parliamentary democracy in that country after a fifty-year hiatus.

Spain's Francisco Franco lingered between life and death in the early months of 1975, undergoing a series of hideous operations, expiring only when his family finally decided to disconnect life-support machines. Within three years the country had undergone a complete change of political systems, and within eight

more it would see its first left-of-center government since 1939.

These episodes necessarily tantalize those who look forward to a post-Castro Cuba. Perhaps events in time will justify their expectations. But it might be good to temper such optimism with a few qualitative considerations which make Cuba different from its peninsular cousins.

Before addressing those considerations, however, it might be useful to briefly touch on some of the peculiar aspects relating to Castro's recent retreat from public life. First, his condition (whatever it may be) must have been serious enough to regard the surgery he underwent as life-threatening, or he would not have publicly transferred power to his brother. Even now, a full six months after his operation, his own prognosis, recently released to the Cuban public, is tantalizingly tentative. Second, the speech Raúl Castro made on Army Day last December 2—a speech which can be read as a virtual offer to bury the hatchet with the United States in exchange for support and recognition—would probably not have been made if he, Raúl, regarded the transfer of power as purely temporary. Third, the sudden flying visit of a Spanish physician to attest to the “non-malignant” nature of Castro's illness after weeks of speculation, while momentarily quashing rumors of its mortal nature, poses more questions than it answers: Why was the visit even necessary?

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Who is the doctor? What are his politics? What is his relationship to his hosts? Can such a visit be regarded as purely professional when information about Castro's health is a matter of the highest political importance? While it is plausible that the Cuban regime is not in immediate danger in the event of Castro's death—perhaps, it is in no danger even over the longer term—why is it treating the dictator's health as if it were?

### What Comes Next?

No two historical situations are alike, and there are some pitfalls in comparing Castro's current plight to that of Pinochet, Salazar, or Franco. For one thing, unlike many dictatorships built around an overpowering personality, the Cuban regime has successfully worked out the problem of political succession. While Raúl Castro has remained in his brother's shadow for the last half-century and does not occupy as heroic a role in the historiography of the Cuban revolution, he has long occupied the second position in party and state. He is minister of the armed forces, the most important institution in the country and the one which—through its control of the tourist industry—has direct access to the most important source of national income. Moreover, in many ways Fidel Castro has chosen well. True, Raúl is not charming or charismatic. He will never receive the fawning homage of our mindless Hollywood elite or Western Europe's feckless politicians. But he has no intention of attempting to play a role for which he is not suited. What he does know—like Stalin in the 1920s Soviet Union—is how to acquire vast institutional power quietly. He can be expected to govern in a more collegial manner and push other figures, including civilians, forward to expend their political capital in a difficult transitional period. What happens when he is finally gone—he is seventy-five and thought to have excessive fondness for the bottle—is less clear.

Most of those who would form the nucleus of a Solidarity-type resistance movement have left Cuba, some many years ago, or plan to do so at the earliest possible moment. In retrospect, probably the biggest single mistake the United States made in its policy regarding the island—assuming our primary purpose was to undermine Castro's hold on his people—was its

generous open-door policy toward Cubans dissatisfied with their government. To be sure, in this exchange

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the United States won some important propaganda points in the Cold War and also gained some very valuable citizens. (There is hardly a field—whether it be entertainment, sports, medicine, education, business, the judiciary, or community leadership—in which the Cuban-American community has not made an outstanding contribution. It is one of the most talented, most productive, and most affluent ethnic groups in the United States.) But as things stand today, the dissident movement on the island, though widespread geographically and more extensive than ever before (though no one can say for sure how numerous), is nonetheless isolated, infiltrated by government agents, and largely unknown to the public at large. Thus there is no immediate force and no recognizable figure to challenge the *continuidismo* represented by Raúl Castro's accession.

The very existence of the United States nearby—a force continually depicted in the Cuban official media as overwhelming and unquenchable in its lust to control the world, spending sleepless nights trying to reverse the “achievements” of the revolution—acts as an indirect prop for the regime. Unlike Poland or the Czech Republic or East Germany, the communist state in Cuba is the product of a genuine national experience and exploits many pre-Castro trends and sentiments. (When the bill falls due for the disasters of the last half-century, some of it will have to be laid at the door of irresponsible Cuban intellectuals of earlier periods, such as the late historian Herminio Portell-Vilá, who tirelessly retailed the notion of Cuba as an eternal victim of Spain and the United States.) The fact that U.S. hostility toward the Cuban government has outlasted the Cold War and seems not to respond to any overarching strategic purpose unquestionably feeds a national disposition toward self-pity.

Ordinary Cubans are also said to be frightened of the prospect of abrupt political change on the island which might lead to an invasion—if not of U.S. troops, at least of Cuban-Americans intent upon recovering their lost properties and former influence. While these concerns are understandable, they are also greatly exaggerated. Too much has changed in Cuba over the past fifty years

for the exile community to play a political role there, and Miami's vast economic resources can only be effectively deployed in Cuba if the exile community is willing to play the game by the rules of a regime it understandably despises.

As for fear of the United States, the harsh truth is that Cubans are living in an historical time warp when their country was far more important both economically and strategically; today it has nothing we need or want—not even beaches and warm climate. (One of the most important side effects of the Cuban revolution was the development of a major tourist industry in South Florida, Puerto Rico, and the Dominican Republic.) The present U.S.-Cuban impasse is driven by historical grudges and ideology, not concrete interests.

What could those interests be? Unfortunately, the most important of all is not the restoration of democracy on the island—as desirable as that obviously would be—but the avoidance of a massive migration crisis, which is to say, a repetition of the Mariel boatlift in 1980–81, when thousands of Cubans scuttled to leave the island, including some criminals and mental defectives whom Castro perversely included in the mix. This explains why the Bush administration has validated the 1994 agreements by which we

take a floor of 20,000 unhappy Cubans each year. What Raúl Castro was offering Washington last December 2 was a guarantee that no such crisis would occur as long as the two governments respected each other's broader priorities. After all, Raúl Castro must be thinking, Washington had no problems with Rafael Leónidas Trujillo's long reign in the Dominican Republic or the Anastasio Somoza dynasty in Nicaragua; why can't it make its peace with my leadership in Cuba?

## Raúl's Rules

Apart from implicit assurances to continue the current migration regime, Raúl Castro might well offer some other incentives to the United States, or rather, to U.S. business. Unlike his elder brother, he is said to be impressed by the Chinese model, which combines free markets, foreign investment, and iron-clad dictatorship by the army and the

Communist Party. The lifting of the U.S. trade embargo and the ban on tourist travel would call into existence a new business lobby in Washington—hotel chains, airlines, and exporters of foodstuffs and construction materials—with a vested interest in good relations. Contrary to the persistent delusions of some members of our Congress, the Cuban market as a whole offers very little to the United

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The biggest obstacle to Raúl Castro's apparent dream of a seamless transition to a Communism that works is not, however, U.S. policy or domestic politics, but the fact that Cuba is not China. It is not part of a huge continent home to a millennial civilization, and it can never dream of global influence or power in its own right.

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States; it is a mere speck on the economic screen. But to those directly involved in commerce with the island, it would not be negligible. For example, the port of Jacksonville, Florida, exports a billion dollars' worth of products (mostly foodstuffs) to the Dominican Republic each year, largely to provision its tourist industries. A similar or even larger figure could easily be imagined in the case of Cuba—certainly enough to justify the hiring of expensive legal talent on Washington's K Street to downplay the unpleasant news from Cuba's ghastly prisons.

To be sure, a transition to the Chinese model would require Raúl Castro to negotiate past some formidable obstacles. The Helms-Burton Law (1995) specifically names him as one of two personalities with whom the United States will not negotiate under any circumstances. It also enumerates a series of conditions for the United States to resume relations with Cuba. These would in effect require the

entire dismantlement of the dictatorship and the calling to life of a full-blown democratic system. Indeed, Helms-Burton raises the bar so high as to suggest that its purpose was not so much to bring about democracy in Cuba as to prevent some future (presumably Democratic) administration from making its peace with the status quo. However, the very fact that Raúl is a less flamboyant personality and a (marginally) less delectable target for the wrath of the exile community can be counted among his assets. One or two gestures beyond business or migration incentives—such as the release of political prisoners, or at least an agreement to admit the United Nations' special rapporteur on human rights and instate new rules which respect workers' rights in joint ventures—might well shatter the fragile coalition that buttresses Helms-Burton and lead to its repeal. (As it is, the latest Gallup poll shows a majority of Americans favor resumption of diplomatic relations with the island.)

The biggest obstacle to Raúl Castro's apparent dream of a seamless transition to a Communism that works is not, however, U.S. policy or domestic politics, but the fact that Cuba is not China. It is not part of a huge continent home to a millennial civilization, and it can never dream of global influence or power in its own right. Nor can it wholly insulate itself from the impact of the United States or Spain, much less similar countries nearby to which it is linked by language, customs, and history, such as Mexico, Costa Rica, or Colombia. Even Venezuela, currently in the thrall to a demagogue who claims to want to replicate Fidel Castro's political trajectory, must appear to the island's elite as a dangerously disorganized (that is, open) society excessively awash in consumer goods. Meanwhile, who knows what inconvenient political fallout will spill onto the island with the eventual return from Venezuela of Cuban doctors, teachers, and sports trainers currently seconded there?

In spite of Fidel Castro's best efforts, Cuba is and remains a Latin American country, and it cannot escape

forever the broader trends which have swept and transformed the region over the past half century. Perhaps this is why Raúl Castro feels the time has come to make peace with the United States before the currents of history overtake him and the regime he and his brother have created.

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*AEI editorial associate Nicole Passan worked with the author to edit and produce this Latin American Outlook.*

## Note

1. As this *Outlook* goes to press, it is reported that no high Cuban official—not even Foreign Minister Felipe Pérez Roque—attended the inauguration of Nicaragua's new president, Daniel Ortega, on January 10, 2007. Could it be that the expiration of the "maximum leader" is expected at any moment, and no one wants to be absent from the island during the scramble for power and position afterward?