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The Heroic Myth



“One thing is certain: wherever he may be, however and with whomever, Fidel Castro is there to win. I do not think anyone in this world could be a worse loser. His attitude in the face of defeat, even in the slightest events of daily life, seems to obey a private logic: he will not even admit it, and he does not have a moment’s peace until he manages to invert the terms and turn it into a victory.”¹ The man who wrote these words is the writer Gabriel García Márquez, a longstanding friend of the Máximo Líder. They give us some idea of what may have driven Fidel Castro for more than half a century to outlast his various enemies, opponents and critical friends: namely, a wish to be proved right, to be morally as well as politically victorious. No self-doubt: “his” Cuba for the Cubans! The final verdict on his “mission” would rest with history alone – although Castro also tried from the beginning to keep the last word for himself and to anticipate the verdict of history. In 1953, at his trial for the abortive attack on the Moncada Barracks in Santiago de Cuba which launched his career as a professional revolutionary, he concluded his famous defense plea with the certainty: “History will absolve me!” For García Márquez, “he is one of the great idealists of our time, and perhaps this may be his greatest virtue, although it has also been his greatest danger.”² Yet an even greater danger has always been lurking in the background: the danger of isolation. For only in isolation is there no possibility of contradiction.

With an iron will Castro has survived generations of American presidents, Soviet general secretaries, international leaders of states

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and governments, democrats and potentates, until he has become by far the longest-ruling “number one” of the twentieth century and one of the most interesting figures of contemporary history. Bearded, always dressed in his green uniform, a hero and object of hate in one: this is how the world knows him. Against no one else are so many murder plots supposed to have been hatched. Leaders who are so unyielding, so “unpolitical” in their refusal to compromise, do not usually survive for long in that part of the world; they tend to be overthrown or killed. The fact that Castro is still alive is little short of a miracle. It is due to the alliance of his own well-trained instinct with a ubiquitous security apparatus that is considered among the most efficient in the world. From soon after his twentieth birthday Castro had assassins and conspirators on his trail: political gangsters at Havana University in the late 1940s, henchmen of the dictator Fulgencio Batista, traitors in his own ranks, big landowners evicted during the Castroite revolution in 1959, Cuban exiles in Florida working hand in hand with the CIA and the Mafia. Their bosses, most notably the legendary Meyer Lansky, lost a fortune estimated at more than US\$100 million in hotels, clubs, casinos, brothels and other such establishments – a good tenth of the value of US assets taken over by the Cuban state. That a stubborn farmer’s son from the underdeveloped east of the island simply came and took away this lucrative paradise and sink of iniquity from the fine, upstanding United States; that he went on to humiliate the “Yankees” and President Kennedy in the eyes of the world when they attempted an invasion with exiled Cuban mercenaries in 1961 at the Bay of Pigs; that Soviet nuclear missiles installed for his sake in Cuba nearly led in 1962 to a third world war – these deep narcissistic wounds will never be forgiven, even after his death, by the great power to the north.

There are scarcely any photos that show Castro laughing. Yet the Cubans are a spirited people full of *joie de vivre*. Gabriel García Márquez described Castro as “one of the rare Cubans who neither sing nor dance.”³ He is said to have a good sense of humor – but it is as if he has forbidden himself any public display of laughter or pleasure. Such things are secret, and it is a state secret whether there is a private Castro behind the political Castro.

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Information about himself and his family is filtered for public consumption, becoming partly contradictory or inaccurate. On the whole, then, not much can be gleaned about his personal life. We know that his marriage came to an early end, that he had a few passionate affairs such as those with Natalia Revuelta (once the most captivating woman in Havana) and Marita Lorenz (a German captain's beautiful daughter who was later contracted by the CIA to assassinate him). He has one son from his marriage, Fidelito, a nuclear scientist with a doctorate, as well as several children born out of wedlock and a host of grandchildren. In each case, so it is said, he is a kind yet strict father or grandfather – yet Alina, his daughter by Natalia Revuelta, keeps tormenting him with her hatred. It is well known that Castro likes to go swimming and diving; that he enjoys baseball, sleeps little and has a mania for working at night; that he had to give up smoking cigars for health reasons; that he lives an ascetic existence with few material demands, but is fond of ice cream and likes to cook spaghetti for himself. When García Márquez once found him in a melancholic mood and asked what he would most like to do at that moment, Castro astonished his friend with the answer: “Just hang around on some street corner.”⁴ Did he ever think that perhaps he ought to have become a baseball player? He certainly had the opportunity. For in his student days, he was such a good pitcher that the New York Giants offered him a professional contract. Had he accepted, part of world history would have taken a different course.

Instead, this son of a big landowner from eastern Cuba felt called to lead a handful of comrades – including the Argentinean Che Guevara, later deified as a pop icon of the sixties generation – in a movement to bring down the dictator Batista. Since 1959 Castro has ruled his people like a large family, with the stern hand of a patriarch. The whole island is his “latifundium.” He wants to be seen not as its owner, however, but as its trustee. Under his rule, sweeping reforms have made Cuba's health and education systems unparalleled in Latin America and beyond; and for the first time Cubans have been able to develop a national identity, even maintaining it through a period of political and economic dependence upon the Soviet Union. These achievements, and

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not just the ever-present straitjacket of state security, may be one of the reasons why Castro's system has been able to last so long despite its lack of democratic and material freedoms. For decades now the majority of Cubans have lived with a split mentality: on the one hand, a love-hate relationship with the United States and a longing for the life conjured up by the glitter of Western globalization; on the other hand, admiration and respect for Fidel as their patron even in times of greatest hardship.

Although Fidel Castro seems to have taken more after his father, we should not underestimate the influence that his mother's strict Catholicism and his long years at a Jesuit boarding school had upon his essential character. It is no accident that he has repeatedly drawn parallels between early Christianity and his understanding of socialism, even if he has long been in conflict with the official Church. In this way, he has over the years developed an "ideology" of his own that involves more than just the adoption of Soviet-style Communism. His Caribbean model of socialism is "Castroism," or, as Cubans say, "Fidelism" – a pragmatic mixture of a little Marx, Engels and Lenin, slightly more Che Guevara, a lot of José Martí, and a great deal indeed of Fidel Castro. Martí was the Cuban fighter who, in the late nineteenth century, launched the decisive struggle for the country's independence from Spain; Castro identified with him from early youth and always saw himself in the role of his heir and descendant. "He knows the 28 volumes of Martí's work thoroughly," writes García Márquez, "and has had the talent to incorporate his ideas into the bloodstream of a Marxist revolution."⁵ Martí, who was killed in the early months of war in 1895, was spared from seeing how the United States eventually intervened and, after the Spanish defeat in 1898, established its own dominance over the island. But on the day he died, he wrote with great concern to a friend: "Belittlement by a mighty neighbor who does not really know us is the worst danger for our American continent."⁶ Precisely this is the deeper cause of the Cuban-American and indeed the Latin American dilemma, and it will remain such after Castro himself has departed from the scene.

The Young Fidel



Among Jesuits

The name of the Cuban citizen Fidel Castro first entered the White House files in 1940. On November 6 of that year the young boarder at the Jesuit Dolores College in Santiago de Cuba sent a three-page letter to US President Franklin D. Roosevelt congratulating him on his re-election. Before signing off with a bold flourish, “Goodby Your friend,” he added a personal request: “If you like, give me a ten dollars bill american, because I have not seen a ten dollars bill american and I would like to have one of them.”¹ In the letter Castro stated that he was 12 years old – a claim which, if true, would have meant that he was two years younger than he is officially reported to be.² He received no reply from the president, only a letter of thanks from the State Department. Nor did it contain a ten-dollar bill. No one could then suspect that the boy would grow up and confiscate everything that the North Americans owned in Cuba.

At the very time when Fidel Castro was penning his lines to Roosevelt, the man who 12 years later would embody his enemy-image of an American lackey was making his debut as Cuban president: Fulgencio Batista y Zaldívar, the son of a mulatto worker from Banes, not far from Castro’s own birthplace in Oriente province. Born in 1901, Batista had a reputation for being shifty, ruthless, and open to bribery. In 1933, after the fall of the dictator General Gerardo Machado, this former military stenographer had organized a revolt in a political arena already dominated by

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corruption and violence. At first he kept in the background, but as the American man he controlled the country's direction and advanced to become chief of the general staff. His path crossed with that of the Mafioso Meyer Lansky, and their friendship would later mark the political landscape.

In the space of seven years Batista got through seven puppet presidents, until no real alternative remained but to have himself elected to the highest state office. During the four years from 1940, he was Roosevelt's right-hand man on the sugar island, whose economy was completely dependent on the trickle from the United States. One of the members of the government coalition was the pro-Moscow Partido Socialista Popular (PSP) – a situation accepted by Washington in the context of wartime alliances. At that time Cuba had the most progressive Constitution in Latin America, even if important parts of it (such as the redistribution of land owned by US corporations) were not implemented. After a time-out lasting eight years, when the presidency was assumed by the equally corrupt Ramón Grau San Martín (1944–8) and Carlos Prío Socarrás (1948–52), Batista seized power on March 10, 1952, just before presidential elections were due to be held, and established a dictatorship that played into the hands both of his friends around Meyer Lansky and of the government in Washington. On January 1, 1959, he was finally overthrown and chased from the country by a young revolutionary called Fidel Castro.

Castro's origins had pointed to anything but a revolutionary career. "I was born into a family of landowners in comfortable circumstances. We were considered rich and treated as such. I was brought up with all the privileges attendant to a son in such a family. Everyone lavished attention on me, flattered, and treated me differently from the other boys we played with when we were children. These other children went barefoot while we wore shoes; they were often hungry; at our house, there was always a squabble at table to get us to eat."³

Information issued by the Cuban Council of State declares that the future revolutionary and head of state was born on August 13, 1926; he saw the light of day around two in the morning, weighing just under ten pounds.⁴ According to his siblings,

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Ángela and Ramón, he was already the third natural child of the 50-year-old landowner, Ángel Castro y Argiz, and his housekeeper and cook, Lina Ruz González (who was roughly half his age). Like his brother and sister, he was given the name of a saint, Fidel, and a middle name Alejandro. In fact, Fidel is derived from *fidelidad*, the Spanish word denoting faith or fidelity, loyalty and dependability. “In that case,” he once said, “I’m completely in agreement with my name, in terms of fidelity and faith. Some have religious faith, and others have another kind. I’ve always been a man of faith, confidence and optimism.”⁵ In fact, “the origin of the name [wasn’t] so idyllic. . . . I was called Fidel because of somebody who was going to be my godfather.” This was Fidel Pino Santos, a friend of his father’s, “something like the family banker. He was very rich, much richer than my father. People said he was a millionaire. . . . To be a millionaire in those days was something really tremendous. . . . That was a time when people used to earn a dollar or a peso a day.”⁶

Relations in the family were pretty disastrous. María Luisa Argote, the wife with whom Fidel’s father had two other children (Pedro Emilio and Lidia), seems to have left the home after Fidel was born, and the marriage was later dissolved. Ángel Castro eventually married his servant, who bore him four more children: Juana, Raúl, Emma, and Augustina. Their wedding ceremony – the year of which remains unclear – was performed by Enrique Pérez Serantes from Santiago de Cuba, a priest and friend who, like Ángel Castro and the parents of Lina Ruz, had originally come from Galicia in Spain. It was also he who baptized Fidel – but only when he was sent “at the age of five or six” to stay with a family in Santiago, where he received private lessons. Evidently the lack of a clear family relationship in connection with Fidel’s birth was the real reason why the godfather became unavailable, and why the young boy had to wait so long for the Church’s seal. Meanwhile, Fidel later recalled, “people called me a Jew. They used to say, ‘He’s a Jew.’ I was four or five and was already being criticized. . . . I didn’t know the meaning of the word *Jew*, but there was no doubt that it had a negative connotation, that it was something disgraceful. It was all because I hadn’t been baptized, and I wasn’t really to blame for that.”⁷ Since “my wealthy godfather

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hadn't materialized and the baptism hadn't been performed – I was around five years old and, as they said, a 'Jew' . . . – a solution had to be found for the problem. . . . One afternoon, they took me to the cathedral in Santiago de Cuba, [where] they sprinkled me with holy water and baptized me, and I became a normal citizen, the same as the rest."⁸ Thus, religious prejudice exposed him to discrimination from which he continued to smart in later life, without at first really being able to pinpoint the circumstances that lay behind it. And in the end this helped to ensure that it was his foster-father – his teacher's sister's husband and Haitian Consul in Santiago – who agreed to take on the role of his godfather. It is not clear whether Fidel's real parents were even present at the baptism. Many years later the priest who performed the ceremony, by then Archbishop Pérez Serantes, is said to have saved Fidel's life when Batista's troops captured him soon after the abortive attack on the Moncada Barracks and wanted to make short work of him.⁹ The man in the cassock also became an important link-man for Castro's revolutionary movement, but one day he grew disillusioned with the revolution and was even placed under arrest for a short period.

Castro's home, the "Finca Mañacas" (Palm Farm), nestles in the idyllic Nipe foothills of the Cristal mountains between Santiago de Cuba (the country's second-largest city) and the town of Mayarí, some 12 miles south of the Bay of Nipe. The old "royal road" passes nearby, on its 600-mile way to Havana at the other end of the island. The area, one of the most beautiful in Cuba, had in those days the reputation of a Wild West, where bandits and the armed "sheriffs" of the United Fruit Company imposed the rule of force. The old men from the Buena Vista Social Club made it known all over the world through their song "Chan Chan," which sold millions of CDs in the late 1990s. "Few places in Cuba," writes Hugh Thomas, "were quite so dominated by the North American presence."¹⁰

There, near the village of Birán, lay the Finca Mañacas sugarcane plantation, with its 800 hectares of freehold and another 10,000 hectares on leasehold, whose other main sources of income were livestock and timber, as well as a small nickel mine. On the shores of a small lake, half-surrounded by a palm grove, single-

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and double-storey houses had been built on stilts in the Spanish Galician style; they are still preserved today as a kind of museum. The farm had its own post and telegraph office, a dairy, a general store, a baker's and butcher's shop, a workshop, a school, and a cock-fighting pit. Some "two hundred, perhaps three hundred" families, or "roughly a thousand people," most of them black Haitian laborers and their families working in the cane fields and woods, lived here under the sway of Fidel's father, in simple palm huts with bare clay floors.¹¹ "There wasn't a single church, not even a small chapel," although most of the people were Christian. "At that time, the farmers had all kinds of beliefs. They believed in God, in the saints . . . , in the Virgin. . . . They believed in Our Lady of Charity, Cuba's patron saint. . . . Many people also believed in spirits and ghosts."¹²

The area around Santiago de Cuba has always been a bastion of the Afro-Cuban religions and cults which African slaves brought with them in the form of their own gods and voodoo ceremonies, and they have reacted imaginatively to the constant attempts by the official Catholic Church to suppress the obscure mysticism of their so-called *santería*. Often they have simply mixed their African rituals together with Catholic doctrine and liturgy, taking over Christian saints and attaching them to their own gods or *orishas*, so that Changó, for example, has become Saint Barbara, or Saint Lazarus "Babalu Ayé." "I remember," Castro told Betto, "that, as a child, I heard stories about spirits, ghosts and apparitions. People believed in superstitions too. . . . For example, if a rooster crowed three times without getting an answer, that meant some tragedy might occur. If an owl flew over at night and you could hear the sound of his wings and his screech – I think they called it 'the owl's song' – that too was a harbinger of tragedy. . . . In that sense, the world I was born into was quite primitive, because there were all kind of beliefs and superstitions."¹³

Surrounded by nature and animals, the young Fidel Castro went hunting on horseback in the woods, swimming in the River Birán or skin-diving in the Bay of Nipe; his playmates were the workers' children. It was thus at an early age that he first came into contact with agriculture and social hardship, with the privation that ordinary people experienced during the periods between

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harvests. His own parents learned to read and write only late in life, and the family lifestyle was in keeping with their origins and the harsh environment.

There, we lived among the people, the workers, . . . we even had animals under the house – the cows, pigs, chickens and all. I wasn't the grandson or great-grandson of a landowner. Sometimes the great-grandson of a landowner didn't have money anymore, but he kept the culture of the aristocratic or rich oligarchic class. Since my mother and father had been very poor farmers who managed to acquire some money and accumulate some wealth, my family didn't have the rich people's landowners' culture as yet. They were people who worked every day in harsh conditions. They had no social life and hardly any relations with people like themselves.¹⁴

Fidel's father was a tight-lipped, hard-working man, coarse and quick-tempered, quarrelsome and intolerant of contradiction – the very picture of a patriarch. Well-built and over 6 feet tall, always with a wide hat covering a bald head that his wife and daughters had to keep shaved and polished, he ruled the home and farm with a strict hand. Ángel Castro had been born on December 8, 1875, the son of a miner in the small village of San Pedro Láncara near Lugo in the bleak province of Galicia in North-West Spain, not far from the pilgrims' route to Santiago de Compostela. He first came to know the east of Cuba between 1895 and 1898, where he served as a cavalry quartermaster in the Spanish army during the Cuban war of independence. Since his only prospects back home were those of a day laborer, he returned to the island as an immigrant in 1905, at the age of 30, and worked first in the nickel mines near Santiago and then for the United Fruit Company. Later, he struck out independently (providing transport services for the Company, among other things) and eventually bought some land of his own, so that by 1920 he was already quite well-off. Hugh Thomas thinks that Ángel Castro must have worked very hard, but that “he hacked his farm out of forest, perhaps sometimes on moonless nights, perhaps by stealing title deeds.”¹⁵ According to Fidel, he was “a very active, enterprising person, and he had an instinctive sense

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of organization.”¹⁶ In 1950 his assets were estimated at half a million US dollars.

The mother was the balancing character in the family: she gave her children the closeness lacking in the father, and ensured that, from the early age of probably five, Fidel attended the village school at Maracané near Mayarí. His exceptionally good results soon persuaded the parents to send him to the provincial capital, Santiago de Cuba, where he was given private tuition by a black female teacher. “Those classes consisted of having me study the addition, subtraction, multiplication and division tables that were printed on the cover of my notebook. . . . I believe I learned them so well I’ve never forgotten them. Sometimes I calculate almost as quickly as a computer.”¹⁷ Castro later looked back: “Of all the people I knew, she was the first who was able to motivate me; she gave me a goal and aroused my ambition.”¹⁸

When he was six-and-a-half or seven, he was sent to the “La Salle College” run by the Franciscan order of Marianist brothers in Santiago de Cuba. “I was away from my family, my home, the place I loved, where I used to play, run around and enjoy freedom. . . . [S]uddenly, I was sent to a city where I had a difficult time, faced with material problems.”¹⁹ Above all, he seems to have missed his mother. Clearly, ever since he was a small child he felt closer to her than to his father – perhaps the two males were just too alike, as Fidel seems to have taken after his father in many ways. He too showed an early strength of will, and a similar self-assertiveness and refusal to compromise.

Once, Fidel’s father heard reports that he and his brother Ramón had been behaving like rowdies at the La Salle school – Fidel was even supposed to have returned a teacher’s box on the ears – and was on the point of bringing them back to the farm. It was only their mother’s intervention which prevented things from going so far. “It was a decisive moment in my life, . . . although a boy wasn’t supposed to like studying at that age, I felt that taking me away from school was a punishment I didn’t deserve and I was being hurt, unfairly hurt. . . . I remember going to my mother and explaining that I wanted to go on studying. . . . I told her . . . that if I wasn’t sent back, I’d set fire to the house. . . . I really threatened to set the whole place on fire.”²⁰

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By the time he was 13 he was trying out his first insurrection. Accusing his father of exploiting the sugarcane workers on the farm, he stoked them up and tried to organize a strike. This sudden assault was bad enough in itself, given the taboo surrounding the boss's authority in Spanish American countries, but the fact that the son conducted it against his father in front of everybody led to a deep rift between the two. When looking back at the past, Castro has never done more than make brief mention of his father, whereas he has always expressed himself with great warmth and affection about his mother.

His education in Catholicism played an important role from earliest childhood on. One of the first things we were taught to believe in were the Three Wise Men. I must have been three or four the first time the Wise Men came. I can even remember the things they brought me: some apples, a toy car – things like that – and some candy. . . . We were told that the Three Wise Men, who'd traveled to pay homage to Christ when He was born, came every year to bring children presents.

Santa Claus has never been popular in Cuba, and so instead “children wrote letters to the Three Wise Men: Caspar, Melchior and Balthazar.”²¹

Curiously, the young Fidel spent three successive feasts of the Epiphany not on the family farm at Birán but with the apparently childless foster-parents in Santiago de Cuba, even though his relations with them became increasingly difficult. It was there that he wrote his first letters to the Three Wise Men.

I wrote when I was five and asked them for everything – cars, trains, movie cameras, the works. I wrote long letters to the Three Wise Men on January 5. . . . The disappointments came later. . . . I remember that my first present was a small cardboard trumpet; just the tip was made out of metal, something like aluminum. My first present was a small trumpet the size of a pencil. . . . For three consecutive years, three times, I was given a trumpet; I should have become a musician. . . . The second year, the Three Wise Men brought me a trumpet that was half aluminum and half cardboard. The third time, it was a trumpet with three small keys, made completely of aluminum.²²

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It remains a mystery why Fidel was so often away from home during the Christmas period and the most important feast in the year. Was it because of domestic tensions on the family farm? The young boy must anyway have suffered for a long time as a result.

How much he missed home can be felt in later recollections.

The countryside was freedom. For example, Christmas Eve was a wonderful thing, because it meant fifteen days of vacation – and not just fifteen days of vacation, but fifteen days of a festive atmosphere and treats: cookies, candy and nougats. We had a lot of them at my house. . . . When that time came, you were always excited, from the time you took the train and then continued on horseback until you finally arrived. . . . The roads were nothing but huge mudholes. During the first few years in my house, there weren't any cars or even electricity. . . . Christmas vacations were happy times. Holy Week was another wonderful time, because we had another week of vacation at home. . . . Holy Week in the countryside – I remember from when I was very young – were days of solemnity. What was said? That Christ died on Good Friday. You couldn't talk or joke or be happy.²³

Unlike his father, Fidel's mother was very religious – “she prayed every day. She always lighted candles to the Virgin and the saints. She requested things from them and prayed to them in all kinds of circumstances. She made vows on behalf of any family member who became ill or who was in a difficult situation.” Later, through all the risks of the revolutionary struggle, his mother and maternal grandmother “made all kinds of vows on behalf of our lives and safety. The fact that we came out of the struggle alive must have greatly increased their faith. . . . I could see the strength, courage and comfort they got from their religious feelings and beliefs.”²⁴

Such things leave their mark – especially in a Latin American country, where the mother is often revered as a saintly figure. In the early sixties, after Castro's profession of faith in communism, the Roman Church and the Cuban clergy, still feeling tied to the old oligarchy, came out in opposition to the new regime, while for a long time the only faith he allowed on the island was faith in the revolution. Anyone who declared for the Church was subject to discrimination. Subsequently, in the spirit of his own

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fidelista dialectic, Castro has never tired of pointing up a close affinity between early Christianity and socialism,²⁵ and has placed the heroes and martyrs of his revolution on a level with the martyrs in the history of Christianity. Yet the things that fill the clergy with indignation do not disturb him; in the end, the Church is not God.

It was not easy for him early in life. But although he was looked down upon because of his rural origins, his birth out of wedlock and his late baptism, he managed to pull through. His brother Raúl, who experienced school as a “prison,” with endless “prayer and fear of God,” recalled: “But Fidel was different. He dominated situations. . . . And, every day, he would fight. He had a very explosive character. He challenged the biggest and the strongest ones, and when he was beaten, he started it all over again the next day. He would never quit.”²⁶ He also stood out by his intelligence and dazzling memory. In the end, the brothers at La Salle advised his parents to send him to the Jesuits’ strict and respected Dolores College.

“I never had good marks in maths, grammar and other subjects – except for history, a subject I like a lot, and in geography.”²⁷ At first he was a day boy, but as he wanted to be a boarder he provoked a breakdown in relations with the family where he had lodgings.

I had had enough of that place, and one day I . . . told them all to go to the devil, and entered school as a boarder that very afternoon. This was the second time, or the third, fourth, fifth, I don’t remember which, that I had to take it upon myself to get out of what I considered an unpleasant situation. . . . From then on I definitely became my own master and took charge of all my own problems without advice from anyone.²⁸

Fidel concentrated his physical energies mainly on long hikes in the Sierra Maestra, the range of mountains rising to almost 2,000 meters at the gates of the city, with their humid forest that was often so difficult to penetrate. It was here, nearly 20 years later, that his revolution would begin its triumphal march across the 1,000 kilometers to Havana. “Of the whole group, I was

the enthusiast, the mountain climber par excellence. I did not imagine that mountains would one day play such an important role in my life.”²⁹

In his last year at the Colegio Dolores, Castro recorded, “I was one of the best in my class.”³⁰ This encouraged his parents to send him to the top school in the country, the Jesuit college of Belén (Bethlehem) in Havana, where he eventually obtained his school-leaving certificate. It was the elite school of the Cuban aristocracy and bourgeoisie, a training ground for the rising generation of conservative politicians. Fidel passed the entrance examination in October 1941 and left behind the “Wild West” of the island. In fact, the examination also involved a kind of preliminary test of political talent, at which candidates had to speak freely for ten minutes. Fidel obviously made a lasting impression, and right from the start – as classmates later recalled – the Jesuits detected in him an exceptional gift for political leadership. In the eyes of his examiner, the head of the oratory academy and college “ideologue” Father José Rubinos, he soon developed into the most capable pupil and the best athlete among the boarders.³¹

The fathers were convinced supporters of the Spanish fascist dictator Francisco Franco – anti-Communist but also, for historical reasons, inclined to anti-Americanism. They dreamed of countering US economic imperialism and the influence of Anglo-Saxon culture in Latin America with a renewal of *hispanidad*, and of reviving the traditional ties with Europe in the shape of Franco’s “New Spain.” They brought to life for their pupils such historical figures as Julius Caesar, Simon Bolívar, Benito Mussolini and Francisco Franco, as well as Antonio Primo de Rivera, the founder and spiritual father of the Spanish Falange, whose writings Fidel had to study. But the personality he discovered for himself at Belén, and with whom he would identify for the rest of his life, was the freedom-fighter José Martí, in a sense the George Washington of Cuba. In his writings, Fidel found the roots for his own later development. For what that multilingual writer and staunch republican had championed in the second half of the nineteenth century had been the view that a new political leadership must associate the independence struggle against Spain with a