The Collegians and Castro

Fidel Castro—a liberator or a dictator—a menace or a saint?

Perhaps there is no one true picture of this bearded Cuban rebel who faced almost certain defeat in 1956 when his invading force was cut to 11 men—but who never gave up and swept on to victory in 1959, gathering the strength to rout a modern army of 30,000.

Castro and his “26 of July” movement, so called because he and a handful of rebels attacked a government fort on that date in 1953, stand as an embodiment of freedom to many and as a symbol of evil to others.

Many Americans associate Castro with the famed war trials and with a refusal to permit free elections until 1961. To many Cubans, however, Fidel Castro is their savior—a combination of Jefferson, Lincoln and Eisenhower.

Two young Americans, Jed Johnson, Jr., ’59, Chickasha, and Paul Witt, ’59, Denton, Tex., have taken a long second look at their views of the man and his aims in the light of a seven-day, all-expense paid tour of Cuba provided by the Cuban students association.

The two were among 190 American collegians selected for the trip from some 1,000 attending the National Student Association convention in New York City August 26-31. The invitation to the NSA representatives came after the Cuban student group had found only 210 takers among students of eastern seaboard colleges, who were invited last spring.

On September 5 Johnson, Witt and 188 other young Americans boarded a Cuban airlines turbojet for the 3-hour, 58-minute flight from New York to Havana.

That was the start of seven whirlwind days that were to cause the Oklahomans to reconsider the picture of Cuba they had carried in their minds and to substitute instead a picture in their hearts.

Johnson, a pre-law student, and Witt, a petroleum engineering student, are both slow talking and quick witted. They looked and they talked. They considered and they thought. They hadn’t come home as mere springboards for Cuban propaganda.

“We were down there only a week,” Johnson emphasizes quickly, “and we don’t profess to know all the answers. We are just telling of our impressions and what we saw. We are far from being authorities. It isn’t true, however, that we saw only what the Cuban government wanted us to see. We could go where we wished and talk to anybody, and we did.”

“I have come home with a completely different view from that I held when we left,” Paul said. “I didn’t fully understand what had existed in the past, so I didn’t understand the present.”

Johnson stresses that no one can really hope to understand what has happened or how it is viewed by the Cubans themselves unless they are aware of what the Batista regime was like.

“I went to Cuba thinking that Castro was a dictator like Batista, but I have come home thinking that although he is a dictator, he is the popular choice,” Johnson continued.

The Cubans love Castro; they hated Batista. This is the theme that struck both Johnson and Witt broadside.

“Everywhere you see little cloth dolls of Castro and “26 of July” caps, T-shirts and flags. There are signs across the streets, saying ‘Gracias, Fidel,’” Witt said.

“Everyone I talked to, on the streets or in the country, told me the same story—under Batista life was intolerable. The press attaché at the American Embassy confirmed this. He told us that under Batista armed men would go to a home, knock on the door and shoot whoever walked out, whether it was the one they sought or not.

“I talked to a boy whose brother was killed that way,” Witt added. “They were looking for him, but they killed his brother.”

“It is because the American public is not really acquainted with what went on under Batista that it cannot appreciate that 80 to 95 percent of the Cubans back Castro,” Johnson said. “It is hard to find any criticism of Castro at all. The Cubans have a saying, ‘Jesus is in heaven. Castro is on earth.’ Many hang up pictures of Castro with a halo around his head next to a picture of Christ and consider Castro a saint.”

But Castro is hardly considered a saint by most Americans. Both the war trials, with their implication of kangaroo courtism, the denial of an immediate free election are repugnant to Americans, steeped as they are in the tradition of a slow-moving judiciary.

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"The Cubans do not understand the agitation by Americans for an election," Johnson said. "They believe that he has been elected—through their blood, sweat and tears. I think he should have an election soon. It is necessary if his government is to be understood here, but I think he is popularly chosen now and would be the overwhelming choice in a free election."

The war trials, which broke in big, black headlines across America, were expected and demanded by the Cubans. Castro in 1958 had announced his intention of hunting down and punishing war criminals if he came to power.

The Cubans compare the trials to the Nuremberg trials, but point out that the machinery for their trials was established by Castro before the end of the war and not after the war as was the machinery for the Nuremberg trials.

"They cannot understand how we can criticize them for shooting down war criminals after they had been tried," Johnson said. "The trials prevented an extended period of rioting after Castro's victory. Always before, a revolution was followed by the slaughter, without benefit of trial, of those on the losing side. The war trials prevented this type of pandemonium. To the Cubans the trials were understandable.

"We could never condone such trials here," Witt said, "but to the Cubans they were justified and necessary and done with public approval. They did not start a reign of terror in Cuba. The people are not frightened of torture and death as they were under Batista."

Convinced that the Cubans themselves are happy with their new government, Johnson and Witt see economic policy as the biggest obstacle facing Castro.

Castro has abruptly put into force several wrenching economic changes, which are favored by most Cubans but hated by foreign landholding and business interests. He has cut the telephone rates and apartment rents drastically without consulting the companies or owners. His most far-reaching change is the land reform.

Castro plans to give the land to those who till it, breaking the stranglehold of wealthy landowners. Forty per cent of Cuba's land is in the hands of foreign interests, and 50 per cent is owned by 17 per cent of the Cubans.

"The landowners call it confiscation, but the people are definitely behind the land reform," Johnson said.