

FROM CASTRO TO CASTRO

Raúl and the unbearable shadow of Fidel

OPINION

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Fidel Castro was taking great pains to prepare his 80th birthday celebration. It was set for Aug. 13. Some official note told of "thousands of international invitees." It was to be his apotheosis. In the classic world, the word apotheosis was given to the ceremony that conferred the condition of gods upon a nation's heroes. But Castro couldn't turn into a god. His diverticula -- small ulcers that lacerate the intestine and sometimes cause profuse bleeding -- got in the way. The hemorrhage was so intense that they had to operate on him urgently. Given his age, the surgery was very risky, but failure to attempt it could become an inevitable death sentence.

From that point on, suspicious maneuvers began. After the operation, and on a provisional basis, as the official document stipulates half a dozen times, Fidel Castro transferred his powers and responsibilities to Raúl, his younger brother, an elderly general 75 years old, addicted to whiskey, cockfighting and bawdy jokes. Shortly thereafter, they declared that the *Comandante* was recovering quickly but decreed that his health was "a state secret, so as not to give weapons to Yankee imperialism."

Worse, they drifted into fantasy. Rumors shook Cuba from one end to the other. Some gave him up for dead. Others, probably the most accurate, said he was gravely ill and predicted a slow and painful convalescence from which he would emerge without the physical ability required to regain power. No photos or official medical reports were produced. They were concealing the image of a defenseless little old man, probably intubated, clad in a humiliating hospital gown and beset by an insolent pain in the rectum.

Allegedly, Raúl carefully controls the military establishment. Maybe so, but he doesn't remotely have his brother's charisma and does not relate to the chiefs of staff in the same way. Traditionally, experts have divided the military ranks into *Fidelistas* and *Raulistas*, but there is a fundamental difference: the *Fidelistas* feel subordinated to the Maximum Leader by the implicit recognition of an almost superhuman leadership. Their loyalty is not to the motherland, or to the revolution, or to a mad ideology discredited by reality. Their loyalty is to the undefeatable *caudillo* -- no matter what he does. It's an animal link, not a rational one.

By contrast, the *Raulistas* know that the *Comandante's* younger brother is a small and fallible human being, a little man like any other, with dandruff and halitosis, lacking a grandiose vision of history and himself, without any exceptional attributes. *Fidelismo* is the glory of an epic deed. *Raulismo* is a system of bureaucratic and economic complexities, conceived to retain or acquire privileges.

But that's not the only difference. Fidel Castro has segregated a peculiar form of government based on his quarrelsome personality and his showmanship. Down the years, almost 50 now, he has quarreled (or reconciled) with everybody and has turned those squabbles into national crusades that usually culminate in never-ending processions where the Cubans, sweaty and tired, shout slogans in unison and wave little flags. To Fidel, who never got past the stage of college capers, governance is just that: a tumult, a deafening protest and a big show. During his first big speech after the revolution triumphed, a white dove landed docilely on his shoulder in what appeared to be a divine blessing.

Raúl is different. He is terse and rational, his speeches are brief. And if a dove flies over him, it will surely defecate on his head. Raúl, for example, would never stage the show with young Elián, or launch barrages of rafters toward the American coast, or call former Argentine President Eduardo Duhalde a "boot-licker," or brand former Spanish Prime Minister José María Aznar "a pocket-sized Führer." His vocation is order and efficiency. In the 1980s, he fell in love with the Chinese reformist model and instructed some of his officers to create enterprises within the Army that could be managed with capitalist criteria. Fidel, a stubborn collectivist, forced him to drop those plans. For sure, Raúl now dreams about reprising that old project.

The irony is that neither of them is governing today. Fidel can't do it because he's bound to a bed with catheters, sentenced to silence, a horrible punishment for a man who suffers from chronic oral incontinence. But Raúl can't govern either, because he cannot take any initiative that goes counter to the opinions of his brother. That paralyzes him. That's why he remains silent. That's why he dares not publicly assume command, much less begin giving orders or transmitting a personal vision of the conflicts or their solutions.

He does not fear the Yankees' reactions but that of Fidel, an implacable and irascible brother, ever dissatisfied, who has not stopped intimidating him for one minute of his life and now watches him through the fog of pain killers from a bed at the CIMEQ hospital in Havana. He knows that if he takes one false step and the *Comandante* manages to come back, Fidel will send him into retirement or punish him in some ostensible and humiliating manner.

We're not looking at a provisional government but at an impasse. Raúl prepares to assume command, but for that to happen he first has to read into the TV cameras his brother's death notice, and there's no way to predict when that will happen. Simultaneously he fears and desires Fidel's death. Today, he's the most daunted and saddest man in Cuba.