

Cuba 'marching ahead' without me, Fidel Castro says

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HAVANA --

Fidel Castro said Wednesday that Cuba is "marching ahead" without him in power, insisting that he is consulted on all important decisions but giving no hint about when -- or if -- he might retake office after stepping down one year ago.

But he was decidedly less optimistic about the island's chances of improving relations with the United States, writing in his latest newspaper essay that "no one should entertain the slightest illusion" Washington will negotiate with Cuba.

Castro, who turns 81 this month, has not been seen in public since July 31, 2006, when he stunned Cuba and the world by issuing a proclamation stating that he had undergone emergency intestinal surgery and was stepping down in favor of his younger brother, Raúl.

"Today, I am bombarded with questions as to when I will take up again what some call power," he said in the essay, titled *Eternal Flame*, published Wednesday in the Communist Party newspaper Granma.

"Raúl has already responded that, as I recover, every important decision is consulted with me," he wrote. "What will I do? I will fight tirelessly as I have done my entire life."

Castro said he was satisfied to see Raúl Castro, the Communist Party and other groups "march on, guided by the unshakable principle of unity."

He said Cubans must be ever ready to beat back any foreign invasion: "It is our duty to work untiringly to strengthen our defensive capability and preparedness."

In a speech marking Cuba's Revolution Day last week, 76-year-old Raúl Castro extended an olive branch to the United States, hinting that his government might be willing to negotiate with Washington once President Bush leaves office.

But the elder Castro flatly dismissed that idea Wednesday.

"No one should entertain the slightest illusion that the empire, which carries the genes of its own destruction, will negotiate with Cuba," he wrote, calling the U.S. government "the empire" and blasting its efforts to promote a "transition to democracy" in Cuba as "apocalyptic" and "foul and insane."

Recovering in an undisclosed location, Castro's condition and exact ailment are state secrets. He has looked stronger and more alert in government videos and photographs meant to show his steady recovery.

While he has not appeared in public, he has written more than 30 published essays in recent months.