



**MYTHS OF THE ENEMY: CASTRO, CUBA
AND HERBERT L. MATTHEWS OF *THE NEW YORK TIMES***

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ABSTRACT

Fidel Castro was given up for dead, and his would-be revolution written off, in the months after his disastrous invasion of the Cuban coast in late 1956. Then a *New York Times* editorial writer named Herbert L. Matthews published one of the great scoops of the 20th century, reporting that not only was Castro alive, but that he was backed by a large and powerful army that was waging a successful guerrilla war against dictator Fulgencio Batista. Matthews, clearly taken by the young rebel's charms, and sympathetic to his cause, presented a skewed picture. He called Castro a defender of the Cuban constitution, a lover of democracy, and a friend of the American people: the truth as he saw it.

The image created by Matthews stuck, helping Castro consolidate his power and gain international recognition. US attitudes toward the conflict in Cuba changed, dooming Batista. But after the triumph of the revolution, US views again abruptly shifted and Matthews was blamed for having helped bring Castro to power. The perception that Washington had been hoodwinked by Matthews and State Department officials sympathetic to Castro led to the development of the hard line which still guides US-Cuban relations.

RESUMEN

En los meses posteriores a su desastrosa invasión de la costa cubana en 1956, Fidel Castro fue dado por muerto y su revolución en ciernes, descartada. Entonces, un escritor de editoriales del *New York Times* llamado Herbet L. Matthews publicó una de las grandes notas exclusivas del siglo XX, indicando que Castro no solamente estaba vivo sino que también respaldado por un ejército grande y poderoso que llevaba adelante una exitosa guerra de guerrillas contra el dictador Fulgencio Batista. Matthews, claramente cautivado por los encantos del joven rebelde y bien predispuesto hacia su causa, presentó una imagen sesgada. Llamó a Castro defensor de la constitución cubana, amante de la democracia y amigo del pueblo norteamericano: la verdad tal como la veía.

La imagen creada por Matthews quedó establecida y ayudó a Castro a consolidar su poder y ganar reconocimiento internacional. Las actitudes de los Estados Unidos contra el conflicto en Cuba cambiaron, sellando la suerte de Batista. Pero luego del triunfo de la revolución, los puntos de vista estadounidenses abruptamente volvieron a cambiar y Matthews fue acusado de haber ayudado a llevar a Castro al poder. La percepción de que Washington había sido cegada por Matthews y los funcionarios del Departamento de Estado proclives a Castro llevó al desarrollo de la línea dura que todavía rige las relaciones entre los Estados Unidos y Cuba.

In the earliest days of the Cuban Revolution, when Fidel Castro's very survival was in doubt, a veteran war correspondent of *The New York Times* named Herbert L. Matthews—by then an office-bound writer of editorials—was drawn into an extraordinary series of events that helped bring Castro to power and set the United States and Cuba on their long decades of suspicion and antagonism. Ever since Matthews's initial encounter with Castro in the mountains of southeastern Cuba in 1957, there has been a debate—both journalistic and political—about his motives, his biases, and his inadequacies as a neutral observer. There have been questions about how his writing may have influenced American foreign policy by creating popular, though inaccurate, images of Castro and his movement for the American public. And there has been lingering uncertainty about whether Matthews had been duped by Castro or was simply a hopeless romantic caught up in an extraordinary moment of history.

But in all that time there has been no question about the impact of Matthews's interview with Castro in the Sierra Maestra and the strange relationship that developed between the rebel and the reporter. His reporting on Cuba proved that Matthews had become a journalist who was not content to simply report events but had to interpret them and place them in context, a journalist who relied more on access to key players than access to key documents as a source for sensitive information, a journalist who wasn't afraid to take a position that neither his editors, nor his competitors, could agree with, marking him as something of a rebel too. In the end, the most important question to ask about Matthews's work in Cuba at the beginning of the Castroite revolution is not why he did what he did but whether he got the story right. And now, nearly half a century after

The Times printed his articles, it is clear that on the broad outlines of Castro's aims, Matthews had, indeed, gotten it right. Ironically, given how he thought of himself as an interpreter of events, rather than a mere recorder of them, Matthews's major failing was in incorrectly analyzing the context of what was happening in Cuba, and how it would be perceived in the United States. That in turn contributed to misguided perceptions in Washington, where poor policy decisions were being made by a cadre of officials with little or no understanding of Latin America and its deep resentment of the United States.

This paper will assess three main themes: the ways in which Matthews's journalism influenced public policy and discourse in the United States; the way the pervasive Cold War mentality influenced Matthews's journalism; and the way that both Matthews's journalism and the Cold War influenced Castro's revolution.

POLICY AND THE PRESS

It was a series of unrelated happenstances that led Matthews to travel clandestinely into Oriente Province, the crucible of all of Cuba's revolutions, in early 1957 to interview Castro. He stayed there just a few hours, but that was enough time to get what has been generally regarded as one of the great scoops of the 20th century, great in part because of the spectacular nature of Matthews's exclusive, and great in part because of the time in which it occurred.

Matthews's interview with Castro took place at a singular moment in American history, a time when innocence flirted with treachery and post-war America leaned into the winds of the Cold War. For three hours on that winter morning in February 1957, these two indomitable and restless men, brought together by fate, held together by a

common need to exploit each other, crouched beneath the wild brush of the Sierra whispering so the soldiers hunting them wouldn't know they were there. They talked of many things—freedom, tyranny, justice—but mostly of revolution, and what Matthews heard was like balm for what he called his “old and war-weary soul,” which had been badly wounded decades earlier by the defeat of the idealistic but doomed Republicans he had so enthusiastically covered during the Spanish Civil War. This was his chance to redress that defeat and to ensure that this time the revolution succeeded. To do so, Matthews had to first resurrect Castro. At the time his initial article was published, the world believed that Castro had been killed during a botched invasion of Cuba three months earlier. Matthews would reveal that Castro was alive and, by the words he used, make it seem that he led a powerful rebel force whose eventual victory was almost certainly assured.

“The personality of the man is overpowering,” Matthews wrote in that first article, which was published on the front page of the Sunday paper on February 27, 1957. “It was easy to see that his men adored him and to see why he has caught the imagination of the youth of Cuba.” He called Castro “the flaming symbol of the opposition to the regime,” and stated without qualification that “thousands of men and women are heart and soul with Fidel Castro and the new deal for which they think he stands.” He gave Castro room to describe his aims as “fighting for a democratic Cuba and an end to the dictatorship,” and he allowed the rebel to declare boldly, “You can be sure we have no animosity toward the United States and the American people.” Negative references were few, and most were aimed at Castro's shaky economic ideas.

His heroic portrayal of Castro as a scruffy mountain rebel leading an insurrection of Cuban youths against Batista was the image on which American perceptions of the revolution would be widely based for several years. By highlighting Castro's promises to restore Cuba's constitution and hold free elections, his articles and their prominent display in *The Times* (two of them on the front page, a third inside, and all three heavily promoted within the paper) increased pressure on Washington to stop shipping arms to Batista. The Cuban Army's bombing of civilians in the Sierra Maestra was the last straw; a decision was made, in March 1958, to suspend shipments. It was widely viewed as a signal that the tired dictator had lost the support of the United States and could not survive. State Department officials parroted Matthews's assertion that Castro was not a Communist nor was he likely to lead a Communist revolution. Matthews's generally glowing portrait of Castro, combined with Batista's increasingly violent attempts to put down the rebellion, also made it easier for Washington to drop the search for an alternative to both Batista and Castro, until it was too late.

Before the interview, Castro had been seen as a virulent anti-Batista insurrectionist, but certainly not the only one, nor even the one most likely to gain a substantial enough following to pose a real threat to the regime. The violent nature of his 26th of July Movement frightened many Cubans who preferred civil resistance. Castro's group was the most fanatic, but it was not the most numerous, nor the most powerful of those struggling to overthrow the dictator. The 1953 attack on the Moncada barracks had established his reputation on the island. But after he was released from prison in 1955 and exiled in Mexico, other groups, including the Revolutionary Directorate, gained strength in Cuba and became legitimate contenders for leadership of the insurrection.

Publication of the three articles based on Matthews's interview with Castro introduced a new dynamic to the budding rebellion. It greatly raised awareness of Castro in the United States, both broadly across the population and specifically in Washington, where the Cold War was in high gear. Latin dictators in Argentina, Colombia, and elsewhere were being toppled, and although Batista was cooperative, and liked by big American business, his hard-line regime gained him little sympathy or support. The impact of the articles in Cuba was different because Castro was already so well known. By raising the ire of Batista—who at first denounced Matthews and insisted the articles and accompanying photographs were frauds—and focusing the efforts of the Army on eradicating the remnants of Castro's small landing group, Batista in effect signaled Castro's growing importance to the rebellion. Castro's group used the articles as proof of their growing strength, and in time both fundraising and recruitment benefited substantially from them. Ernesto "Che" Guevara, who was already with Castro in the Sierra when the interview took place, said that Matthews's work was more important to the rebels than a victory on the battlefield. The attention Castro gained from the articles influenced others as well. The Revolutionary Directorate, which also had embraced violence, had long planned to attack Batista's presidential palace and kill the dictator. Just two weeks after the articles were published, the Directorate launched its ill-fated attack. The insurrectionists were stopped before they could reach Batista, and their leader, Antonio Echevarria, was killed.

Matthews added to the initial impact of the articles with sharp attacks on Batista in the editorial pages, where he wrote nearly all of the *Times*' opinion pieces on Latin America. Taken together, Matthews's writing on Cuba had a decisive impact on Cuba's

relationship with the United States. “Seldom has a single writer so influentially set the tone—at least as perceived by a broad cross-section of its interested readership—toward a person, movement or historical phenomenon,” wrote political scientist William E. Ratliff in *The Selling of Fidel Castro*. The British historian Hugh Thomas declared that Matthews’s writing had “immediately made of Castro an international figure.” In 1960, *El Tiempo* of Bogotá referred to Castro’s victory as “the Herbert Matthews revolution,” a common sentiment throughout Latin America.

Matthews was no Young Turk looking to establish his reputation at *The Times* by risking his life in Cuba. He was a middle-aged editorial writer who had already accomplished so much in a long career at the paper that he would have been considered one of the century’s most influential, and controversial, newspapermen even if he had never met Castro. He hadn’t really tracked down Castro; Castro had sent for him, or any foreign correspondent willing to tell the world that he was still alive. *The Times*’ resident correspondent in Havana, Ruby Phillips, had originally been offered the interview but had turned it down because she didn’t think it was worth the risk of losing her access to the Cuban government or being kicked out of Cuba all together. It was true that Castro had deliberately misled Matthews into thinking he had a much larger army than the ragtag bunch of rebels who followed him into the mountains, but it hadn’t been as simple as marching the same men round and round in front of the reporter. Documents show that the American embassy also was convinced that Castro’s group was powerful enough to pose a real threat to the regime. Matthews had gone to the embassy for a briefing before heading into the mountains.

Matthews represented an important moment in journalism, the point where reporters were being transformed by technology and rising expectations from mere recorders of events to interpreters of the world. The immediacy of radio and television had accelerated the pace of news gathering and contributed to a substantive change in the way news was reported. There was no longer time to allow days to pass before reports could be filed from a battlefield. To have an impact, reporters had to be on the scene immediately, relaying the truth, *as it was known at the time*. This meant getting to the people who were making the decisions or giving the orders and getting them to reveal their thinking. The danger, of course, is that the reporter becomes reliant on the source, who may be motivated to reveal information that is not necessarily accurate. The great clash between Matthews and Ruby Phillips grew in part from this distinction, and created the untenable situation in which two veteran journalists filed conflicting reports from and about Cuba. She was an old school reporter who presented just what she saw without delving too deeply into what it meant. Maintaining access and her entrenched position in Havana influenced her early reporting on the revolution and made her reluctant to give the rebels too much of a chance for success. But once Castro triumphed, she exposed his abuses and his hypocrisy and was eventually expelled. From the hours of his first interview in the Sierra, Matthews was pushing journalism in a different direction, one shaped by interpretation, explanation and, ultimately, the personal opinions of the writer. Matthews put what he saw in Cuba into the perspective of history, which could make what he wrote seem off base at the time he wrote it, while Phillips's reports, though pedestrian, seemed to catch the events of the day more accurately. Both relied on access—Phillips to Batista, Matthews to Castro. Each paid for their actions. Phillips was

censored by Castro and eventually was thrown out of Cuba. Matthews became so closely identified with Castro that he surrendered his objectivity.

But for a brief time after his Sierra interview appeared, Matthews basked in the broadest adulation of his profession. He became one of the first great print superstars, and one of the last print giants to stand center stage in the spotlight before television became the most glamorous news platform. He was a bona fide celebrity who appeared on *The Tonight Show* when the biggest audience most print reporters ever had was the crowd at the local saloon. His adventures in the Sierra Maestra were celebrated in song and poetry, including an elegy written by Florence Ripley Mastin of Piermont, N.Y. and submitted to a poetry editor at *The New York Times*:

“Your ancestors fought like Castro and like him
In peril of your life, you braved the guns
Of night patrols. In dripping forests dim
With rain, when the icy stream of danger runs
In the veins you found him—and your story
Of his fight adds luster to Old Glory.”

The newspaper rightly declined to publish the poem, but Matthews kept a copy of it in his files until he died. A man of no small ego, Matthews saw his escapade as a personal triumph over what he considered to be his too-early banishment to the editorial board of *The Times*. He was 57 when he climbed the Sierra to meet Castro, who then was only 30, and doing so proved he could still scoop the best of a new generation of correspondents. When he won the George Polk Memorial Award for international reporting in 1958, the citation from the Overseas Press Club read: “The articles of his exploit played down the danger, a natural reaction of a dedicated reporter who has covered more than his share of war and revolution.”

His fame in the United States was widespread, but in Cuba, where the gaunt, bespectacled American was a major celebrity, it bordered on hysteria. “I have never expected and certainly never wanted to be placed in the position of a public idol like Clark Gable or Frank Sinatra,” he wrote in a memo to his editors after his first return trip to Cuba in June 1957. “I have discovered on this trip that there is nothing more embarrassing or more tiring than to be a hero and I found it a very painful as well as naturally gratifying experience.”

Other writers who followed Matthews into the Sierra or who attempted to profile the budding revolution in the late 1950s came back with sympathetic portraits, a few of them even more stirring than Matthews’s had been. Norman Mailer did not trek into the Sierra but when he said of Castro “the ghost of Cortéz had appeared in our own century while riding Zapata’s white horse,” his hyperbole probably exceeded Matthews’s own. However, some observers did pick up worrisome signs of conflicts in Castro’s personality. In June 1957, just three months after Matthews’s articles made it seem that all of Cuba supported Castro heart and soul, Carleton Beals wrote in *The Nation* that while some Cubans considered Castro a great liberator, “others see in him a more ruthless and less predictable dictator than Batista.”

But in the days before cable TV and 24-hour news coverage, it was Matthews’s depiction of Castro that had greatest impact. It would be hard to overestimate the significance of Castro appearing exclusively on page one of *The Times*’ in 1957. As the paper came off the presses, Castro’s dark past was largely replaced in the United States by instant legitimacy. Matthews made Castro into a likeable rebel, a roguish character

with a beard and a youthful perspective who became a laudable symbol of defiance throughout the world.

After the Sierra interview, both Castro and Matthews became heroes in each other's homelands as well as in their own. Later both were transformed into international villains. Castro took on the mantle of bombastic herald of a new age of rebellion and revolution, an enemy of America that the United States itself had helped create. After his brief gust of glory, Matthews was called a traitor who had deliberately misrepresented Castro to further his own personal and political ambitions. Obsessed with Castro and the revolution, Matthews swallowed the criticism and continued to write what he saw happening there, claiming at times that he was the only one able to actually identify the truth.

COLD WAR PARANOIA

The unfolding tragedy was shaded by the deep haze of the Cold War. At Senate Judiciary Committee hearings looking into the Cuba situation, witness after witness roundly denounced Matthews, implying his guilt by association with Fidel. Senator Joseph R. McCarthy had convinced many people that the State Department was infiltrated by Communists, and later Senators James O. Eastland and Thomas J. Dodd attempted to prove that Matthews had shaped the State Department's misguided views on Cuba and Castro's embrace of Communism.

Matthews never had many friends in the media; he wasn't the kind of correspondent who liked to warm bar stools or tell war stories. When diplomats and government officials attacked him, few of his colleagues came to his defense. Some

joined the attack. *Time* magazine became a particularly harsh critic, saying of him: “Dazzled from the start by the dashing revolutionary, Matthews fell into the trap that everywhere awaits the unwary reporter: he let emotional bias suspend his judgment.”

Matthews did have a few supporters. Most were academics, which is what he once thought would be his own destiny. He was a member of the advisory board of the *Hispanic American Report*, published by Stanford University, which once said in his defense that blaming Matthews for what happened in Cuba was “as absurd as blaming a meteorologist for a thunderstorm.” While he complained that after the Cuba controversy erupted he sometimes was treated like “an untouchable” within *The Times*, Matthews could generally count on the support of John B. Oakes, the powerful editor of *The Times*’ editorial page, who continued to defend him even after Matthews died in 1977. Just months after he had his own run-in with the publisher and was forced to resign from the editorial page, Oakes publicly complained about *The Times*’ obituary of Matthews, which had prominently mentioned the controversies over his coverage in Spain and Cuba. “If Herbert Matthews was one of the most ‘controversial’ journalists of his era,” Oakes wrote in a “Letter to the Editor” that was published in *The Times*, “that is only because nothing arouses more bitter controversy among a newspaper’s readers than honest reporting that contradicts their emotional preconceptions.”

Matthews was glad to have the meager votes of confidence he received during the troubled times of his life, but he was not afraid to stand alone in support of what he had written. As other Castro sympathizers turned critical of the revolution following the first executions of Batista supporters in 1959 and the later confiscation of American property, Matthews continued to defend Castro and to deny that he, or the revolution, was

Communist. As scorn was heaped on him, he lashed out at other journalists, editors, diplomats and State Department officials who didn't see things his way. He repeatedly declared American coverage of the Cuban Revolution to be the "worst failure in the history of American journalism," and he warned one of his editors in 1960 that unless Americans understand what is happening in Cuba from the Cubans' point of view, "the conflict between us will remain insoluble and perhaps even become a catastrophe."

Matthews and *The Times* were sharply criticized for the way Castro was covered. William F. Buckley Jr. famously quipped that Castro could claim "I got my job through *The New York Times*." Matthews's closeness to Castro became as much a liability as an advantage. Rather than represent the sensational peak of a long and distinguished career, his interview with Castro became a black hole in his life, drawing in his reputation and his vitality. Matthews's name was ruined, and *The Times*, which had initially played up his coverage of Cuba, was considered guilty by association. The State Department went from agreeing with Matthews's assessment that Castro was not a Communist, to branding Castro the most dangerous foot soldier in the Communists' global conspiracy. And since Matthews had helped him gain power, he became a convenient and very public scapegoat.

Matthews's private papers, which he donated to Columbia University, show that it angered him to be seen as a fool or, worse, a traitor who had helped the enemy. In the paranoid Cold War atmosphere of the early 1960s, Matthews's name was mentioned prominently in every one of a series of blistering Senate hearings about the Communist threat. His work stirred up such intense emotion that, for a time, he feared for his life. A formerly classified document released under the Freedom of Information Act showed that

Matthews received a death threat so credible that J. Edgar Hoover's F.B.I. felt obliged to offer him a bodyguard. Other released documents showed that the F.B.I. had tailed Matthews for years and tapped some of his phone conversations because Hoover considered him "an apologist for Castro's government."

His editors struggled to support him during the barrage of bad press, but the criticism heaped on him tainted *The Times* as well. His editors eventually determined that Matthews had committed professional suicide and for the good of the paper had to be taken off the story. "Herbert has been unfairly maligned by many people, but to a great extent he has brought about this state of affairs himself by his subjective and at times emotional style of reporting," the *Times*' foreign editor, Emanuel R. Freedman, wrote to Editor Turner Catledge in 1962. "Herbert has destroyed his usefulness as a reporter on Cuba."

The *Times*' archives indicate that Matthews's coverage of Cuba triggered a bruising battle between those editors who doubted Matthews's objectivity, and those who defended his integrity. Eventually, he was prohibited from writing about Cuba in the paper's news columns, a painful blow to a man who'd devoted his life to *The Times*.

Both Matthews and Castro had been driven by dreams and personal beliefs to help shape the great events of their day. They ended their relationship as they began it, strangers linked by fate. Castro once told a confidant that he was "sick and tired of that old man who thinks he is my father. He is always giving me advice." The turn that their relations took foreshadowed the collapsing relationship between their two countries. Relations between the United States and Cuba had been strained since the 19th century, and were nearly fractured by the US intervention at the beginning of the 20th century.

Castro effectively mined a vein of ill-will that ran through Cuban society, making of the United States Government a devil the Cuban people would fear and hate. Castro's ability to use anti-Americanism to unite Cuba bedeviled American officials, up to and including President Eisenhower, who seemed oblivious to the troubled history of the two nations. He never could understand why Cubans did not appreciate the United States more. Matthews's early articles affirming Castro's democratic leanings fueled a suspicion in Washington that the Cuba had betrayed the revolution and misled the United States, creating a legacy of mistrust that continues to poison the 90 miles between Key West and Cuba today.

Other journalists have been rebuffed by history for their empathy with revolutionary movements. The Pulitzer citation of another Timesman, Walter Duranty, bears an asterisk acknowledging deep doubts about the sincerity, and veracity, of his work in the Soviet Union in the 1930s. His record became an open target for Ukrainian nationalists who to this day, say they will not rest until his 1932 Pulitzer Prize for international reporting is revoked. *The Times* itself has admitted that Duranty's work suffered from serious lapses and that his dispatches glossed over or simply ignored the roots of the famine that would kill millions of Ukrainians. The Pulitzer Committee recently determined that Duranty's work in the Soviet Union falls far short of contemporary standards, but said that because a committee 70 years ago recognized the work as significant, the prize should not be revoked. The decision implied that Duranty's flawed work had itself become part of the history of that time.

There have been others. Edgar Snow's sympathetic and generally unquestioning picture of the Chinese Communists, Richard Harding Davis's biased reporting on the

Spanish-American War, John Reed on the Bolshevik Revolution: the list of journalists whose work overseas was as significant historically as it was suspect journalistically is long and still debated widely. Inevitably, Herbert Matthews's name is included on that list, though it may not necessarily belong there.

Nor should Matthews be grouped with fabricators like Stephen Glass of *The New Republic* or the latest *Times* reporter to shame the paper, Jayson Blair, whose deceptions were elaborate and deliberate. Matthews was not trying to curry favor; even after he broke with Castro, his pivotal role early in the revolution guaranteed him free access. He was prohibited from continuing to report about the revolution when his own editors—not foreign leaders—stopped him. Matthews wrote sympathetically about Castro not because he was worried about being kicked out of Cuba but because journalism was a crusade to him, a weapon for righting wrongs and tipping power towards the powerless.

Matthews well understood the dynamics of power and powerlessness. He grew up a non-observant Jew in a New York of workmen's circles and socialist meetinghouses, the son of a tailor and grandson of a Jew from a 19th century Poland that was occupied by Imperial Russia. Although he had the benefit of a Columbia University degree, a reverence for Dante, and a fascination with European history, his academic training came after he had served in France with the US Army Tank Corps. During the 1930s and 40s, he observed great movements that promised to elevate workers and the poor, and he gave his heart to them, sometimes at the expense of his own well being. In Rome during the war, when food was scarce and an American correspondent's PX ration card was more valuable than gold, Matthews used his entire weekly allotment to buy groceries that he then carried up six flights of stairs and gave to an Italian friend who was dying.

He had a soft spot for underdogs, and an apparent blind spot for tyrants. “I make no apologies because once I thought I admired Fascism,” he wrote in 1946. Matthews did not fear his biases because he was certain that they never clouded his judgment or swayed his pen. As he neared death in 1977, weakened by a bad heart and recurrent tuberculosis that he believed had been triggered by his trip to the Sierra, Matthews insisted that he could not divorce his feelings from his reporting. “One must *feel* the Cuban Revolution in order to understand it,” he wrote. And he believed that his bias, which was natural, had never interfered with the truth of what he wrote. Despite all the honors and awards he received through his long career as one of the 20th century’s most accomplished foreign correspondents, he often said he could truly boast of just one thing: that he never wrote anything he didn’t believe was the truth.

RAMIFICATIONS IN CUBA

The half-century that has passed since his famous interview with Castro has not disproved Matthews’s boast about the truth. Certainly some of what he wrote turned out to be jaw-droppingly misguided. But at the time he wrote it he believed it to be true, even when, as he would say, the truth ran counter to where his heart truly lay. He did not perceive anything he wrote as dishonest. But neither was what Matthews wrote always the truth.

There seems little doubt that in the days before the triumph of the Cuban Revolution on January 1, 1959, Matthews had been, if not dazzled by Castro, then mightily impressed by him, so much so that his empathy for the rebel and his movement took control of his pen. “I was moved, deeply moved, by that young man,” Matthews

confessed in *The Cuban Story*, published in 1961. In his 1969 biography of Castro, he compared the rebel leader to Oliver Cromwell and called him “one of the most extraordinary men of our times.” When challenged by critics who felt he had tried to make Castro a hero, Matthews claimed he had only reported what he had seen. He considered factual errors, like wildly overestimating the strength of Castro’s forces and the number of telescopic rifles the rebels possessed, to be simple mistakes that did not materially affect the story.

Later, however, when the question of whether Castro was a Communist caused hysterics in Washington, Matthews presented so complicated a response that his answers were often seen as mistruths and deliberate distortions. They were actually carefully nuanced explanations of complex political ideas. “There was no error in writing what I did in my story about the ‘democratic’ ideals of the guerrillas because the statements accurately reflected what Fidel said and—in my opinion—believed,” he wrote. “Communism,” he insisted, “was not a cause of the Cuban Revolution; it was a result.” He held to his theory that Castro had not been a Communist when he took power; he insisted, in fact, that the Cuban Communist Party had played no role in the revolution. But Matthews believed that Castro was willing to call himself one after the United States tried to corral the revolution. Embracing the Soviet Union became a palatable alternative, though not one that reflected any profound ideology that Castro held.

“The Cuban Revolution has taken a Marxist-Leninist form as a man would don a suit of clothes,” he wrote in *Revolution in Cuba: An Essay in Understanding*, his last book, which was published in 1976, a year before he died. “It is the man who counts, not the clothes. What matters in Cuba today is the revolution, not the label.”

But in Washington it was the label that counted, and every time Matthews wrote that Cuba was not Communist his detractors multiplied like ants on an overripe mango. Confusion was rampant through the first years of the revolution in large measure because Castro's own ideology was still undergoing violent transformations, and only the demagogues could be certain of what was happening. Given the tangled history between the two countries, few Americans, or Cubans for that matter, could believe that Castro would actually attempt to distance himself from the United States by inviting in America's greatest enemy. And yet they watched as he confiscated American property, broke up large landholdings, and refused to call elections, just like a Communist.

There is no doubt about the direction Castro eventually took but his Communist roots remain unclear more than 45 years after Matthews's first articles appeared. "Castro really never became a 'communist' at all," Georgie Anne Geyer wrote in her biography, *Guerrilla Prince*. She, like Matthews, believed that Castro came to use Communism to stand up to the United States. "He did not adapt himself to an ideology; he found an ideology to adapt itself to him," Geyer wrote, decades after Matthews had said essentially the same thing. In the end, it matters little whether Castro was or wasn't a Communist. What does matter is the way he unleashed a sweeping social revolution and kept it alive with rants against capitalism, democracy, and American power.

Matthews struggled against the public role thrust on him as Castro's inventor even as he basked in the implied glory and implicit responsibility of being the reporter who had a hand in reshaping not only the history of Cuba, but of the United States and the western hemisphere. Matthews insisted publicly that he had done no more in his articles than to give Castro the opportunity to be himself, and he rejected suggestions that the

publication of his articles had been of immense help to the Cuban insurrection. And yet, when he pleaded with his editors to be allowed to return to Cuba in 1958, he asked them to recognize the “unavoidable fact that I, as the inventor of Fidel Castro, am caught up in the chain of events occurring in Cuba.” In 1959, he proudly accepted a medal from Castro formally declaring him a member of the “Sierra Maestra Press Mission,” and he safeguarded the medal for the remainder of his life.

Matthews wrote about Cuba well before the tragedies of Vietnam and Watergate drove a wedge between reporters and government officials. During his day, correspondents worked closely with the government and the line between the press and public policy sometimes blurred. He regularly briefed his friends at the State Department, as did other correspondents. When Earl E.T. Smith was named the new ambassador to Havana, his superiors instructed him to get briefed by Matthews before heading to Havana, which he did. After Matthews was no longer permitted to write about Cuba in the news pages of *The Times*, he continued to try to mediate between Washington and Havana. Just before the missile crisis reached its riskiest stage, he asked State Department officials to help him get into Cuba. In exchange, he promised to brief them on everything he learned. He wanted one more chance to make a significant contribution toward an understanding between two capitals, and two peoples, that were growing increasingly distant from each other. But before the government could decide what to do, Matthews’s editors forbade him from entering Cuba.

In the end, it was that kind of activism, that need to be involved in altering the political landscape, that became Matthews’s undoing, though he never regretted it. Given the choice between explaining the world and changing it, Matthews, like some other

journalists of his and subsequent generations, damned passive objectivity and chose to be an actor, wearing his heart clearly on his sleeve and never apologizing for it. “True journalism, like true historiography, is not mere chronology, not...simply...describ[ing] the to describe the event exactly as it happened,” he wrote in 1946, more than a decade before he climbed the Sierra Maestra in search of Castro, “but placing it in its proper category as a moral act and judging it as such.” As he neared the end of his life, Matthews hadn’t changed his views at all. If anything, they had become more direct: “I would always opt for honest, open bias,” he wrote. “A newspaperman should work with his heart as well as his mind.” He never conceded the immense danger of permitting his personal views to slither into his reporting, nor did he acknowledge the dangerous consequences, for newspapers as well as for nations, of creating myths.

Would the world be different if Matthews had not gone to the Sierra to hear Castro’s revolutionary confession? Consider that if it had been some other correspondent who was less willing to allow Castro to shape his ideas, or perhaps someone who wrote for a less influential publication than *The Times*, Castro’s image might have been questioned more critically, which could have weakened his chances of being seen by US officials as the unquestioned symbol of the anti-Batista forces. Had Matthews’ portrait been less heroic—as one written by Ruby Phillips would likely have been—there might have been less pressure on Washington to withdraw support from Batista. Had Matthews not been such a lightning rod for criticism, and *The Times* so reluctant to be seen as aiding the Communists in Cuba again, the newspaper’s editors would not have been so reluctant to reveal in advance details about the Bay of Pigs invasion, which President Kennedy said would have kept him from allowing the plan to proceed. Matthews did not create

Fidel from Sierra mud; he did not endow him with the fanaticism and incredible ability to survive by which he eventually triumphed over Batista. But he did create for Americans the image of a youthful rebel valiantly fighting from his mountain hideout against a brutal dictator. And the revolution turned on images, not battlefield victories. After Matthews made Fidel the symbol of the revolution in the United States and much of the West, Castro's most important mission was simply to survive.

Square of shoulder and somber in demeanor, over six feet tall, hurtfully thin, with a low voice and war weary, hazel eyes, Matthews lived a life of intellectual passion and commitment that brought him a constant stream of both elegy and infamy, and committed him to the circle of hell reserved for those with unshakeable faith that they alone are telling the truth. Despite his awards and all the criticism directed against him, the taciturn loner with the bearing of a professor—who only enjoyed the camaraderie of other men in combat—never veered from referring to himself as, simply, a newspaperman, a surprisingly down-to-earth title for a man who treated himself to good cigars, fine wines and Saville Row suits, and who sometimes used a walking stick presented to him by Mussolini. The last line he wrote after 45 years in the employ of *The Times* was a summing up of that perception of himself, and of his life: “A newspaperman walks with the great of many lands, but he must go his own way—right to the end of the road.”

In Castro, and in Che Guevara, Juan Almeida, Camilo Cienfuegos, and the other bearded rebels he met in the mountains, Matthews believed he had at last found true revolutionaries who could carry out the shattered legacy of the Spanish Civil War—as he had interpreted it during his time covering the war. To him, it was natural for a correspondent to want to take sides, and to want his side to win. That is how he had

worked in Spain, and it was how he went about his business in Cuba. “I feel about Cuba somewhat as I did about Spain,” he wrote in his private notes in 1958. “One sees the tragedy and wants to share it, to be there, to share, if only as a sympathizer, what the Cubans are suffering. This is a personal reaction having nothing to do with the professional and more scientific desire to see what was happening.”

He espoused a journalism of compassion, believing that foreign correspondents were obliged to try to see what was happening in the countries they covered from the point of view of the people living there. What others objected to as bias, he offered as clarity; what others saw as personal involvement, he believed was a greater search for truth. For Matthews, the central dilemma of finding the truth was not simply a matter of retaining objectivity. Rather, for him what was most important was being comprehensive, which required the correspondent to see things from another’s point of view. This approach presaged the most controversial reporting on Vietnam, through the Watergate period, and right up to the current reporting on the situations in Afghanistan and Iraq. Such multi-layered reporting isn’t usually well received by public officials, nor always understood by readers. However, it explains a great deal about what Herbert Matthews was trying to do.