Leonard Ray Teel

Reporting the Cuban Revolution: How Castro Manipulated American Journalists.

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On June 5, 1958, seven months before he became Cuba's master, Fidel Castro sent a letter to his secretary and companion Celia Sánchez containing an ominous prophecy. He was furious: General Fulgencio Batista's army was bombing civilian targets in Sierra Maestra, the rebel leader's hideout, with USAF-branded rockets that had found their way onto the island despite the arms embargo imposed on the Cuban government by the Eisenhower administration. "I have sworn to myself," Castro told Sánchez, "that the Americans are going to pay dearly for what they are doing." He then wrote, in words that would often be quoted by historians and journalists trying to prove Castro's early "anti-imperialism," "When this war ends, an even bigger and longer one will begin for me: the war I am going to fight against them. I realize that's going to be my true destiny" (quoted in Rebeca Chávez, "Releyendo una carta de Fidel: La casa de Mario," *Cuba Debate*, July 8, 2015).

In his otherwise well-informed and very readable *Reporting the Cuban Revolution*, historian Leonard Ray Teel does not mention that letter, even though it would have helped him establish that the real Castro was probably very different from the romantic figure often portrayed in the American press in 1957–58. Teel suggests that Castro successfully hid his Communist inclinations and true plans for his country from the U.S. correspondents who visited him in the mountains of eastern Cuba during his 25-month war against Batista's dictatorship. However, he does not prove that Castro was a convinced, committed Communist when he met the *New York Times*'s Herbert L. Matthews in February 1957, or even when he talked to the *Reader's Digest*'s Dickey Chapelle just a few weeks before his victory on New Year's Day 1959. Nor does he make a convincing case to support the notion that the smart and seasoned American journalists who interviewed the young rebel leader did not see "what was" a future dictator, but saw rather what they "wished to see," a people's hero. Teel attributes that apparent failure to the abandonment by American reporters (mainly Matthews) of the basic principle of journalistic objectivity in their search for a scoop.

Were they fooled by Castro, who already in 1958 harbored strong anti-American feelings, as the letter to Sánchez seems to indicate? Whether Castro and his younger brother and eventual successor as Cuba's leader, Raúl, were already Communists during their Sierra Maestra campaign remains obscure, though if they were, the American correspondents who trekked their way to Cuba's highest peaks were not the only ones the Castro brothers deceived. At that point,

their rebellion, as the *New York Times*'s skeptical Homer Bigart described it, was "a middle-class reform movement" rather than an "economic and social revolution," and received financial support "mainly from wealthy and middle-income groups" (p. 121). If he was a Communist in 1958 and never really meant to restore the Constitution, call free elections, and return to civilian life ("building roads and hospitals in Sierra Maestra," as he ludicrously told *Time-Life*'s Sam Halper [p. 139]), Castro not only lied to the American reporters, but also did an exceptional job of hiding the truth from the vast majority of his countrymen. It's hard to blame a few American journalists for failing to report what millions of Cubans did not see either.

Teel's book starts and ends with a strange ceremony that took place in Cuba's embassy in Washington in April 1959, when Castro himself presented a gold medal to the 13 American journalists who had traveled to Sierra Maestra to report his revolution. Those journalists, particularly Matthews, the *Chicago Tribune*'s Jules Dubois, and CBS's Robert Taber, helped Castro bypass Batista's censorship and in the difficult early months of 1957 gave his squalid army a political prominence and international visibility they had not yet earned. Castro's gratitude was surely genuine, even if he chose a typically bombastic way to show it. *Reporting the Cuban Revolution* might not provide evidence of Castro's great deceit, but that's something other books, probably less thrilling than this one, could do. Teel does a great service just by bringing together the Cuban adventures of those remarkable American journalists in a style that is more journalistic in its own right than academic, and that is not a bad thing at all. It also has impeccable timing—released as Americans begin to slowly rediscover that little, noisy island just ninety miles south of Florida. Future editions of the book should amend a series of typos and minor mistakes (such as Castro's birthday and Guevara's surname) that an American reader might not notice, but a Cuban surely would.

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