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## The legacy of Fidel Castro

By Kamal Wadhwa

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What do we know about Fidel Castro? That he was raised in a wealthy Cuban landlord's family with a devout Catholic schooling by priests who were his teachers. Given his aristocratic upbringing, he would have probably succumbed to elitism and the easy life he had not taken his teachers seriously. In essence, Castro was really a defrocked priest who took upon himself the protection of his congregation when the Church would not!

Castro's mentoring by priests gives a valuable clue to his later development as a devoted scholar who valued his education very greatly and who also attached a lot of importance to physical culture and the care of the body. That probably explains Castro's later success as a revolutionary thinker and ideologue as well as a military commander who could cope equally well with books and battles.

There has been no leader in history of Castro's ilk who has applied his education and academic knowledge so rigorously both to solving the practical and humdrum problems of daily life and the task of waging a revolution, often by violent means. He was a professor, a military genius and a political supremo - all three personalities combined into one!

All the qualities and attributes of Castro's personality and character would have served no purpose had he not possessed a sensitive conscience that knew pain and suffering and could empathize and sympathize with the most wretched of mortals no matter what their station in life. It may be that he has survived into his eighties because he always did the right thing and took the proper course of action whenever and wherever necessary.

Castro really defeated America through the power of his books and multifaceted learning because most Americans do not believe in book learning. Ironically, that very great education as a lawyer was acquired at Harvard University and he used it to topple the dictator Fulgencio Batista. Castro managed to loosen Batista's hold over Cuba by rhetoric and action on a very high intellectual and military plane, respectively.

Moreover, Castro was deeply aware of the Latin American revolutionary tradition as bequeathed to him by José Martí and other great men. By seeing himself as part of a distinguished past and a Latin American world wider than Cuba, he could draw comfort and solace that other Latin Americans before him had sacrificed their lives to take up the cause of Latin American humanity.

That is why Castro never took pity upon himself despite the dangerous life he lived, with political controversies, jail sentences and often exile - everything that his enemies could impose upon him. His family life was more often than not in shambles and some of his most dear ones defected to America from where they launched vociferous campaigns to malign him.

Had not Castro led an uprising at that critical juncture in Cuban history to challenge and uproot Batista, Cuba may well have become a banana republic like Panama or Nicaragua. Batista was mired in sleaze and corruption and totally caught up with the pleasures of the flesh. Even the Americans were tired of him and wanted him out.

That Cuba has survived as a socialist state without any great pain or suffering is a measure of Castro's intellectual genius and political acumen. At a time when other Latin American countries are fast succumbing to capitalism and free market systems, Cubans now are reasonably well-fed and tolerably clothed and housed. If America has its way, then Latin America will once again become its backyard - a playground for the rich and famous.

With its vast oil riches and membership in the NAFTA (North American Free Trade Association), neighboring Mexico has yet to benefit its people despite government rhetoric about the mythical progress it has attained. Indeed the Mexican government has acted against its own national interest by seeking to cut subsidies on food targeted for the poorest of the poor Mexicans.

And what about the periodic incursions of American forces into Mexican territory in hot pursuit of fugitives without a thought for international law and the rules that bind all nations in such cases?

Without doubt, Latin America is in deep turmoil indebted as it is to American banks and commercial institutions. And with the loosening up of Latin American economies, the power and financial muscle of the MNCs is beginning to be felt by the rank and file of South Americans as the former launch their media blitzes and sales pitches to sell goods and services that no one really needs.

Most North Americans see Latin America as a potential basket case and a debtors' club. Witness the help the United States is giving Colombia to curb its drug barons. Bolivia still kowtows to the United States as long as the problem of its external debt to American banks is not resolved. There is also just that danger that the native economies of Latin America will be greatly damaged or uprooted to make way for foreign goods and services that are being marketed by Western MNCs. In time, the means of production and distribution may well fall to the MNCs and cripple Latin America for generations to come!

But with all its problems, there is no great fear of Latin Americans dying of hunger and starvation because the Vatican is there to feed and supply Latin America if the need arises. However, as long as Castro lives that will not happen. Other Latin American leaders have been too deeply impressed by Castro's Cuba and its secular traditions so as not to succumb to charity and the open gutter it leads to.

Latin America can still free itself from the trap it is caught in if its leaders adopt Castro's revolutionary consciousness and use his methods to fight the creeping and ugly capitalism as is

represented by the WTO - a covenant like no other covenant in history! So great is the global destabilization that has been caused by it!

Millions of young hearts are beating for Castro, especially in the benighted regions of the Third World. Everywhere young people are tired of earlier revolutionary role models such as Gandhi, King and Mandela. They think it is cowardly not to fight; bullets must be fought with bullets, not with acts of forgiveness and compassion.

Like Castro, these deprived youths respect books and education, but they don't want to wait for decades and the eternity it takes to bring about non-violent change. They want satisfaction and change in the immediate future - during their own lifetimes and not for their children, but themselves!

Fidel Castro's legacy is practically relevant today because the Third World and parts of Europe are caught in the grip and vise of capitalism and free market forces. While in the past the State was generally the dominant player in these economies, it is now beating a hasty retreat as the pressure on it to deregulate mounts - equally by domestic companies and foreign MNCs!

In the new era we are witnessing today, moneymaking is the sole and prime motive even in the poor man's life because everything that matters to him is factored with cold cash considerations in mind. And as our planet faces increasing resource scarcity, tomorrow's world will be gripped by economic mania and material obsessions!

What we see around us is a crude cultural barbarity where people choose comics over books, lifestyle magazines and paperback novels over true, authentic literature and fast food over home-cooked meals - all because the inferior habits do not take much effort and do not unduly tax the body or the mind!

Castro's Cuba has shown that high culture can co-exist with bread and butter reality; that ideas and ideals are as important to socialist countries as output and investment, and that romance and happy endings, too, exist under socialism. This is not what the West would want to believe as it would lose its motive power and purpose to demonize socialism and the East.