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**Fidel Castro's Feat**Historian and essayist Rafael Rojas is a professor and researcher at the Center for Economic Research and Teaching (C.I.D.E.) in Mexico City.http://www.pbs.org/wgbh/amex/castro/subimages/hr_greyline_5_1_5.gifCubans of my generation either feel hatred or love for Fidel, or perhaps a mixture of both. We do not see him simply as a European or American head of state, questionable, sometimes ridiculous and always exposed to criticism. He is the living legend of a revolutionary era. A solemn and heroic presence with an almost familiar, intensely affectionate relationship with the people. Cubans like me, born a little before or a little after 1959, neither criticize nor judge Fidel: we adore him or despise him, loathe or idolize him. We were born in a country where a revolution, headed by him and personified by him, radically transformed the social order, presenting itself as a symbol of the rebirth of the Cuban nation.The revolution cut the umbilical cord that tied us to our past in order to make it easier to accept our present: first it rendered us weightless, then drew us in. Ignorant of the past we were taught to hate it; unaware of the outside world, we learned to distrust it.Our vision of Cuba and the world was shaped by Fidel Castro's simple and unique interpretation of our history: Our country had been a colony of Spain for 400 years, and then for fifty years a neo-colony of the United States. Until finally in 1959, with the triumph of the revolution, Cuba achieved true independence . But in Fidel's narrative the revolution accomplished even more than that; along with sovereignty came social justice. Socialism and nationalism became the cornerstones of a simple and effective ideology which, fused with the personality of Fidel Castro, has sustained the Cuban political system for more than forty-five years.We are not only the sons and daughters of Fidel's narrative, but also of the symbols he created. As children we witnessed his triumphant entry into Havana; we saw him climb on a tank while leading Cuba's defense during Bay of Pigs; stood motionless while he addressed tens of thousands people at the Plaza de la Revolución and watched our parents applaud him, and shout in awe "Fidel, for sure, hit the Yankees hard," or simply chant "Fidel Fidel Fidel Fidel! in a long reiteration of the name, drowned at the end in a frenetic ovation. And up there, at the zenith, Fidel answered this demonstrations of love with a smile, rubbing his hands together, as if applauding himself.We were characters in a fictional play, acting out a script conceived by the ambitious mind of a messianic *caudillo* leader. Our education was based on the certainty of the historic exceptionalism of the Cuban revolution. An accident of geography -- Cuba's proximity to the United Sates -- was to be regarded as a blessing, bestowing upon us the mission of redeeming not just our island, but the rest of the world, from Yankee Imperialist domination. We were taught that we were different because we were better: more independent, more just, freer, more cultured. We imagined that being Cuban -- that is, the inhabitants of Fidel Castro's nation -- was a privilege, and that the entire world, enraptured by the great feat of the revolution, was grateful for our mere existence.Our parents and grandparents, who did know the rest of the world and knew the past, underestimated the enormous talent of that Napoleon of the Caribbean. They handed over to him their judgment, their role as protagonists of history, entering into a symbolic transaction that opened the doors and windows of our homes to the mythic presence of the Commander in Chief. Once embedded in the hearts of our families, Fidel displaced our parents, enamored our mothers and wives, fascinated our brothers and children. His infinite public power was built on this intimate affection by a majority of Cuban families. A large picture of Fidel hung in the family room next to the photographs of grandmothers or grandchildren, perfectly integrated into the lives and affections of the people. Cubans believed in Fidel as one believes in a saint who performs the miracle of achieving national greatness.As a child and an adolescent I went many times to the Plaza de la Revolución to hear Fidel speak. Then we lived in El Vedado, and the families in the neighborhood, impelled by the Committee for the Defense of the revolution, joined in the street to walk together to the Plaza. I recall those pilgrimages as ceremonies of reconciliation when the hatred and the envies, the resentment for the vigilance and denunciations that poisoned the life of the neighborhood, were set aside to attend to that revolutionary communion headed by the Commander in Chief.From the ground, the figure of Fidel dwarfed the giant white statue of Martí. His body, agitated in front of the microphones, was like a distant green dot. The voice, amplified by dozens of loudspeakers, could be heard clearly, though each phrase left behind an echo. I remember the silence, the seriousness with which my parents listened to his words -- the solemn stance, head tilted down, arms crossed in front, a position that we children imitated without clearly comprehending Fidel's words, and the shame of being reprimanded when in the middle of that political mass I dared laugh or play with another child.I was eight years old when I first understood a speech by Fidel Castro. It was dedicated to Salvador Allende, right after the military coup in Chile in 1973. Fidel's words, weaving together the history of the bombardment of the Presidential Palace (La Moneda), Allende's resistance along the hallways and on the stairs, with his rifle, with his gun, with that helmet incongruous with his intellectual's glasses, and finally, the suicide in his office, bloody, covered in the Chilean flag, had a profound impact on me. Fidel was a speaker who knew how to provoke an emotional reaction with the drama of politics.I also remember a phrase spoken by Fidel in honor of the innocent victims of a terrorist bomb which blew up a Cuban civilian plane. It is a phrase that today seems purple, even pathetic -- but at that time it was engraved in my ten year old brain: "when an energetic and manly people cry, injustice trembles."Between 1985 and 1990, while studying philosophy at the University of Havana, I began to hear Fidel's words differently. I began to discover contradictions, to reject his posturing, to recognize his subterfuges. Above all I was bothered by his arrogance, disguised in demagogic exaltations of the "dignity" and the "courage" of the Cuban people.Once I saw Fidel up close. Several pioneers were holding an honor guard in front of Che Guevara's beach house in Tarará. Fidel stopped at the entrance, shook our hands, patted our heads, and went in, followed by the usual entourage of journalists and bodyguards. When I evoke that moment my memory recalls the pink color of that skin, in perfect contrast to the olive green of his uniform and the softness of his hands. A color and texture incompatible with the harsh exercise of power against all odds. In 1990, shortly before emigrating to Mexico, I met Fidel personally and had a conversation. I had just returned from Moscow and Fidel was curious about *perestroika* and *glasnost*. Fifteen years after that encounter I recall not the white beard, colored gray, nor the expressive eyebrows which so easily transform his face from charm to irritation, but those reddish spots dotting his forehead and his temples. Evidently, with time, my eyes have opened to the flaws in that soft and pink skin -- deceitful texture of a frenetic will to dominate, just as the consciousness of a free man opens to the vices and the cunning of a *caudillo*.When one begins to distinguish between a democratic and dictatorial regime, it is inevitable to associate Fidel Castro's image with the longest personal dictatorship in the history of Latin America. |

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