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SUBJECT Interview with Fidel Castro

DAN RATHER: With the change of leadership in Moscow, last week was a momentous one in the communist world. We spent part of it in Cuba with Fidel Castro, the only leader in the Soviet bloc who chose not to attend the funeral of Konstantin Chernenko and to forego the opportunity to meet with Chernenko's successor, Mikhail Gorbachev.

What Fidel Castro chose to do instead was to appear on U.S. television, on a broadcast he knows President Reagan watches.

With his official interpreter sitting in with us, for three hours we talked, and then we walked all around Havana. Here, then, some of that talk, some of that walk, and then back to the interview.

What are the chances that this new generation of Soviet leader will make the Soviet Union less adventuresome in Latin America?

FIDEL CASTRO: Adventuresome?

RATHER: Less adventuresome.

CASTRO: What are the adventures of the Soviet Union in Latin America? Nicaragua? El Salvador? Do they have soldiers in Nicaragua? Does the Soviet Union have anything to do with El Salvador? Come on. This is a myth.

RATHER: You say it's a myth?

CASTRO: Yes, definitely. It's a myth, totally.

RATHER: Mr. President, the President of the United States believes it.

CASTRO: Well, what we can we do? At times I have said, talking with some North Americans, that there are many beliefs in the United States, and at times there are few ideas. And what is asserted once is considered as an august truth.

I can assure you that the Soviet Union has had absolutely nothing to do, ever, with El Salvador.

Now, in the case of Nicaragua, it's the same.

RATHER: What am I to say? The President of the United States, the Secretary of State, the Secretary of Defense, the National Security Council Adviser, when I get back they're going to say, "Listen, he gave you propaganda, nothing but propaganda. That he and the Soviets are deeply involved in Nicaragua, deeply involved in El Salvador."

CASTRO: That I'm making propaganda?

Look, I will say something. I believe that there is a misunderstanding concerning Cuba's positions. If the starting point of the idea that we are anxious to improve relations with the United States, that is a mistake. If the starting point is the idea that it is necessary for us really to improve situations with -- the relations with the United States, that we have economic needs, political needs, or needs of any other type, that is a mistake.

I will tell you the truth. It seems to me that the President of the United States is being ill-advised. I'm not going to say that he's ill-advised in every case, but in some things I think it is obvious that he's ill-advised.

If not, the President of the United States would not have ever compared the volunteers of Lafayette with the mercenary criminals of Somoza who are waging the dirty war against the Nicaraguan government. The Sandinistas are defending their homeland against a foreign aggression.

RATHER: If you hold to this position, President Reagan holds to his position, sooner or later there's going to be a bloodbath.

CASTRO: I will ask a question, for the improvement of relations between the United States and Cuba. Nixon established relations with Mao Tse-tung. And I ask, Nixon's ideas, were they the same as those of Mao Tse-tung?

So that we do not, we do not have to have the same ideology, nor the same points of view -- that is, the United States and Cuba -- for us to improve relations.

RATHER: A philosophical question, if I may. Let me use a hypothesis and get your reaction to this. You studied philosopher.

CASTRO: A bit.

RATHER: Well, this will not take a doctorate in philosophy to answer.

You have made of Cuba one of the most dependent nations on earth. You may not like it, there's no joy in it, perhaps, for you, but you depend on the Soviet Union for money, for food, for medical supplies, for military hardware, for your very survival.

Now, with that hypothesis, is it worth it for Marxism to do?

CASTRO: I agree with you, but on the inverse. Because we are the most independent country of the world because we do not depend, not even in the slightest, on the United States. And what country, at present, depends less on the United States than us?

RATHER: More of what we talked about after some of that trip around Havana.

One of the first things you notice about Fidel Castro is how little security he has. Few leaders anywhere move among their own people with such relaxed confidence. Some of this may be because the best of the opposition has left Cuba or is in jail. But Castro is popular with his own, and the light security around him is part of the proof.

Talking, at length and passionately, is one of Castro's trademarks. Another is his curiosity. The man constantly asks questions about home life and families, recipes and local gossip. It's all done with jokes and good humor.

"What's your favorite TV show?" he asks a woman. He grimaces at her reply. "That's a lousy program," he says, "and she likes it best."

Havana seems a little cleaner, a little brighter than it was a few years ago. But the overall economy may be even tighter. You can see it on the streets. Plenty of buses, mostly from the East bloc, a few from Japan, but very few private cars.

In an economic system able to survive only through heavy infusions of Soviet money, private cars are strictly a luxury, partly because fuel is too precious to waste on them.

We stopped in Old Havana, all that's left of Cuba's long colonial past. Castro was eager to show it off. Some of the old buildings are being refurbished and archaeological sites restored. In one of the old buildings that once was a governor's house and church, we talked of religion and the Pope. Castro was raised a Roman Catholic. Now, he says, he criticizes the Pope when the Pontiff supports the status quo, praises him when he speaks out for the poor. The church in Cuba is free, Castro insists, as long as it doesn't meddle in politics.

And he had a question for me about my questions on his relationship with the church.

CASTRO: You're talking to me about soul. I want to ask you whether you're playing the priest here and whether you're asking for my confession. What's the difference between a confessor and a journalist?

RATHER: Ahh, the journalist is an honest broker of information only.

CASTRO: Then I prefer the confessor. Because the confessor, when he's asking for your sins, doesn't publish them on TV.

RATHER: You look to be a healthy man. You've certainly been vigorous in this interview.

CASTRO: You too.

RATHER: But let me tell you what I hear. I don't make this up. A doctor, New York heart surgeon, there's a report that he came down to examine you in Cuba last year. Is this true?

CASTRO: Me?

RATHER: Yes.

CASTRO: A U.S. doctor?

RATHER: Yes, a U.S. doctor.

CASTRO: Never.

RATHER: How about an eye doctor? There are reports circulating that...

[Confusion of voices]

RATHER: Well, in the case of the eye doctor...

CASTRO: Eye doctor?

RATHER: Eye doctor. The report was that you even checked in to Columbia Hospital.

CASTRO: Look, this might be a double or someone. Where does that come from?

RATHER: You came to power as a young man in your thirties, 32. You're now 58.

CASTRO: Right.

RATHER: When you look in the mirror in the morning, you see gray in your beard and in your hair.

CASTRO: Yes.

RATHER: Does it bother you? Do you say to yourself, "Ooh, I'm getting old. I'm really getting old"?

CASTRO: Look, I will tell you what happens, which is something interesting. I, myself, have asked: when will I get used to the idea that I am really getting old? I have not let myself get full with the glory or self-sufficiency, lack of modesty, that of feeling superior to others. I have not let myself follow the question of the conception of what is called the drug of power, the drug of dominance. I never speak of power because I never relate power to myself.

RATHER: You observe President Reagan. You've never met him, have you?

CASTRO: Through television.

RATHER: What do you think of him?

CASTRO: On this judgment? On his policy? Or what?

RATHER: Number one, what do you think of him as a man, as a person? And number two, what do you think of him as a --and his policies?

CASTRO: I will start with the first, with respect to policy. Well, we have great differences and total disagreements because of his conceptions on socialism, because of his crusade, his idea of a crusader. That it's an aberration. That is, that it is something that must disappear from the face of the earth. I think these are things that belong to other times. It's not

something realistic or rational.

Some people make criticisms, comments that whether Reagan had not -- had only read a book, or one book, that Reagan despised intellectual work, or that Reagan was not intelligent. Really, I don't believe that. I don't believe it.

The differences I have with him are political differences, differences in conceptions and of ideas. That's where the great difference lies. But I do not underestimate him.

RATHER: Through all of those hours of talk, I kept thinking, "Why is Fidel Castro doing this, and why is he doing it now? Is he genuinely worried about the new generation of Soviet leadership and what it will do?"

Frankly, I don't know. But I did come away with the impression Castro really believes that maybe, just maybe, President Reagan will decide to try with Cuba what Richard Nixon did with China. And without changing his ideology, Fidel Castro wants to give that the best chance he can.