

[1957 | 'Fidel Castro Is Still Alive'](#)



David W. Dunlap is a Metro reporter and writes the Building Blocks column. He has worked at The Times for 39 years.

Accompanying the Nov. 21 obituary of Richard Eder, a former foreign correspondent and drama critic, was a remarkable photograph by Jack Manning of Mr. Eder earnestly taking notes in the back seat of a vintage Oldsmobile while Fidel Castro pontificated up front.

Perhaps the shutter was snapped at exactly this moment, described by Mr. Eder in an article for The Times Magazine ("Cuba Lives by Castro's Moods"): " 'Even your agriculture in the United States will be less scientific than ours,' he boasted, swinging around in his seat."



Herbert Matthews at Mr. Castro's camp in the Sierra Maestra in 1957.

The film wasn't fogged; the atmosphere was smoky.

Credit Herbert Matthews for The New York Times Caption

In any case, the photo was a reminder of the sometimes close connection between Mr. Castro and The Times, going back to a worldwide scoop in 1957 by our correspondent Herbert L. Matthews.

Actually, let's back up two months, to Dec. 2, 1956. The United Press filed a story from Havana that The Times ran at the top of Page 1: "Cuba Wipes Out Invaders; Leader Is Among 40 Dead."

"Cuban planes and ground troops wiped out a force of 40 exiled revolutionaries who landed on the coast of Oriente Province tonight. Government military leaders said Fidel Castro, leader of a revolt against President Fulgencio Batista, was among those killed."

And that was what the world believed until Feb. 24, 1957, when The Times published an electrifying account by Mr. Matthews. He had emerged a week earlier from the Sierra Maestra, where he posed as a rich American sugar planter to avoid suspicion at army checkpoints in order to reach a well-hidden encampment deep in a tropical forest more Brazilian than Cuban:

Mr. Matthews secured Mr. Castro's signature

— dated "Febrero 17 de 1957" —

as proof that he had been with him.

The Times ran this facsimile on its front page of Feb. 24, 1957. Caption

"Fidel Castro, the rebel leader of Cuba's youth, is alive and fighting hard and successfully in the rugged, almost impenetrable fastnesses of the Sierra Maestra, at the southern tip of the island."

"This is the first sure news that Fidel Castro is still alive and still in Cuba. No one connected with the outside world, let alone with the press, has seen Señor Castro except this writer. No one in Havana, not even at the United States Embassy with all its resources for getting information, will know until this report is published that Fidel Castro is really in the Sierra Maestra."

[The gripping account — Mr. Matthews took his wife along as “camouflage” — is well worth reading, on Times Machine or as a PDF, “Cuban Rebel Is Visited in Hideout.”]

Mr. Matthews’s coup, which occurred two years before Mr. Castro’s, was the beginning of a relationship that would haunt the correspondent and color his reputation. In a front-page article six months after Batista was overthrown, Mr. Matthews declared:

“The only power worth considering in Cuba is in the hands of Premier Castro, who is not only not Communist but decidedly anti-Communist, even though he does not consider it desirable in the present circumstances to attack or destroy the Reds — as he is in a position to do any time he wants.” (“Cuba Has a One-Man Rule and It Is Called Non-Red.”)

If this all sounds like the making of a book, it was: “The Man Who Invented Fidel,” by Anthony DePalma, a Times reporter



Bruce Weber, in the

striped vest over
Mr. Castro’s left shoulder,
suddenly found himself in the path
the Cuban leader made through the newsroom.

Credit Joyce Dopkeen/The New York Timestion

Even a news staff long accustomed to charges by conservative critics that it was too close to Mr. Castro could scarcely have been more surprised when the dictator actually turned up one Wednesday afternoon in October 1995. (Times Talk, the house organ, recorded the event.)

After meeting with senior executives on the 14th floor of The Times’s headquarters at 229 West 43rd Street, Mr. Castro allowed as how he would like to visit the workers, too.

Tom Bodkin, now the creative director of The Times, was just a few feet away from Mr. Castro as he made his way into what was then a cramped and squalid newsroom. “I was struck by his imposing size (though many people look tall from my perspective),” Mr. Bodkin recalled. “He definitely had a star quality and I couldn’t help but think that, about how his commanding presence played a role in his success as a revolutionary leader.”

The Castro entourage moved so swiftly that most reporters and editors didn’t know what was happening

1957 | 'Fidel Castro Is Still Alive'

Published on FIDEL Soldier of Ideas (<http://www.fidelcastro.cu>)

until they were face to face with him. "Somehow I ended up right in his path as he walked into the newsroom and he walked up to me and shook my hand," Bruce Weber said.

"I have two specific recollections," Mr. Weber said. "First that I was thinking: 'My God, I could pull on his beard!' And second, that someone asked, out loud, 'What do you think of the newsroom?' and that he responded (I think through an interpreter): 'It looks as though you could use a union.' "

Author:

- [Dunlap](#)

Source:

The New York Times
28/11/2014

Source URL: <http://www.fidelcastro.cu/en/articles/1957-fidel-castro-still-alive>