

Fidel Castro

In a light moment during the first year of the Cuban revolution, one of Fidel Castro's comrades proposed that the Caribbean island should declare war on the United States. 'Why on earth would we do that?' asked Castro. 'Because Japan and Germany lost the second world war and look how wealthy they have become,' came the answer. 'Yes', said Fidel, 'But what if we win?'

In the event, it was the Americans who took the fight to Cuba, as they were later to do to Nicaragua. And 30 years on, leading his revolution into its fourth decade, he is able to look back and proclaim, not just survival, but a kind of victory.

In those years he has ensured health and education services of a standard that is rightly the envy of the Third World. He has played the decisive role in events of such international significance as the Bay of Pigs (1961) and the military defeat of South Africa in Angola. He has won the respect of statesmen and the adulation of millions, especially in Latin America.

Yet while his place on the world stage has been so prominent, throughout that time the 'real Fidel' has remained a deliberate mystery. He has neither official residence nor any family life apart from a son by a pre-revolutionary marriage. His ex-wife lives in the US and is fiercely anti-Castro. The son, 'Fidelito', now middle-aged, is the head of the country's atomic energy authority, in charge of building the Caribbean's first nuclear power station.

In fact, his private life is less hidden than non-existent, so completely has he subsumed himself in his life's work, the Cuban revolution. Surrounded by his retinue of advisers and researchers, he acts as Cuba's round-the-clock custodian of revolutionary progress with an energy, enthusiasm, depth of knowledge, power of concentration and air of political authority that never

fail to impress those who see him in action.

Most impressive of all, however, are his famous skills as an orator, his ability to keep a crowd of up to two million in his thrall for hour after hour. Yet the Shakespearean scale of his delivery is curiously unsuited to the television era in which he lives. In a country much of whose physical and psychological furniture bears the imprint of the 1950s, its decade of insurrection, the leader's public style, too, can look dated - though Castro's sheer power and charisma gives it instead more an aura of timelessness.

The oratory will be sorely tested over the coming months and years, since the Cuban president is today facing the sternest test of his political sway among his people. As Cuba celebrates its revolutionary anniversary, there is increasing popular dissatisfaction with the stagnant economy. In the past, this has always managed to deliver at least small improvements with the passing of the years. Now, for the first time since the heady days of the 1960s, expectations are having to adjust to zero and negative growth, for the foreseeable future. Rarely have Cubans been so lacking in civic confidence.

At the same time, in the wake of Mikhail Gorbachev's recent non-visit to Cuba, significant numbers of intellectuals can be heard privately regretting their *commandante's* public rejection of *perestroika* and *glasnost*. To some Western commentators it does seem that Castro is lagging behind the times. Many have succumbed to the temptation of effectively dismissing him as a once-romantic dictator whose arteries have hardened.

The case against Castro, being made increasingly vociferously from abroad, focuses, above all, on his resistance to *perestroika*. It is a line of thought which should be handled with care. What



Fidel Castro: An aura of timelessness

can seem merely stubborn to First World eyes makes more sense from the perspective of a Third World country in straightened circumstances.

Castro has made it abundantly clear that he regards Cuba's ultimate destination as economic integration and political unity with Latin America. *Perestroika*, by contrast, is the economic means whereby the Soviet Union is attempting to take its place in the First World. The concept has, he argues, little relevance to the needs of Third World countries where the redistribution of wealth, both within countries and vis-a-vis the developed world, remains the central issue.

In fact, there are many signs that Gorbachev himself is far more interested in using his contacts with Castro to extend his influence in the Non-Aligned Movement

than to tick him off over economic principles. In his historic December speech to the United Nations, the Soviet leader clearly intended his announced cancellation of all Third World debts to Moscow to be followed up by a speech delivered in Havana two days later at which he would expand on his Third World policies.

As the outlines of the new international order ushered in by Mr Gorbachev become clearer, it is against shifts in the Third World in general, and Latin America in particular, that Fidel Castro believes Cuba's prospects are to be measured. Castro may be proved wrong for his determination that Cuba should go it alone economically. But it would be a brave person - and there are plenty around - who would dismiss him as a wrong-headed fool. •

Noll Scott