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The Man Who Invented Fidel: Cuba, Castro, and Herbert L. Matthews of the New York Times. Anthony DePalma. New York: Public Affairs. 2006. 320 pp.

In 1959, Fidel Castro said of *New York Times* correspondent Herbert L. Matthews (1900-1977): “I am sick and tired of that old man who thinks he is my father. He is always giving me advice.” Matthews used this quote as a source of pride in one of his books and it is also cited in this work. Anthony DePalma, senior correspondent for the *Times*, wrote this biography of one of his newspaper’s most pompous and controversial correspondents. The author has relied largely on the Herbert L. Matthews Collection at the Butler Library in Columbia University, the archives of the *Times*, a “boxload of documents” on Matthews obtained from the FBI through the Freedom of Information Act, and published secondary sources. The first part of the title of this book, taken from another Matthews self-aggrandizement quote sent to his editor on January 22, 1958, is a phrase that he continued using as a claim-to-fame for the rest of his life.

Matthews was born and raised in New York City’s affluent Riverside Drive in the Upper West Side. His father was a Jewish haberdasher whose parents had migrated from the Eastern European Pale in the mid-nineteenth century and changed their last name. Matthews sought adventure and glory as a teenager by joining the army during World War I, but arrived in Eastern

France too late to see any action. Upon returning home, he enrolled at Columbia University and after graduating, began working in the *Times* newsroom in 1926. Five years later, Matthews married an Englishwoman in New York, before being assigned to Europe. He chronicled Mussolini's invasion of Abyssinia with "sympathy" and "bias toward the Italians" and then reported on the Spanish Civil War with a similar slant for the Loyalists and the leftist International Brigade. Meanwhile, Matthews neglected his wife and two children for more than a decade while remaining in Europe to cover World War II. A heart attack in 1949 prompted his return to New York, where publisher Arthur Hays Sulzberger created for him the unique position of reporter-editorial writer.

Matthews' career was eclipsing in January 1957 when Fidel Castro, the leader of a tiny guerrilla force in the Sierra Maestra Mountains of Cuba, sent word to American journalists in Havana that he was available for an interview. Jay Mallin, the *Time* magazine correspondent, immediately rejected the offer. DePalma acknowledges the rivalry between his newspaper and the magazine, but omits mentioning Mallin, who covered Cuba for a decade. *Times* correspondent Ruby Hart Phillips, residing on the island for more than two decades, also turned down the interview request but passed it on to her editor, who assigned it to Matthews.

The melodramatic Matthews-Castro meeting spawned a glowing three-part series, totaling 6,790 words, that first appeared in the *Times* on February 24, 1957, the 62nd anniversary of the start of Cuba's war of independence. Matthews' coverage of the Cuban revolution then degenerated into apologia, whitewash, and hero worship. DePalma overlooked Matthews' shallow investigative reporting and journalistic inaccuracies. For example, Matthews falsely portrayed William A. Morgan, an American hoodlum who joined the Cuban rebels in 1957, as "a

veteran of the United States Army in World War II.” He also quoted Che Guevara on January 4, 1959, as saying, “I have never been a Communist. . .it gave me pain to be called an international Communist all the time.” Two weeks later, Matthews affirmed that for Cubans, “Castro is the greatest hero that their history has known,” belittling independence apostle José Martí.

Matthews’ grew annoyed as Phillips kept contradicting his assertions, especially when on March 11, 1957, she quoted General Fulgencio Batista calling Castro an "agent of the Soviet Union." Matthews’ ostentatious editorials and reporting “convinced Congress to hold hearings on the Cuban situation.” Consequently, the United States instituted an arms embargo against Batista in March 1958 and gave him an ultimatum to leave office two weeks before the rebel victory.

DePalma, like Matthews, is an apologist for the terrorist acts of Castro’s 26th of July Movement. He purports that “the bombs were usually placed where no tourist or Cuban civilian would be hurt—near a power line, or a telephone exchange—and they were meant not to maim or kill” (p. 66). In contrast, *Times* articles by Phillips and Homer Bigart during 1956-58 show that the rebels perpetrated assassinations, kidnappings, airplane hijackings, burned scores of schools, and detonated bombs in crowded movie theaters, nightclubs, stores, and buses. Matthews was removed from the Cuba assignment after insisting on July 16, 1959, that Castro is “not only not Communist but decidedly anti-Communist,” and that “Cubans today do not want elections.”

The author, emulating his subject, gives credence to rebel propaganda that “Batista’s goons” murdered 20,000 people during the insurrection (p. 139), without consulting any other sources. Dr. Armando Lago, an economist and scholar, has minutely documented that total down to 2,070 and has shown that the rebels themselves killed or executed 945 people prior to 1959.

By 1972, Matthews had morphed into a curmudgeon who “rarely admitted mistakes.” He was boasting to his wife, “I know more about the Cuban revolution than anybody else could possibly know” (p. 253). DePalma is critical of Matthews’ detractors, especially Phillips, Ambassador Arthur Gardner, and Cuban exiles. He concludes by exonerating his employer and Matthews for not bringing communism to Cuba. The author blames “many others,” especially “the U.S. diplomats in Havana who famously misread the anti-Batista opposition.” He defends Matthews when claiming that “no journalist can truly be without personal bias,” that Matthews “did not set out to present a distorted picture of Castro,” that he did not get “the story wrong at the beginning,” and that he “made mistakes but did not deliberately distort the news.” This biography has proven to be as controversial as its subject.

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