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CASTRO LITE? OR THE RAUL THING?

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FOR TWO WEEKS, RAUL CASTRO HAS ENJOYED A TASTE OF THE ROLE HE HAS LONG AWAITED. Fidel's younger brother, and the world's longest-serving defence minister, is now acting president of Cuba and head of the Communist Party. As such, he is publicly exercising power that he might have already been wielding behind the scenes – power he might assume permanently.

If that happens, those looking forward to a rapid transition to democracy in Cuba will be disappointed. As I discovered while writing a biography of the Castro brothers, Raul is more contradictory and emotionally complex than Fidel, making him less predictable than the older brother the world has come to know so well.

Despite his long-standing prominence, and two weeks of speculation about what his new role means for Cuba's future, the puzzling duality of Raul's character leaves many questions. Now in charge, will Raul revert to the mercilessness of his early revolutionary years, when he ordered countless executions? Or might the compassion Raul's family and friends describe lead him to break with some of his brother's cherished policies?

At the moment, no one is better positioned to lead the Cuban people – three-quarters of whom have known no leader outside Fidel. Raul has always been the regime's most effective administrator and his brother's only indispensable ally.

Now 75, he has long controlled the military and security services, directed huge segments of the economy and last month began exercising greater control over the Communist Party. As early as last year, he might already have been acting as a regent, amending Fidel's decisions.

In a recent speech, Raul intimated he might lead in a more collaborative fashion, perhaps yielding one of the country's top offices to a trusted civilian. Vice-President Carlos Lage, an internationally respected economic planner, could be rewarded for his loyalty by assuming the country's presidency. Other prominent civilians – including National Assembly President Ricardo Alarcon and Foreign Minister Felipe Perez Roque – are unlikely to contest Raul's succession. His authority derives from the country's constitution and from his frequently reiterated place as Fidel's chosen replacement. Raul simply has no credible civilian rivals.

His ascension could be threatened if splits were to occur in the armed forces. At least one influential rival, former Politburo member and interior minister Ramiro Valdes, might already be attempting to undermine Raul's authority. And the loyalty of field-grade military officers is difficult to assess.

Raul's reputation for ruthlessness is well deserved. In an interview with a Mexican journalist in 1993, he volunteered the nickname "Raul the Terrible" – an admission of his bloody record as the Cuban revolution's chief executioner in its early days, when, according to a former guerrilla colleague, Raul and Ernesto (Che) Guevara "compet-

ed in killings and viciousness."

He presided over perhaps hundreds of executions by firing squads in the late 1950s, sometimes delivering the coup de grace himself. In his guerrilla diary, portions of which the Cuban government released decades ago, he wrote dispassionately about the 1957 execution of a Cuban who had betrayed Fidel: "They tied his hands and brought him to the camp. He was terrified, and his eyes were bulging out of their sockets."

Raul developed a taste for blood 50 years ago in Mexico City, when Fidel ordered him to kill a young member of their rebel movement whom Fidel no longer trusted. The order came on the eve of the brothers' departure from a small Gulf Coast port to begin a voyage to Cuba, where they would launch their insurgency. The killing was a test of Raul's revolutionary mettle – one that he passed with flying colours, though decades later he expressed remorse.

For many years, Raul was the revolution's most implacable Stalinist, the Kremlin's most reliable friend in Cuba. He led the charge against dissidents, personal rivals and others who fell out of Fidel's favour. But his worldview began to change when the Soviet Union disintegrated and the subsidies dried up. In the face of economic crisis, Raul came to demonstrate

greater pragmatism. He dispatched trusted military officers to Europe, where they studied business techniques to improve the management of military-run enterprises. And he began allowing military personnel to engage in business activities – especially in Cuba's tourist sector.

Unlike Fidel, Raul has a compassionate side. A number of Castro relatives and associates in exile have described him warmly to me. He is often caring, once meeting with reporters to announce the birth of a grandchild. He remains close to Vilma Espin, his wife of more than 47 years, who is now gravely ill. He also relishes the role of paterfamilias. He was devastated in 1989 when Fidel insisted on the execution of Arnaldo Ochoa, a close friend and highly decorated general whom the regime accused of having engaged in drug trafficking. And Raul is said to have spared others. One witness, a Cuban living in Miami, told me that during Pope John Paul II's visit to Cuba in 1998, Raul knelt when greeting him – but took pains to avoid any media coverage of his obeisance.

If Raul succeeds Fidel, his leadership of Cuba and his relationship with the United States probably would reflect different priorities from those of his brother. More than once, Raul has spoken in the Cuban media of the virtues of supply and demand – a concept that remains anathema to Fidel. Since the 1990s, Raul seems to have favoured limited market-oriented reforms, including greater civilian entrepreneurship. He probably would try to emulate China's approach: economic reforms without political opening.

Raul's top generals refrain from Fidel's harsh anti-American rhetoric, and they have been cordial in meetings in Cuba with delegations of retired U.S. senior officers. And when Al-Qa'ida terrorists were first incarcerated at the U.S. naval base at Guantanamo Bay, Cuba, Raul was quoted in the official Cuban me-

dia giving assurances that if any escaped, they would promptly be returned. Fidel has said nothing of the sort.

However, Raul does not understand the United States as well as Fidel, who follows U.S. politics with intense interest. Raul rarely meets with Americans and has not been interviewed on the record by a U.S. media representative in decades. His past vacation spots included different regions of the Soviet Union, but he has spent just one

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day in the United States – in April 1959.

Back then, Raul seemed the more radical of the Castro brothers, more ideologically rigid and anti-American. But he and Fidel might have reversed roles. Fidel's daughter Alina Fernandez told me in 2004 from exile in Miami that her Uncle Raul "is the practical brother." Once fully in power, Raul might well believe that his government should seek better relations with the United States, especially an end to its decades-old economic embargo of Cuba. Lacking Fidel's charisma, he no doubt knows that he will have to do more to satisfy popular expectations for change. Providing bread, rather than Fidel's revolutionary circuses, will be a priority.

There are a number of unilateral steps Raul could take to end the stalemate with Washington. What if, for example, he expressed the desire to enter into counterterrorism co-operation with U.S. security and intelligence agencies? How could such an offer, if genuine, be refused? Current U.S. policy – the embargo

and travel ban, the punitive 1996 Helms-Burton Act, the inclusion of Cuba on the State Department's list of international sponsors of terrorism – would become increasingly unsustainable.

Such a Cuban initiative might be too much to hope for; once in power, "Raul the Terrible" might maintain his brother's repressive rule. "We have more than enough cannons to defend" the regime, he warned the Cuban people after demonstrations in 1994. But he cannot afford a Tiananmen Square. The military forces he has nurtured might well split if given orders to fire upon civilians; a civil war on the island would be the worst case for him, for Cuba and for the United States.

There is no way to predict how long Raul might govern. His health might be precarious after decades of heavy drinking. He is a poor public communicator, feared more than admired by the populace, and has never managed a major national crisis. If splits develop within the uniformed services, his tenure might be brief.

Raul will be unacceptable to some in the United States because of his bloody record – or simply because he is a Castro. The Bush administration's Commission for Assistance to a Free Cuba recently confirmed a long-standing policy opposing Raul's succession. But his critics should consider that he might be a transitional figure, possibly laying the foundation for moves toward a more participatory Cuba.

However life after Fidel unfolds, the truth about this fascinatingly complex younger brother should not be difficult for U.S. officials to discern. My guess is that they will find they can work with him.

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