

[Interview given by Commander in Chief Fidel Castro Ruz, President of the Republic of Cuba, to El Clarin journal. Buenos Aires, Argentina](#)

Journalist: Mr. President, we can start if you like.

Fidel Castro: Yes, time is compelling.

Journalist: Of course. I think that a good starting point could be:

We are at a stage where the international system is being redesigned, not necessarily by law but by force as we have just seen.

Cuba, as you always remind us, has been suffering a blockade for several decades now, which has become a major obstacle in the establishment of a safety system for the political experience of the island, for life in the island. Do you think this situation, in the wake of this redesigning embodied by George Bush, this attempt to redesign the world becomes more serious? How do you see this?

Fidel Castro: It depends on the possibility of such a redesigning, but to answer your question, yes, this situation is much more serious and dangerous. Not only for Cuba but also for a number of other countries, because we would have to know what does he mean when he says that '60 or more' countries can be attacked. For that "or more" concept we have to come up with an equation. When several days later there was an initiative in the United States proposing to attack the Netherlands if the International Criminal Court sanctioned any American, we could see that the "or more" equation is very broad. I don't know if anyone has been left out of that "or more".

Journalist: President, this particular redesigning depends more on the use of force than on the rule of law. When you say, and I agree, that there is more danger for the whole region, one needs to think that unlike the previous decade, we have an upsurge of governments, and if not governments, political alternatives in the region that shows that somehow the Latin American region is fed up with injustice, it is fed up with the neoliberal model, the Washington consensus or whatever we choose to call it, that is not relevant. The region is tired of injustice. And this leads us to think --and history tells us so-- that when such processes take place, the likelihood of a confrontation with the United States is higher.

How do you foresee the future, not only Cuba's future but also that of the region as a whole? I am thinking of Chavez in Venezuela, Lula in Brazil, what does this mean?

Fidel Castro: There is danger not only for the region but also for the world. But I see that you want to discuss the region.

Journalist: Yes, I do.

Fidel Castro: Yes, there is danger for the region. Danger of aggression, danger of being devoured, danger of being subjugated, danger of a takeover of its resources, danger of being imposed a system that is already in a crisis. It is neoliberal globalization; and, everything that is happening is but an expression of its crisis.

Cuba, in the first place, is in danger; it has the honor of running the greatest risk.

Journalist: Perhaps, Mr. President, although Cuba runs a great risk, the greatest risk of all for the region is Colombia. In Colombia we can now think of an invitation --made by the Colombian government-- to militarize a struggle that has been going on for decades in the hemisphere. If this appeal to militarize the hemisphere is materialized, if the United States encourages it, to put it blunt, if a hemispheric military intervention in Colombia takes place, it will be very difficult for the countries in the region.

Fidel Castro: Yes, but this started before the present administration. In the same way that developments like Kosovo took place before this administration.

Journalist: Of course, the NATO intervention.

Fidel Castro: And they talked about the new NATO strategic concept. On June 28, 1999, when the European Heads of State met with the Latin American and Caribbean Heads of State in Brazil, I raised some questions on that new strategic concept. One of these questions was: "We would like to know if Latin America and the Caribbean are included or not in the Euro-Atlantic periphery defined by NATO."

Another question related to this issue was: "After a lot of debate, the EU has supported the declaration issued by this Summit that states that this strategic association is based on full respect for international law and on the purposes and principles set forth in the United Nations Charter related to non-intervention, respect for sovereignty and equality among States and self-determination. Does this mean that the United States is also committed to respect the principles embodied in this agreement signed by its allies? What will be Europe's position if the United States, unilaterally and under any pretext, decides to drop bombs and launch missiles against any of the Latin American or Caribbean countries gathered here?" I won't say my question was provocative but it was very candid.

The Head of State of Brazil, Fernando Henrique Cardoso, who was chairing the session, considered these questions to be very important and suggested that they should be answered at the private meeting that would follow immediately after this session. German Chancellor Schroeder, and other European leaders agreed.

The private meeting took place and I was waiting for the issue to be discussed, but they spoke about other subjects and time went on and nobody brought up the issue. I did not want to sound impertinent by demanding an answer. The answer was not as important as the fact that the question had been raised. I knew that none of the Europeans could say a single word about it. What happened in the following years has explained everything. And today, the correlation of forces in favor of the United States is greater.

Recently, I also posed a very serious question to the gentleman who heads the Spanish Government regarding certain recommendations he made during the Kosovo war, something extremely serious, but there has been no answer and maybe because there can be no answer. I concluded, rather jokingly, that "I accuse, thus I do not exist". Because I am useful for certain things, particularly when they want someone to blame, but when I ask a question that commands an answer, I get silence for a reply.

Now, back to what you concretely said, there have been changes in that policy that appeared as a concept of domination in which the superpower and its old allies and some new allies as well are involved; and the latter are more dangerous because they are in a hurry to earn merits. Today, the situation is different from what it was when I asked the question about NATO's new strategic policy. As you see, these are old ideas that were previously backed by certain arguments and pretexts. Now the United States needs no argument or pretext. That idea was, more or less, conceived to operate within the framework of the United Nations or the privileges of the Security Council. This one ignores the United Nations, it ignores the Security Council, it ignores Europe, it ignores NATO, and it ignores the world. It is totally unilateral in its new concept.

Journalist: Mr. President, let me try to put it in clearer terms.

Since the missile crisis and up to now, until this administration, all that you have described may have been developing. But since the missile crisis up to now it became increasingly difficult to think of a direct American military action against Cuba, like what we had at the time of the naval blockade. Has it become a more likely event today?

Fidel Castro: Yes, it has. The error is more likely today.

Logic would indicate that they should not do it. But one cannot think in logical terms because logic is a scarce asset nowadays, the same way there is no respect for international law.

Back then we ran an imminent risk in a given period of time, that is, a number of days. Today, it is a prolonged risk.

Journalist: If you allow me. Thirty years ago, what Oscar mentioned about the region being tired of injustice, was present in South America. We saw this in governments like those of Argentina, Chile and Uruguay. Such experiences ended dramatically for our country. Why would it be different today?

Fidel Castro: Which experience do you have in mind?

Journalist: I'm talking of the 1960's. Salvador Allende in Chile, Cámpora-Peron in Argentina. We had a Latin American wave of rebellion that ended up in dictatorships (several voices overlap).

Fidel Castro: I would say in bloody tyrannies. Terrible things occurred. I don't know, but they look to me as unbelievable fantasy.

Journalist: And today we have a new dawn in Argentine.

Fidel Castro: Yes, you do, but times have changed.

I would say that, unlike those days, this is the best moment for Latin America.

Journalist: This is the best moment for Latin America?

Fidel Castro: Yes, in my view, it is the best moment.

Journalist: Why?

Fidel Castro: Let me explain. Before, they were isolated countries. In Chile, the left won over. First, there was an attempted coup d'état to prevent the left from taking power. The plan failed and Allende took over. He acted with moderation. I knew him very well, he was not an extremist. But everything was organized from the very first moments to overthrow him. They set the stage, created the conditions. To this we must add real economic problems and those that were created. Any government in such conditions would have to deal with big dilemmas. On the one hand, old demands and expectations by the people who want to improve their situation overnight and, on the other, old and powerful interests not easy to defeat, something that needs time and a careful process. Those who have suffered the most get impatient while those who do not wish such changes work to wear out and overthrow the government. It is no secret that this was not an easy task.

That Argentinean period that you have mentioned was also very important, but its inherent risks were domestic in nature. Of course, this is a country with vast resources --we must say it, I hope you are not annoyed by my saying so-- all kind of resources: food, energy and even industrial resources.

Journalist: You have reminded us many times about that in public, Comandante, that we were a rich country and much more efficient.

Fidel Castro: That's what I say. You know what you say. Criticism must be answered with criticism.

Anyway, conditions were better than in Chile. Chile was highly dependent on copper. Now it has developed other products, many other products although it continues to depend on agriculture. The fishing sector, for example, has become a major source of income; they have even become milk producers. Agriculture has been important. Chilean wine, and I'm not comparing, is of good quality, and they have good productivity and diversity. But they have mainly developed forestry and maritime products that have become major sources of revenue. They have also continued developing the mining sector.

Allende did not have such resources. He had great needs, big demands and direct and indirect blockades and credit suspension.

The vulnerability of our countries... well, of all countries except ours and it is embarrassing to say this, but the problem is that they are forced to depend on what has been established, the Monetary Fund and its credits, and the very difficult conditions it imposes.

This in no way means that we lack economic problems. What I mean is that we do not face the same insurmountable obstacles as the rest of Latin America.

Journalist: They are not the same.

Fidel Castro: At that time, that rebellion you mentioned was a more isolated occurrence. Though there was a debt, which at the time already amounted to 300 billion US dollars, almost one third of the current debt, Allende won the elections in 1970.

Journalist: Yes, Allende acceded to power in late 1970.

Fidel Castro: The Latin American debt was lower, but it began to grow and continued to grow and in 1985 was approximately 300 billion US dollars.

The elements that today lead to unrest and nonconformity are much more extended in the hemisphere. There are no more oases in the south hemisphere, in the Caribbean, in Central America, or in Mexico. The rebellion is a worldwide event no longer limited to our countries. At that time there was not, like now, a neoliberal globalization that is devastating, with the forced privatization of practically all resources, and strict measures that leave Latin American currencies with no other choice but to flee. The money must flee. It is only logical because, well earned or not, no Latin American currency can guarantee the stability of its value, none whatsoever.

Even in a country where the currency parity was maintained for a few years vis-à-vis the US dollar, such was the case of the Real --and I don't know which was first if the Argentinean Peso or the Brazilian Real, do you remember? Let's say the Peso and the Real. The Real experienced a crisis before the Peso did. Both currencies had created expectations at a time everybody was fed up with inflation and wanted a stable currency, because the enormous and unchecked inflation was a true nightmare. There has always been a steady inflation; it has been a historic trend. Today's dollar must be worth more or less ten cents of the dollar we had 40 years ago.

Journalist: Yes, in 1971 when Nixon declared the dollar unconvertible.

Fidel Castro: In the past, with two cents you could buy things, even with one cent of a dollar, am I right? Now it only serves the purpose of propaganda: \$10.99 instead of \$11.00 or \$99.99 instead of \$100.00, just to create the psychological illusion of something cheaper.

Which currency is stable? Gold used to be a currency, like cocoa used to be a currency for the Aztecs.

But they had a value per se. Gold and cocoa had their own value. And who knows the amount of money the world has spent in producing gold as a means of exchange.

I think the idea of having other means of exchange, a symbol of money, is good. The problem is that the symbol has become something that is minted at will, a symbol that has been terribly abused, even by the Americans because they are the ones that have minted more paper money, after removing its conversion into gold as you indicated.

Well, maybe I'm taking too much time, but I wanted to say that the circumstances are very different for all those reasons and because money is fleeing and it must flee, there is no choice. If the condition is imposed that there can be no control over exchange rates, it becomes a deadly mechanism. Just any kind of instability, any internal problem, any economic problem, any drop in prices and any export deficit paves the way for the money to flee more quickly. The action advised, or should I say imposed, by the current economic order to counteract this trend is: raise the interest rates, so that the money won't flee. They raise it to 40%, to 50% and then they have to lend it at 52%, 55% and no country can be sustained with a loan for which it has to pay 50% interest for working capital, investment, expansion. No country at all.

When there was this crisis in Southeast Asia, for example, Mahathir, who established an exchange control, was faced with a 14% interest loan. He reduced it to 7% to come out of the debt, so that people could work, to create jobs and make the economy work. Under these conditions Latin America has a terrible situation.

You see, the last time I came...if you allow me I'll take one more minute.

Journalist: As much as you wish.

Fidel Castro: I just don't want to upset those who are waiting for me.

Journalist: It's them out there, not us...

Fidel Castro: If it were for me I would gladly spend three hours.

When I came to Argentina the first time, 44 years ago, the Latin American debt was 5 billion US dollars and then it occurred to me -I am always having some thoughts, some good ones some not so good-- what I later said: Latin America must develop, there is too much poverty. The Marshall Plan was being discussed as an example of assistance by a country with more resources to the rest, and I said: "Latin America needs a Marshall Plan", and I came up with the figure of 20 billion dollars for the economic and social development of Latin America. I don't know if I did right or wrong. I could even feel remorse, but I think I was right. If my memory doesn't fail me, Rubottom was then the American representative.

And who could have guessed that was what Kennedy would do later on.

Journalist: Later, in the Alliance for Progress.

Fidel Castro: Yes, and even a Land Reform; we carried out the first one in May 1959. It was due to a land reform that an expedition was sent against Jacobo Arbenz, and later there were 200,000 dead. That was the outcome, plus 100,000 missing persons, and this is not an overstatement. This is according to reports and studies made by very serious people, some of whom died because they wrote about such appalling figures.

The debt in 1985 was 300 billion US dollars. We fought against that debt because we could see what was coming. It was not useless, as they got a little bit frightened and came up with some formulas like the Brady bonds, and so on. But, now we have to pay the Brady bonds.

Today, the debt is 800 billion US dollars. The World Bank no longer offers soft loans, it now offers bailout, and the International Monetary Fund is becoming increasingly strict and makes no concessions. And every time there is a budget cut, schools, hospitals and social assistance are among the first to be affected. This creates a lot of discontent.

We have met with many schoolteachers. Thousands of teachers and educators go to Cuba, some to see our experience and what they complain about is lack of budget; they say there is no budget for pencils, for this or for that. The same happens with the doctors, with all sectors. Social services always take the hardest blows.

Besides, when I talked about 20 billion US dollars in 1959, when the Revolution triumphed, 20 billion dollars were worth much more. Probably, it would have been like asking for 80 billion dollars today and I am being very cautious in my calculations.

Today, the debt is around 800 billion US dollars. In some countries over 50% of the budget is used to repay the debt. No country can live with that.

Under these circumstances, capital flight is imperative, because if you have 100,000 dollars worth in gold you can bury them, you can save them, but if you have it in national paper money you need to exchange them and take them out. As free exchange is compulsory, it is the "Open up, Sesame", the doors are opened and people take their money, because there is a regularly stable currency, which is the US dollar, due to the power of its economy and to the Bretton Woods privileges, where they undertook to back that currency with gold.

At the time of the Vietnam War that cost 500 billion dollars without taxes, a lot of problems came up and Nixon unilaterally decided to suspend the convertibility of the dollar. This has caused a terrible problem with foreign exchange speculation since trillions of US dollars are involved in speculative operations taking place every day. No currency can be safe.

England, the queen of finance, had the pound sterling, which was devaluated through a speculative operation.

Journalist: Mr. President, all that you have described are adverse conditions, why do you think then this is a good moment for Latin America?

Fidel Castro: Because of that protest you mentioned that I said had taken place under different conditions and was a relatively isolated occurrence, and today you can see a general protest involving all Latin American countries. A situation has been created that I characterize as unsustainable and unbearable. Thus, the objective conditions have been created that explain certain political developments. You can see it everywhere.

Journalist: Now, Mr. President, do you think that these conditions of rebellion or impatience can stand the test of time or Latin America is running the risk --and Colombia is an example-- of having less democratic democracies, or democracies under tutelage or a change to authoritarianism? Isn't Latin America running that risk?

Fidel Castro: Well, that is a complex question. But, I feel that violence doesn't seem to be the inevitable course. Everything has changed a lot; there are absolutely new phenomena.

In the particular case of Colombia there is an old problem with violence. There are two or three new phenomena in the hemisphere, one of them being that no sensible military man would think of staging a traditional coup d'état to solve the problems. That was the formula that imperialism always used. There is also a change in consciousness. The military know that there is a highly explosive social situation. I didn't say that when I spoke in Buenos Aires of the need for 20 billion US dollars for economic and social development, the population in Latin America was less than 250 million; today, it is almost 524 million.

It has increased tremendously. Employment does not grow in the formal sector but rather in the informal sector, people are trying to survive as best they can. That is a fact.

Today, at the entrance of a beautiful park, a woman was asking the official who accompanied me, for a space in the park, and she said almost in pain that she wanted to "sell something".

Only 20% of the new jobs are in the formal sector. The modern industry with its new technologies is reducing rather than increasing the number of workers.

In Cuba we have cases like a factory that used to employ 300 workers and today it only has 50 to produce mosquito nets, which we use to cover the tobacco plantations. We have doubled the production with a sixth of the labor force. Today, you visit a combined cycle thermal power station that works on gas, and instead of seeing hundreds of workers working with charcoal or oil like in the traditional thermal power station, you don't see a worker, what you see are 15 or 20 engineers sitting in air-conditioned rooms pressing buttons.

Many a time I have wondered. Suppose that the FTAA brings about a great industrial development for any Latin American country. Let's say it would bring about the same level of development enjoyed in Germany. And, I don't like naming countries because you always run the risk of being accused of interference, so much so that one cannot dwell on any topic from a practical or theoretical point of view. But, I have no other choice in this case than to give you an example.

Let's assume that a big, resourceful country like Argentina achieves the level of development that Germany enjoys today, still it would not have solved the problem of unemployment that was one of the elements that led to the crisis. Being one of the most highly industrialized countries in Europe, Germany still faces the tragedy of unemployment affecting 10% of the active population. In our country we are about to reach full employment. Based on the view that employment can grow only in the services sector, we have come up with the idea of transforming studies into a form of employment, an idea that has been welcomed by the population. I'm sure there are other formulas, not necessarily Cuban formulas. Necessity is the mother of invention.

Of course, I am against the FTAA, everybody knows that. It takes a wild imagination to believe that the FTAA will bring industrialization rather than bankruptcy to Latin America.

Journalist: Mr. President, you said that violence doesn't seem to be the pathway.

Fidel Castro: What I say is that I don't see violence as the great ghost. I mean armed violence. I see the masses, and my perception is that the masses are starting to do things they didn't do before.

I can give you an example: Iran a few years ago. The Shah of Iran was the United States gendarme in the region and it was the most powerful country, with the most modern weapons, besides being a very rich country. However, the Shiite people under Khomeini's guide, without weapons, without firing a shot, overthrew the powerful Shah.

When the economic crisis hit Southeast Asia, there was another powerful gentleman by the name of Suharto, with a large well-equipped army. He was tolerated because he had killed hundreds of thousands of leftists, everybody knows that, 800,000, one million, 1.2 million, but the masses overthrew him in a blink.

I don't want to go very far but I rather avoid coming too close. Maybe if you think hard you'll see that changes have taken place in this very country that have not been the result of armed violence, and we are not talking of Indonesia or Iran. Significant political developments have been achieved without armed violence, and I say this with the highest respect for this country. I see it as an example, if nobody prevents my saying so and gets upset and says I am interfering in the internal affairs. I'm just making an analysis from a theoretical and historic point of view, to answer your question.

There is also what happened in Ecuador, you see that we don't need to go far. One day the indigenous people entered the Palace and determined a change of government. These natives didn't have a single weapon, like the military that joined them. Whoever believes that under the current situation the problems of the hemisphere can be solved through the use of force, would be reasoning like in prehistoric times.

Journalist: You mean the left and the right?

Fidel Castro: I mean everybody and I include the middle classes in the wake of a situation that is already unsustainable. The middle classes are playing a very important role when certain national and international situations arise. The middle classes are dangerous for the current prevailing order, because they have knowledge.

Oftentimes you find that the poorest people get used to suffering, to deceit, to oppression. But, when the middle class funds are confiscated then there is serious trouble. I don't need to tell you about these things (laughter). I rather avoid names but there are new phenomena and these phenomena are not only local but global as well.

There are other new things, there is new knowledge. There is a lot of ignorance on the one hand, but a lot of graduates have come out from the universities with knowledge. It is terrible to lack something as important as knowledge. We see it in our own country. Our people are different today.

Before, we had a country of illiterates; 30%, but if you add the functional illiterates and the total illiterates, it amounted to 90%. Because, only 400,000 out of a population of almost 7 million people, had studied up to the sixth grade of grammar school, and what a sixth grade that was! It is terrible when the masses are ignorant. Now, the masses, in growing numbers, have the means to inform themselves. It is true that there are still 860 million illiterates in the world because the United Nations, the UNESCO and the governments have done nothing about it, because it is really easy and possible to eradicate illiteracy.

Journalist: Knowledge is another form of oppression.

Fidel Castro: Knowledge today is basically in the hands of the middle class, what we call in Cuba intellectual workers, so closely linked to the Revolution and who, in the rest of the world are increasingly aware that the prevailing order will lead the world to a catastrophe.

Something else: Internet. With the emergence of Internet the influence of the big networks is being reduced. The large media that were monopolized have seen their monopolistic influence reduced, because with the emergence and expansion of Internet, available to many middle classes, the possibilities to convey a different message are enormous.

Let's take Seattle. Who organized what happened there? Canadian, American, Latin American middle class people who organized themselves and fought there an impressive battle organized it. It was not a war. What resembled a war were the protection measures, the tear gas, the repressive methods used against them. And what about Quebec? Well, the political leaders were shut away in a fortress, but the tear gas got inside, beyond the wire fences protecting them.

If you recall the last meeting at Davos and you have seen some WWI pictures, both fortification lines looked alike. The roadblocks resembled those of the Verdun and Marne battlefields, but this time in peaceful Switzerland. Well, they moved to New York as last year, after the September 11 events, they felt safer in New York than in Switzerland. But neither in New York could they be sure to find peace because the organizers had demonstrated in Washington against the World Bank, against the Monetary Fund, like in Genoa against the Group of Eight. They must be on the verge of --and I think this has to do with the increasing imperialist aggressiveness-- building a small meeting room at the new outer-space

lab, for the Group of Eight, or of Nine, or of some other leaders to meet, because in Canada they were forced to arrange meetings on very high mountains.

Journalist: That is true.

Fidel Castro: They will end up on the Himalayan (laughter). That will certainly be expensive!

The world is coming to a situation in which the masters of the planet cannot even meet. That is why I say this is a global crisis. And that is why I said before that it has different characteristics.

There you have Kosovo, a case I can assure you that I know very well. The war offensive was planned for seven days but was only concluded on day 79, when they had to send in the ground forces and the Yugoslavian army was still intact despite the thousands of bombs that had been dropped. Those are well experienced in guerrilla warfare. They had fought Hitler's troops. They paid a great service to the Soviet Union by delaying for several weeks a German attack that could have been decisive; and they resisted. The Nazis had 30 or 40 German divisions engaged in Yugoslavia that they needed in Stalingrad or to fight the counter-offensive.

They had all that experience, which they had developed and updated. How could they otherwise have their army almost intact? A moment comes when the invasion has to come by land and that is a horse of a different color, particularly when they want a war without casualties.

I remember when we were fighting the South Africans, I mean the apartheid regime in South Africa. It was no problem for them when the natives, recruited in Namibia or Angola, died; but when one, two, three white men died it was chaos. So, a rational is built to wage wars without casualties and in a guerrilla warfare that is very difficult.

Journalist: If you would allow me, I'd like to go back to our countries.

Fidel Castro: Of course, pardon me but as we were speaking about this.

Journalist: No, I just wanted to say this.

Fidel Castro: I mean, as you asked about Colombia, if the same thing was going to happen.

In Brazil we won't see the same as in Colombia. The movements today express themselves in strikes, mass movements and demonstrations. Nobody would even think of armed violence to take over power. The military know this. It is a new era and one of a crisis, and who would want a crisis as a gift. The means to keep the peoples in check would have to be harsher. And we know that in terms of repression the worst has been seen. There is no way it can get worse. People know about certain prerogatives. Internet is everywhere and possibilities of sending messages are real. I'm telling you based on Cuba's experience.

The possibilities we have today of sending messages, carrying ideas and arguments did not exist some years back.

Journalist: Sir, I would like to make a question so that you do not run the risk of interfering in the internal affairs of another country.

Fidel Castro: In mine.

Journalist: Next January 1st you will be celebrating the 45th anniversary of the Revolution.

Fidel Castro: Yes, of what seemed the triumph of a Revolution, because we had to begin from there.

Journalist: But, it was the triumph of the Revolution.

Fidel Castro: The overthrow of a regime and the beginning of a government by people who were quite inexperienced in those matters.

Journalist: According to all the explanation you gave about the new Latin American prospects, how do you foresee the transition in Cuba?

Fidel Castro: What transition do you mean, the one we did or a new one?

Journalist: A new one.

Fidel Castro: A transition to what? Can you tell me to what exactly? Get me a better model and I promise that I will do everything within my reach; I will start fighting again for another 50 years for the new model (Laughter).

Journalist: There was a person here who said...

Journalist: Sir, if you allow me to clarify. When it comes to a historic personality like you, there are those who think about a later stage when that historic personality is no longer there.

We ask you this: How do you imagine Cuba's future once Castro is not around anymore?

Fidel Castro: That is something many people wonder about, and so do I.

Journalist: Precisely.

Fidel Castro: Yes, but the mistake lies in believing Castro is everything. Because you say Castro does this, Castro does that... For example, I can say --not without embarrassment because I'm not fond of praising myself-- that it was my idea how to cope with the Batista problem after he dealt his coup d'état on March 10, when we had no weapons or a single penny and we had to face a powerful force. Anyway, nobody paid any attention to us at the time because the government that had been overthrown did have lots of resources and enjoyed the support of some army officers. We decided that despite all odds, the problem could be solved.

There is not much merit either where chance has played a major role too. You could ask me, how I am still there. And I would tell you because of chance and good fortune, among other things.

Now, we had some ideas. Solving that problem was quite difficult and we took great personal risks, but we could finally solve it.

Later, other problems came to add up, like the economic blockade for 30 years. Then, the special period, which meant another blockade within the strict blockade we were already enduring that was tightened. Under such conditions, nobody bet on the survival of the Revolution.

If the true facts, the real information about our country were known, we would not mind any criticisms. But, if that were the case, they would also understand that if we were the kind of people we are said to be, we would not have the support of our people, which has been a key factor at a level I believe has no precedent. And it is not because they are fanatics, because we are not chauvinists, we are not bigots and we have educated our people in the principle of domestic and international solidarity. When it is international solidarity, we call it internationalism.

Hundreds of thousands of Cubans have fulfilled internationalist missions. I have already mentioned the battle against the South African racists in Angola. This African country is more distant from Cuba than Moscow is from Havana. When you fly through the Equator and you look at a map it seems near. But it

takes a 14-hour-flight to go from Havana to Luanda, over one more hour than flying from Havana to Moscow.

So, we have waged a fierce battle in a place 14 hours away by plane, and we also fought in the border with Namibia, which is even more distant. Cuba is a small country, and I want you to know that all this was done with our own resources. We did it with our merchant fleet, as we already had a merchant fleet. Don't ever think that a Soviet ship transported one single Cuban battalion to that country.

Hundreds of thousands, actually, over half a million Cubans have fulfilled, in one-way or another, an internationalist mission. Because tens of thousands of doctors have been involved in internationalist missions, as well as construction workers and teachers where that was possible. In Nicaragua we had 2,000 schoolteachers working in the mountain areas, and some were killed. Thirty thousand teachers had volunteered out of which we had to choose 1,000. We then sent 2,000, and when some of them were murdered, 100,000 teachers volunteered to go.

The people need to be committed to an idea. Sometimes instead of ideas they are

taught bigotry, chauvinism, racism, you name it. Our country survives because of its ideas, otherwise we could not have fought such a monster. We would have been eaten away by their media, their blockade, the wealth they exhibit.

I only say this: You can make all kind of criticism against Cuba and express your views on anything. But, the fact remains that the information published on Cuba is distorted, and that has been the case for many years, using techniques that distort the truth and sell lies.

In the past, we took all the blows and had no means to strike back, but internally we always preserved our unity and the support of the people based on ideas, truth and concepts. That's why when you spoke of a change I was asking you a change to what. To what surrounds us? To what we see in the world? I don't want to list what we have and for which we have ethical and sound reasons to be confident. Our people know that we never lie, because truth is a sacred principle. In our country the people know we abide by such rules.

Books have been written on alleged tortures in Cuba and other similar things. We know who writes these books and even who orders their writing.

However, we have said that we are willing to give everything, what little we have; we would give everything to whoever proves that there has been a single case of torture in our country.

You find lots of books on that, but we continue to stand firm. We don't mind such slanders.

Journalist: Mr. President, you touched on the internal situation in your country and mentioned how you have educated through ideas, knowledge, freedom, but recently there was a development that had wide international repercussion involving the execution of dissidents. How would you explain such a decision on your part?

Fidel Castro: We had to apply the law; and we had trials, not extra judicial executions. Still, that hurt. We were aware of the price we would have to pay, but we had to choose between allowing actions leading to a conflict and taking action to prevent it. Because there are people over there who want to provoke a conflict between the United States and Cuba, and that the differences with Cuba be solved the same way they were solved in Baghdad, and that tens of thousands of bombs, aircrafts, and missiles be launched against Cuba.

Journalist: Where was this conflict being hatched?

Fidel Castro: Over there, in the United States.

Felipe Pérez: He said news about the "execution of dissidents" in Cuba.

Fidel Castro: Oh! I hadn't realized he used that word. Thank you, Felipe. That is one of the greatest confusions deliberately created. There are two different things here. Those who began hijacking planes and boats are criminals; they have nothing to do with the so-called "dissidents" , in quotes, I don't want to add much more to that.

Well, another important element I was pointing out is deliberate provocation. During a Congress recess they appointed as Undersecretary for Latin America a man with a dark history, a real gangster. He is one of the leading partners of the Cuban American extremist mafia, which for everybody's misfortune, including yours and ours, was responsible for an electoral fraud.

It's amazing how they dare talk about democracy in the United States. Everybody knows the number of votes taken away from the other presidential candidate, the trick to change the position of the candidates' names in the ballot to mislead voters, the African Americans who were not allowed to enter the polling stations, thus stealing tens of thousands of votes that allowed Bush to win by fraud the elections, by some hundreds of votes. Additionally, the black population there is subject to such restrictions that even a fine could be the cause for a person to lose his voting right.

Journalist: You do not interfere in the affairs of other countries, except for one.

Fidel Castro: Oh, yes.

Journalist: You talk about that country.

Fidel Castro.- No, it's not about a country that I talk, it's about a government. I feel great respect for the American people, sincere respect.

Journalist .- Can I go on with the question I was asking?

Fidel Castro.- Yes, I am willing to answer anything you wish to ask on this subject. I was telling you that two different issues got mixed up -maybe it is important for you to follow the course of events. The problem of the so-called dissidents overlapped with the very strange event that after ten years without a single plane being hijacked with passengers aboard taken hostage, there was an attack using knives that they put to the pilots' throats, like the one staged on the planes that were crashed into the New York towers and the Pentagon.

If you perceive a tremendous aggressiveness from the superpower, and a diplomatic chief is sent with the specific mission of creating incidents to thwart a growing movement within the United States against the blockade and against the restrictions on travel to Cuba, and to create conditions for an armed aggression, you are left with no choice but to cut those plans short. Before, the chiefs of the U.S. Interests Section used to get involved in our internal affairs, but this one came with clear instructions to mount a major provocation.

Journalist.- We are talking about the chief of the U.S. Interests Section, right?

Fidel Castro.- Yes, the last one, who arrived more or less in September 2002. It's incredible. I have criticized our authorities for not having informed us before how far this man had gone. He toured the island, based on the alleged need to monitor the situation of those they return to Cuba after capturing them at sea while trying to travel illegally to the United States. Their return is part of the migratory agreement.

It was agreed that no reprisals would be taken with those they sent back. Not a single violation has taken place during the many years the agreement has been in force. Don't you think it has been easy.

We have had a university almost in protest, because they would not accept that certain people would go back there to work. Sometimes we have had to find an alternative solution, because we cannot go against a university that is defending its honor. Well, we have had to find these people another job.

We have complied strictly with the agreement, despite the fact that many of those who leave illegally are precisely those to whom the United States would not give visas. They would never give them visas because of their criminal records. In general, they are people with criminal records, common criminals. Two totally different events were mixed up in bad faith by the imperialist propaganda. Two totally different events.

On March 14 it was decided to arrest a group of mercenaries paid by the United States Interests Section, the so-called "dissidents". That man –the chief of the U.S. Interests Section– had already been systematically touring the island, as part of his conspiracies. He even talked about a new program, a 6,000-mile-tour, recruiting, overtly creating and organizing counterrevolutionary groups, smuggling bags with radios and devices necessary for listening to their subversive station, creating the so-called independent libraries, where they bring two or three good authors, and all the rest is pure poison, the worst kind of literature or the worst kind of propaganda.

It's as if we told our embassy: Look, organize libraries in Argentina or in Brazil, or any other place. Indeed, the man already wanted to act as an established proconsul. He made some challenging public statements that were inadmissible. I think it was on February 24 that he made them, from a Havana apartment where he met with a group of counterrevolutionaries. They were the declarations of a political boss.

After I had been informed of this I spoke in the National Assembly. It was March 6 when I said that he should not think we were going to tolerate that, that if they wanted to take away the Interests Section or terminate the migratory agreements, none of that would make us lose our sleep. It was a strong critique.

There, I explained that the monitoring was never a part of the Agreement. It had simply been a temporary gesture on Cuba's part. Now it was over. Rules that existed for them and for us in relation to the movement of diplomatic personnel: they didn't ask authorization for moving, they just notified us three days in advance. We told them in a diplomatic note: "That rule stands no more for now, you must ask permission three days in advance, and only if you receive it can you move out of the capital."

What did they do then? As he could no longer leave Havana, he allowed the use of his residence as a meeting place for the mercenaries. Thus, his residence became the meeting ground, the command post and headquarters of the so-called "dissidents", with a very good supply of materials and food services.

Listen, we have plenty of documented evidence: The money they receive, and how they receive it. Because, naturally, among those "dissidents" there were several that, as you may assume, are revolutionaries, who were highly trusted by them. The Yankee conspirators suffered a very terrible disappointment. With all kinds of evidence in our hands, they could not deny it. I want to add that the action we took was limited. All that were arrested are mercenaries, but not all the mercenaries were arrested.

Many of our friends from the North advised us: "Don't expel the Chief of the Interests Section, that's what they want". We were not thinking of expulsion, because we have never expelled any diplomats from that Section in all these years, as they are usually do in the United Nations and Washington.

Journalist.- Mr. President, doesn't that make the charge by the Cuban State seem inequitable, that is, if it punishes those who participate in the insurrectionary efforts, the Cubans, and nothing is done against those who instigate them, with the evidence, as you say, that it is the U.S. Interests Section, doesn't it seem a bit inequitable to sentence three Cubans to the death penalty and yet not want to expel...?

Fidel Castro.- I see that I haven't explained myself clearly and there is still some confusion. None of those so-called 'dissidents' have been sentenced to death, or to life imprisonment, or to thirty years. Theirs are sentences that go from 5 to 28 years according to the seriousness of their conduct. Treason to the homeland at the service of a foreign power includes even more serious sanctions. But, the diplomats in the U.S. Interests Section were working in the service of their government, they were breaking basic diplomatic standards, but they were not betraying their country, nor were they under our jurisdiction. There is no comparison.

The death penalty imposed by the courts pertains to acts of hijacking and the taking of hostages that endangered the lives of dozens of innocent persons unrelated with the conflict. Their criminal action, a common crime, was instigated by the U.S. authorities to provoke a conflict. They had other motives, but the danger they presented for the country was a matter of life or death, although from the moral point of view a conscious treason, paid by the U.S. government is much more serious.

Journalist.- Those who took the boat, those who hijacked the boat.

Fidel Castro.- Yes, but they took the boat on April 1. The first hijacking was carried out on March 19, incidentally, the same day the war started [in Iraq]; an hour before the war started, around 4:30 Iraq time, 9:30 Cuba time, because there is a seven hours difference. Individuals who put sharp knives to the pilots' necks hijacked a Cuban aircraft that was traveling from the Isle of Youth to the Capital, with 39 or 40 passengers on board, the last tour of the day.

Journalist.- Yes, yes, I know the story.

Fidel Castro.- They commandeered the plane to Florida, and the problem begins once they get there. It was the first time this happened since the migratory agreements. There, they arrested the guys with the knives, their accomplices were given residence, and four days later, a judge decided that the hijackers could be released on parole. Individuals who did the same thing as those who brought about the catastrophe in New York were paroled. Just think if that was a problem or not! Because these were people with criminal records. I already explained that people who leave illegally generally do so because they would never be given a visa to enter the United States legally. They are careful and selective in that. I don't know how this works in Argentina, but I'm sure they don't give a visa to someone with a criminal record.

These were people who had records as common criminals. When the news that they were out on bail got to Cuba, on March 31 a second plane that set off from the same place was hijacked with 46 people on board by someone who supposedly had a grenade in his hand. Toward the end of the trip he says: "The plane must be diverted." The pilot quickly landed the aircraft in the middle of the airstrip and the hijacker there with the grenade. There were negotiations.

Some authorities in the United States understood that that was sheer madness and didn't agree with it much. So, we clearly saw the opposing opinions of those who wanted a great provocation and others who were more moderate. There were discussions. The State Department people very firmly said that the hijackers would be punished. They even asked us to publish that position. We did all that. And they themselves -some of them- did not want the plane to land in Florida, they preferred a nearby state.

What happened then? We managed to have the hijacker let a number of people off and added the necessary fuel to allow the plane to fly to another state. What they actually did was land the plane on Key West. The authorities there could decide whether or not there should be an investigation. The passengers were treated badly, humiliated, the plane was confiscated and part of the crew was forced to stay there. For the accomplices of the hijacking there was total impunity.

Florida is an almost independent state. They do there what the mobsters friends of Bush want. They have total control of the police, the authorities, the judges, and the prosecutors. This was a great

stimulus for the hijacking of passenger planes and boats.

Look, we have had to investigate dozens of hijacking attempts. We investigated more than 35 attempts in a few days, organized by common delinquents. But there's an important thing: that spate of attacks and hijacking of planes was inadmissible for several reasons. If you wish, I won't mention them now; I have insinuated some of them already. Of the three planes hijacked, one flew directly to the United States; the other was given fuel for the sake of safety and based on promises the American authorities made, that they did not at all keep. Again, they mistreated the passengers as in the first hijacking and they kept the plane there. The last hijacking was a passenger boat that provides service inside the Havana bay and usually carries up to 100 people; there were 40 on that occasion. They also hijacked it with firearms and knives. In our country, to avoid incidents, when somebody hijacks a boat at sea carrying people in it, oftentimes women and children, what we do is follow it, we don't intercept it.

The first disturbance we have ever had in Cuba in more than 40 years took place on August 5, 1994. I don't know if you know the story of how that was solved without using the army, the police, without a single shot, very simply. They were throwing stones, and it was because they had been deceived as the subversive radio had said that a number of boats were coming to take them to the U.S. Then, that crowd gathered by the seaside and as the boats didn't come, they started throwing stones and provoked a disturbance. That was on August 5, 1994, during the most difficult moments of the special period.

That brought about what was called a massive illegal migration, because we said: "We are not going to watch the United States' coasts", and then, we simply went on strike; what we did was a strike. Those people that emigrated know the Revolution well, they absolutely trust our word. If we say: Look, send your boats to fetch your relatives --it is more comfortable than running the risk of traveling by other means-- they don't have any doubts and they send the boats. And why do they run the risk of traveling without a visa? Because there is a law called the Cuban Adjustment Act, that is applied to only one country in the world, Cuba, that is quite close to them, and everyone who arrives there illegally is allowed in and is entitled to legal residence, regardless of their criminal record.

Just imagine if the Mexicans were granted such an adjustment law. We're not asking for it, for we call it a murderous law. What we are saying is that pursuant to the Free Trade Agreement, the exchange should not be only in goods and money, but in human beings, as in Europe, in both directions.

Around 500 Mexicans die every year trying to cross the U.S. border, but this is hardly ever mentioned. They say awful things about Cuba because a sentence has been given by a court of law based on previously existing laws and a strictly judicial procedure. Although I understand those who oppose the death penalty and I agree with them because we too find it very unpleasant.

We had a de facto moratorium on the death penalty for almost three years that we were forced to break because with what they did --and it was a deliberate action, they had it planned, we knew it-- they were trying to start a migratory wave that could serve as an excuse for attacking our country, portraying it as a danger for the security of the United States.

They use that word all the time. If you produce too much meat and the price of meat threatens to go down, you may be considered a danger for the United States' security --I'm warning you--, or if you sell a lot of wheat at cheaper prices.

The idea that a mass exodus would take place has even been expressed in writing.

We cannot allow a wave of hijackings to be unleashed. All an individual has to say is: "I have a hand grenade here in my pocket". The hijackers of the boat, full of men, women and children, took it 20 miles out, with a rough sea at force 4, until they ran out of fuel. It was a miracle they didn't sink! We helped them with our boats, they came back near land, but without changing their attitude, demanding fuel, and then that was when conditions were prepared to free the hostages. We didn't have to use violence, but not because they cooperated, rather because the passengers themselves rebelled. A series of

psychological measures were implemented by the Cuban authorities in coordination with the hostages, these then jumped into the sea and were all rescued.

We already know our migratory potential. If we say: "Those who wish to leave can do so, we will not oppose, or come to fetch them", none would hesitate to do it. Ninety percent of those who migrate under that adjustment law are citizens whose relatives send speedboats from Florida to fetch them; but among them there are also common criminals. In total, more than 50% of those who travel illegally thanks to certain relatives who are well off and pay up to 8,000 dollars per person, do so in 12-passenger speedboats carrying 15, 20, 25, 30 persons, and quite a few boats have sunk causing many deaths.

That is the problem. I summarize it this way: On March 14, it was decided to arrest a group of mercenaries. The arrests began on the 18th. Then, on the 19th common criminals hijacked the first plane. This had not happened, as I explained, for 10 years. Who knows whom they are that were stimulated into taking that plane, those who were granted immunity. But the news spread among the common criminals who learned about this immunity. Then, they believed that the Cuban American mob was behind all this and the plans to attack planes and boats multiplied. Those who hijacked the passenger boat on April 1 had said: "We have four foreigners and so many children". They threatened to begin throwing hostages to the sea if they were not given another boat or fuel. That's how it was. If you give in to such demands, the problem becomes insoluble.

In a situation like this there is an example and a precedent. We sanctioned those who hijacked American planes. We immediately returned the planes to the United States, after attending to the passengers in the best way possible. A number of big American planes were hijacked in the United States and diverted to Cuba. They invented this procedure against Cuba, but it backfired on them, because there are many mentally unbalanced people in that country. They would just take a bottle of water and say: "Look, I have a Molotov cocktail", and pilots are instructed not to take any risks.

Sometimes the police over there have shot the tires and we have had to fill the airstrip with foam so the plane could land on flat tires.

Toward the end of 1980 Carter was in office. The problem had started before, because previous governments had devised it against Cuba. How did we solve it? We returned two hijackers. Before that, they were sanctioned to up to five years in prison. We had to increase and increase the penalty, but the hijackings simply did not stop.

We then adopted another formula: we returned two hijackers and we solved the problem definitively. There would be no need to execute anybody if they had returned the hijackers, as we did, and solved their problem in such a way that in 20 years, despite the mentally unbalanced, it has not occurred again. Now we tell them: "Send them back". It is obvious that Cuba had to cut short the problem of the hijacking of its passenger aircraft and boats.

The Council of State refused to grant clemency, and those crimes have long been punished with the death penalty. Some of those laws were not even being applied. Why? There wasn't an interest and there wasn't a situation of war danger as there is now, the danger of a wave of hijackings of planes and boats. Any day now they were going to hijack a tourist bus, three guys with a knife that would say: "I will kill three tourists if you don't take me to the airport and give me a plane for me to leave". That's how things are, the absolute truth. The Council of State is entitled to grant clemency but it is not obliged to.

When you know there is a serious danger for the life of many people, a serious danger of a conflict, what can you do if they continue giving residence to the hijackers, if they don't send them back, by means of which they would definitely solve the problem.

Usually when they were notified about a group that was traveling illegally, they would send coastguards near Cuba to pick them up and send them back before they reached the U.S. coasts. Do you know what

they did this time? As usual, they sent the coastguards. However, around noon they informed us that that was our business, pursuant to an international agreement, that the country of the ship's flag was the one that had to solve the problem in international waters. They could have solved it as they usually did, but they didn't. They didn't want to have any problems, who knows why, and they said: "You solve it".

Later, we issued a statement categorically affirming: "No hijacked plane or boat that lands or arrives at a Cuban port shall ever again receive a single drop of any kind of fuel." People know, and so do they, that when this is affirmed, that's how it is.

In addition, we said: "Whosoever commits such crimes shall be sent to a court of law to be summarily tried, and the Council of State shall exercise no clemency." Passengers inevitably run risks with criminal actions of that sort. I asked: "And if in these irresponsible ventures an airplane blows up in the air, with all the passengers in it, who is responsible for the dead, we or those who are provoking them from the United States? It will be the sole responsibility not only of those who commit the crime or incite others to commit it, but also those who condemned us mercilessly because we had to apply measures in defense of Cuba and its people."

And how much would a war with the United States cost Cuba? No less than millions of people, because Cuba is a country that already has a culture of struggle.

Journalist.- Of defense.

Fidel Castro.- It has the determination to do it, and in Cuba the war won't be over in three days, nor 100 days, nor 100 years. Because we have studied all the wars that they have fought in the last 40 years, their technique, their tactics, and we know how to defend ourselves. But, none of this would make sense if we could not count on millions of people, millions of weapons, and the necessary knowledge of how to defend ourselves.

It is a war we do not want, a bloody victory we do not at all want. But, of course, we will never surrender the country.

I am talking to you very frankly. There is confusion, despite what we have said and what we have explained. You know that the cables tend to make a caricature of what is said. None of the mercenaries they call "dissidents" have been executed. It was thanks to Felipe that I realized that detail in the question. I thank him for giving me the possibility to explain it well. I was simply going to explain the reasons for the arrest and the sanctions.

Journalist.- Mr. President, here it has been said...

Felipe Pérez.- This has to be the last one, because it is 12:50.

Fidel Castro.- Well, let's see, I'll be briefer, quicker.

Journalist.- Your presence here, in Buenos Aires, has been interpreted as a way of paying back Argentina's position of abstaining in the vote on Cuba at the United Nations. Is this a correct interpretation?

Fidel Castro.- Among others, yes.

Journalist.- And the others?

Fidel Castro.- We've been talking about the others. I see an interesting movement, and we have some friends among those who were coming, some prestigious people, I had that opportunity of greeting them here. Second, because we are very happy for Argentina, for the way the events are unfolding

here. We are happy. We saw how important this is, the fact that many people came, the messages, not only for the Argentinean people but even for the process as a whole, in the search for solutions in difficult times; one can make an inventory of the difficulties. There is also the solidarity with Argentina, with the people and with the current administration, the Argentinean government. Yes, all of that.

And I had to think it over a lot. What was my only concern? We were there with the threats of May 20 and a series of measures to respond to the threats. And I didn't know if we were going to be over there mobilizing 2 million people in a protest or if I would be here. That kept me back home almost to the last minute. We had to wait for May 20, when the United States government and the Miami terrorist mob did unusual things such as the use of an U.S. Air Force aircraft, placed it at 6,000 meters to interfere with our television signal, with our advanced educational programs.

Fortunately, they are constantly making mistakes, they are erratic, and they are Olympic champions of error, which is not difficult when you are the Olympic champion of force and power, of a power greater than the rest of the world, and the ability to destroy this world. Because they have said not only that, but also that any dark corner of the world could be attacked. I don't know if you have a dark little corner somewhere around here. If you do, install electric light, at least (Laughter), to avoid being victims.

Journalist.- Sorry to interrupt, but you spoke about these circumstances. And how was your relationship in the past decade with the past government, with Menem?

Fidel Castro.- I'll tell you immediately, I'll just take another minute, but let me finish what I was telling you.

Another important thing was if my coming here might do some harm to the government. Because, as you know, unfortunately, when I arrive, I'm sometimes received with a bit of noise. Well, that's the way they received me in Mexico at the presidential inauguration. There was no danger here of a whole glass building collapsing, although reporters, photographers and cameramen are quite a troop. There's no way to hold them back. I went to lay a wreath at San Martin's and Jose Marti's monuments and when I looked in the mirror, I saw a line here; I came out with a small lesion. And some cameraman hit even the President of the Republic, who was escorted by horses, but don't accuse anyone (Laughter). He was wounded on his inauguration day.

I realized that it wouldn't be badly looked upon if I accepted the invitation. But I wasn't sure of coming until the last minute. I was convinced that I would be doing him no harm. Because you shouldn't go just because you're invited. Sometimes they make the invitation, but they suggest a name: so and so should be the one to come. In this case nobody mentioned any name or any thing like that, and we have a lot of friends. On the contrary, there was satisfaction when finally the possibility of my arrival was announced.

My trips aren't too easy either. I travel in an old IL-62. You spoke about Allende. The first time I used it was in 1971, more or less, when I visited Chile. That's the plane I have used all my life. I have gone around the world twice on it. It is very noisy and, when I arrived yesterday there were very low, thick clouds, and I saw how it flew under the clouds and didn't know if it was going to land on the airstrip or on a nearby park. The thing is that every time it takes off, it gets to its destination.

I was very happy to have come, because I have seen something that cannot be transmitted by cable: spirit. I saw the people, in general, everywhere, in Parliament, in a spirit of hope, of satisfaction, the hope of finding a solution. That's what I saw, and a good atmosphere, an excellent atmosphere, that's what I can say.

Journalist.- But Menem's was a ten years relationship, where you yourself said very striking things during that time...

Fidel Castro.- But first of all I want to make clear that in the interview I granted Bonasso, when I said

refresco (soda in Cuba), I meant a gaseosa (soda in Argentina), referring to the champagne Menem used to offer me; and I don't want to discredit his vintage, what for? I didn't mean to be rude when I said of his champagne that it was excellent soda.

We got along fine; you know him well. He invited me to Rioja every time I came. He was very friendly! Our conversations went very well until he went to a press conference; when he got there, it was blah, blah, blah, he ranted and raved against me (Laughter). But you can't take those things seriously, and we would continue talking amicably. His way of thinking is the antithesis of mine; we are the opposite, but noblesse oblige. What am I to do? I can't act unfriendly.

Look, precisely yesterday there was a luncheon for heads of State, and they were all kind. Some have said awful things about me, but they looked very educated, all sitting there and I was very quiet, because they were discussing their own problems.

Look, I perceived a certain spirit. What spirit did I perceive? A spirit almost of unity vis-à-vis the economic problems. I had never seen anything like it anywhere, even though the opinions are not alike. In Cuzco, they were discussing other issues but here I witnessed --and I don't think I'm being indiscreet, I'm not going to say anything in particular-- but I did see a spirit, a strange, bizarre spirit of coincidence in everyone without exception, including the wives, on economic matters of utmost importance (Laughter).

Journalist.- For me there is an agreement, among others, that the choice is capitalism and they also agree in expressing it. Isn't that a defeat of socialist ideas after 45 years of revolution?

Fidel Castro.- That the only alternative is capitalism?

Journalist.- That's what the governments of this region say, including Lula's, for example.

Fidel Castro.- Yes, they do, and allow me to speak without fear of anything. I think each particular country needs its particular solution. I say Cuba would not have what it has today under capitalism, especially what it is achieving at an impressive pace in the last few years, because learning and experience are also of great value.

Look, the collapse of the socialist camp enriched our experience. It was a disgrace, a tragedy, because it presented us with a hegemonic superpower. When there were two superpowers, Nyerere used to say that when elephants fight, the grass suffers, and yes, it is true, but believe me, it is better to have two elephants with more or less certain limits, than one elephant owning the prairie and everything else, that can run and trample 24 hours a day. That is what has happened, and its power is immense. We have had to face that power, we have an excellent training.

When the blockade was intensified, and the special period in time of peace began, nobody bet a cent on the Cuban Revolution, and when on top of that the laws grew tougher, when the measures became harsher with the Torricelli and the Helms-Burton Acts --they hardly can find anything else to do-- we have had to pass all the tests. We are a people of hardened veterans.

Journalist.- Mr. President, I have the last question, and I refer you --you probably remember-- to the First Ibero-American Summit in Guadalajara. I was there covering that Summit, and of your main speech I clearly remember until today, I can almost hear you saying it, a phrase to the other presidents...

Fidel Castro.- Do you remember that I praised Endara, from Panama, although he came out of an American military camp? To my surprise, he used an openly nationalistic language.

Journalist.- But there was a phrase you told them: "We could have been everything and we are nothing". That was a...

Fidel Castro.- I was referring to this hemisphere.

Journalist.- Yes, of course. That is why I say... that diagnosis, or that maxim, seemed to me –that is why I remember it to date– final, terminal. Have you changed that view?

Fidel Castro.- No.

Journalist.- No?

Fidel Castro.- Now, it seems as if we are beginning to be something.

Journalist.- Oh, yes, yes.

Fidel Castro.- How much time has passed since our independence? It has almost been 200 years. And, what have we been? The British, the owners here in the south, and the Americans invading Mexico, they took away more than half of their territory of the regions richest in petroleum and everything. They took a piece of land from Panama. They took possession of Puerto Rico. They have ruled us one way or another, directly or indirectly or overthrowing governments. In other words, if this hemisphere had united –and more than one person advocated that unity, Bolivar was among those most outspoken– today we would be something in the world, inferior to no one. There is also a lot of racism in the way we are treated. I remember that while still a student I visited the United States. I was already a bit red. I realized that they discriminated people for being Latino.

Journalist.- Really?

Fidel Castro.- Yes, yes, for being Latino. And what about the minorities? Everyone knows what is going on over there. There is no need to repeat it.

I feel sincere admiration for Latin Americans, for their talent, their courage. Don't think... in El Salvador itself, a very small country, we saw –because they were quite near– how they fought very superior forces that had a lot of military supplies, helicopters and everything.

There shouldn't be any wars. We should make efforts to find peaceful solutions everywhere, in Colombia too. There shouldn't be any wars, because at this time in the history of the Americas, no problem can be solved through wars.

I think that the biggest mistake the United States made, and it is there in the speech I delivered on September 11 warning of that danger, was to use war to cope with the problem of terrorism.

I believe that all of the world opinion had to be united, that all the parties, all the trends, all the churches had to be united in that fight against such methods. I don't think there is any church that favors terrorism, as I see it, any of those actions that cost the lives of people who have nothing to do with the conflict. We never used those procedures in our liberation struggle.

Unfortunately, since there are so many different characters, different countries, different forms of struggle and different problems, the task of finding peace with justice is not at all easy. Even the problems of Colombia today are not the same as 40 years ago. There were guerrillas there before there were in Cuba.

Journalist.- Before than Cuba, yes.

Fidel Castro.- Marulanda had already risen up in arms before the guerrillas appeared in Cuba. When we triumphed he was quite peaceful. The truth is that he was provoked at a point in time. The famous Republic of Marquetalia is witness to that. When he went to meet with president Pastrana, in the region of San Vicente de Caguán, Marulanda's chair remained empty, because he was very distrustful for

things that had occurred to him before. In his speech, read by someone else, is the complete list of what they had in that community. I saw a copy of the speech, it was well known, every goat, every cow, every chicken, every mule of the Republic of Marquetalia, and that being in peace they were invaded. At other times, while in negotiations, they used some targeting equipment and bombed him. That is why he is so terribly distrustful.

Now, I believe, Colombia's problem can only be solved through peace, and in peace; everyone should cooperate. True peace, because quite a few "peaces" there have ended up in the cemetery. The communists themselves, who participated in several electoral processes, lost more than 3,000 men. It was a slaughter of cadres. Other organizations went through the same thing. All those precedents have complicated matters there a lot, and now an external ingredient has been added.

I believe that in the same way Latin Americans think we must unite to find solutions to the very serious economic crisis, we must unite to find a solution to the problem of peace and unity in all the Latin American countries without any interference from the United States. An intervention is not convenient to this hemisphere, for the damage it would cause our peoples and their wealth. Besides, it would lead nowhere or eliminate violence, quite the opposite.

In this, as in the fight against terrorism, the drugs, the destruction of the environment, illiteracy, hunger and the serious diseases affecting and decimating the world, our positions are very clear and well known.

And as to wars of conquests, a country may be conquered yet never governed after the conquest, because you can't govern a country from inside a tank, not even occupy it. There are mysteries that are still unknown, such as what happened with the Iraqi leadership, if it died or not. It's a mystery. It seems strange to me, because I know my northern neighbors, and when they don't say a word about something, one should get suspicious.

I have seen images of imposing crowds in Iraq. They are masses such as the one million or more Shiites who did not want Saddam, but who were not at odds with the Iraqi homeland and the Sunni Moslems, of the same culture and religion. When I see that I grow all the more certain of how insensible was the line followed by the United States government after the dramatic events of September 11.

In answer to your question I speak very realistically based on the experience that I have had the privilege of acquiring during many years of struggle. If we were living in those times, I would do what I did. I have not changed my dreams and hopes at all. Now we are living other times, and the fighting tactics are being developed by the peoples themselves and their own leaders, adjusted to the conditions of each country.

It is the duty of the most prestigious men to be an example and to strive for the preservation of the honesty, the loyalty and the integrity of those who fight for the world, to make it a better place. There are tremendous technological changes, and changes in communications, that never existed before. There are also problems and risks in the world much more serious than ever.

When the Cuban Revolution triumphed no one spoke about the environment. That concept was born only in later years. Nobody spoke about the ozone layer, about global warming or climate change, that are becoming vital problems for all of humanity and that unite all of humanity. Nobody spoke about cultural invasion, which takes place through the monopoly of the media that extends throughout the planet. There are many new problems that preoccupy humanity, whether intellectuals or not, those who work with their hands and those who work with their minds. Differences between them are abridged. There is the need to universalize knowledge.

Our country is gradually becoming a country of intellectuals that are now hundreds of thousands. We have extended university education to all the municipalities of the country, with formulas to even fight unemployment. Youths that had dropped out of school, from 17 to 30 years, we have more than

100,000, who we pay for studying. You see, we are preventing people from ending up in prison, as we have been studying a lot of social elements that had never been thoroughly studied before.

Even in relation to the death penalty, we have said that we want it to be eradicated. But under the present conditions, we assume our responsibility with an absolutely clear conscience, because we have an idea of what is going on in the world, of what the others are thinking and of what a war can cost Cuba, a lot more than to any other country; because the cost is greater the more the country is determined to defend itself, when there is the necessary conscience to defend itself till death.

Believe me that if I don't continue talking to you, it is not because I don't wish to explain, but because, as you know, I have other people waiting, and I should see the President at 3:00 p.m.

Journalist.- Until when are you staying?

Fidel Castro.- Until today after 12:00. Yes, it will be after 12:00, as I still have some obligations. It has been a pleasure talking to you.

Journalist.- For me too, sir.

Fidel Castro.- I have taken up serious questions, in a serious conversation.

Journalist.- Thank you, very much.

Fidel Castro.- I'm very pleased.

Journalist.- They're telling me they want to take your picture over there...

Fidel Castro.- It's all right.

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