

OP-ED

Fidel's fade-out

Ann Louise Bardach

ON JULY 27, 2006, Fidel Castro nearly died during emergency intestinal surgery to stem internal bleeding caused by chronic diverticulitis. Since then, Cuba-watchers and obituary writers have been on high alert awaiting his demise.

Yet, more than three years later, Castro soldiers on, approaching his mortal end with the same zeal he lavished on his life. The 83-year-old appears to have adjusted to his medically mandated retirement, enduring various surgeries and their attendant complications. A state-of-the-art convalescent suite has been installed in his principal residence, Punto Cero, where he is surrounded by family and Cuba's finest doctors. On his good days, he entertains well-wishers — among them, Harry Belafonte and Oliver Stone. And he continues to intervene in the thorny politics of Cuba.

In 2007, while still hospitalized, Castro began a transition from being Cuba's commander in chief to its pundit in chief, penning columns he calls "Reflections" in the state-run newspaper, Granma. Late last year, he offered some personal introspection. "I have had the rare privilege of observing events for a very long time," he wrote. He then acknowledged the gravity of his illness. "I do not expect I shall enjoy such a privilege four years from now — when President Obama's first term has concluded."

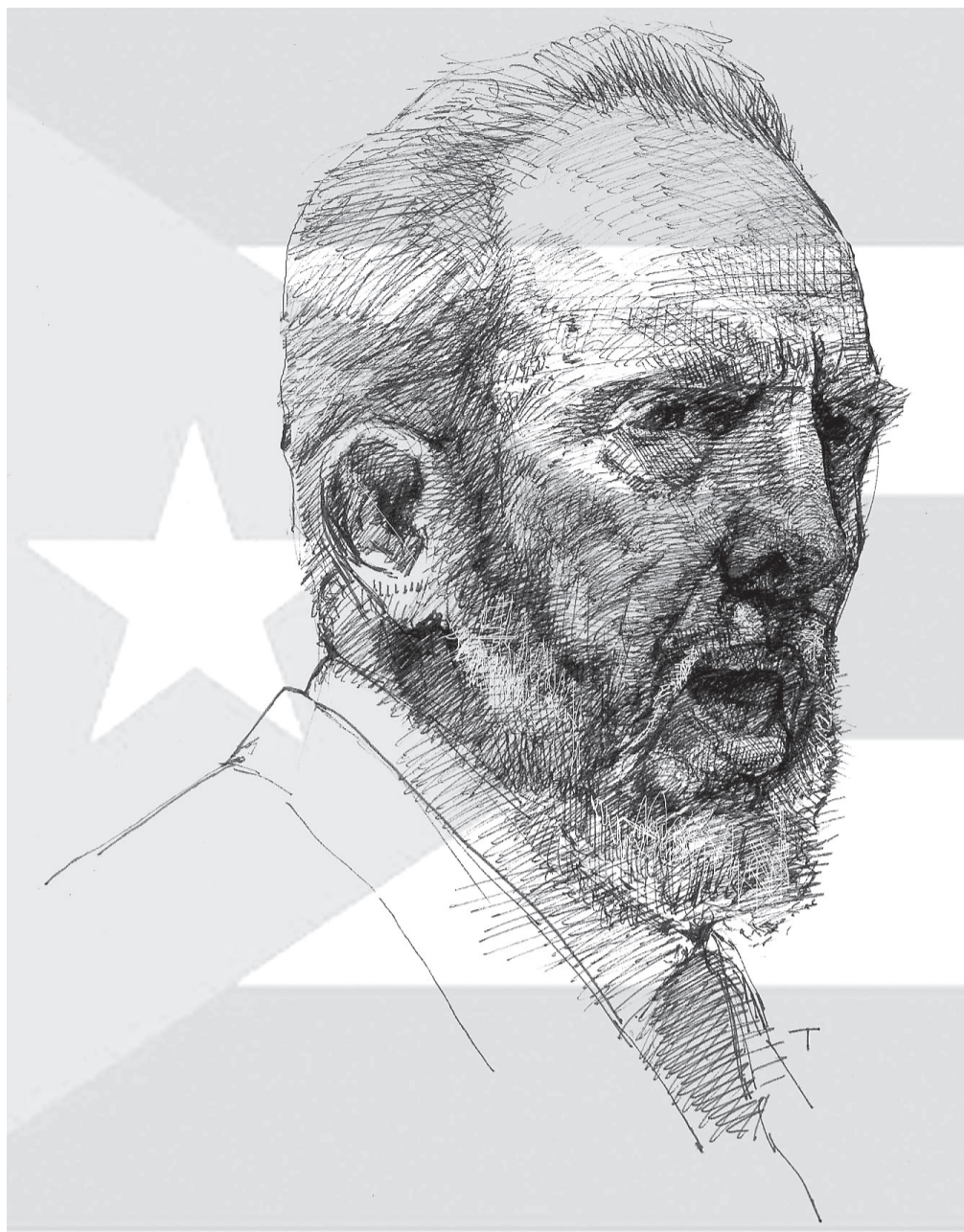
But until Castro is in the grave, we will be hearing from him. While his brother Raul and the Cuban army are running the day-to-day affairs of the country, Castro retains and exercises veto power. And Cubans continue to feel the strongman's sting.

In March, more than a dozen of the most senior members of the Cuban regime were purged from the government. While Raul Castro had initiated the internal coup, Fidel was quick to weigh in and assail its casualties, all former members of his inner circle. The men had succumbed to "the honey of power," he wrote in his column. Their replacements have dodged the limelight and tread far more carefully.

Castro's reluctant leave-taking — with its periodic near-finales — fits into a long tradition of Hispanic *caudillos* or dictators. Consider, for example, the life — and death — of Francisco Franco, Spain's dictator of almost 40 years. Both Castro's father and Franco hailed from the rugged northern countryside of Spain, a region renowned for its fierce and stubborn citizenry. And notwithstanding divergent political ideologies — Franco was a zealous anti-communist — the two men had a good deal in common. Both were willing to forge unpalatable and unpopular alliances with totalitarian states to shore up their power — Franco with Nazi Germany and Castro with the Soviet Union.

And Franco's shrouded last days neatly foreshadowed Castro's. Franco became grievously ill in 1974 and was forced to turn over his rule — "temporarily," he insisted — to Prince Juan Carlos. Castro also initially ceded control to his brother only "temporarily." Like Castro, Franco had an unexpected recovery, though his lasted only a year before he died at the age of 82.

Although it is generally believed that Franco



PAUL TONG TMS

Castro's reluctant leave-taking fits into a long tradition of *caudillos*.

died days earlier, his death was announced on Nov. 20, 1975, the same day on which Jose Antonio Primo de Rivera, the founder of Franco's fascist Falange party, died 40 years earlier.

Some assert doctors kept Franco alive under orders from the dictator that he would live until the ordained date. But Franco's scheming to die with gravity and splendor backfired, and his protracted departure became a joke that would long outlive him. "Generalissimo Francisco Franco is still dead," Chevy Chase would intone with mock solemnity on "Saturday Night Live" as a running gag for nearly two years.

Castro's long goodbye is proving equally irresistible for late-night comedians. "He ran Cuba for almost 50 years," began Jay Leno in one riff. "And political analysts are now debating what

kind of changes the Cuban people will hope for. I'm gonna guess: term limits."

Castro's untidy leaving has also kept the news media in an indefinite state of high alert, as they formulate and reformulate coverage and obituaries. The veteran Spanish Civil War reporter Martha Gellhorn found herself in a similar pickle three decades ago. In 1975, she accepted an assignment from New York magazine to write about post-Franco Spain. "This thrills me, the sort of journalism I love," she wrote her son. "I am waiting for the old swine to die; but obviously he is being kept breathing (no more) while the right tightens its hold on the country."

When I asked Castro in a 1994 interview when he would retire, he snapped: "My vocation is the revolution. I am a revolutionary, and revolutionaries do not retire."

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Making reform stick

RONALD BROWNSTEIN

THE STAKES in the elections of 2010 and 2012 have just increased exponentially. Although many obstacles remain, the House's narrow approval of healthcare reform last weekend bettered the odds that President Obama will sign legislation vastly expanding the number of insured Americans. But the near-unanimous opposition of House Republicans to the bill signaled that the GOP may resist and challenge the initiative for years. That means, if the overhaul becomes law, the coming elections could determine whether nearly universal healthcare joins Social Security and Medicare as a central branch of the American social welfare system — or whether Republicans acquire the leverage to repeal or severely prune the new program before it takes root.

Since Saturday's vote, much attention has focused on the formidable hurdles still confronting the reform bill in the Senate and on the House blueprint's imperfections, particularly its lack of key cost-containment measures. But that focus has obscured the historic significance of the House's 220-215 vote approving the plan. Franklin Roosevelt, Harry Truman, Richard Nixon and Bill Clinton all pursued universal coverage, but none could advance such a bill as far as a floor vote in either chamber.

"There is still a long way to go, but the House vote really was an historical marker," said political scientist James Morone of Brown University, the coauthor of "The Heart of Power," a new book analyzing how presidents since FDR have handled healthcare. "We have had brilliant, successful, charismatic leadership at various times. ... And no one has gotten as far as this Congress and this president."

If Obama does sign a reform bill, which appears more likely than not, Republicans will face a momentous choice between consolidation and repudiation — between accepting the new program or seeking to dismantle it.

The alternative paths are neatly captured by the GOP's contrasting reactions to the two central cords of America's existing social safety net. After FDR got Social Security approved in 1935, Alf Landon, his Republican challenger in 1936, denounced it as "unjust ... stupidly drafted [and] ... folly." Roosevelt's landslide victory over Landon (and subsequent reelections) provided Social Security the time to build impregnable support. But many congressional Republicans kept fighting the program until President Eisenhower, a Republican, declared a truce after his election in 1952.

By contrast, Republicans largely accepted Medicare soon after President Lyndon Johnson signed it into law in 1965. Although conservative Republicans such as Barry Goldwater and Ronald Reagan had fiercely condemned the program before its creation, Nixon during the 1968 campaign spared Medicare from his criticism of the Great Society's cost. Once elected, he became a strong supporter of it and effectively ended challenges to its existence, Morone notes.

Which path might Republicans follow if Obama signs universal healthcare? Several factors point toward confrontation. The GOP accepted Medicare so quiescently partly because the program began dispensing benefits just one year after passage and rapidly became too popular to assail. Social Security, though, was phased in over many years — as healthcare reform is slated to be. Such delay can invite "fierce and protracted ... guerrilla war," notes Harvard sociologist Theda Skocpol.

Also encouraging confrontation is the breadth of GOP opposition. Almost all House Republicans at the time voted to derail Medicare and Social Security by "recommitting" the bills to committee. But once those challenges failed, about half of House Republicans backed Medicare on final passage, and four-fifths supported Social Security. House Republicans last week voted 176 to 1 against the healthcare bill.

Some House Republicans have already pledged to repeal any healthcare bill if they regain the majority. And many GOP challengers in 2010 will surely echo them. But with Obama holding a veto pen, Republicans probably couldn't mount a real threat unless they won the White House in 2012. One top advisor to a possible GOP presidential contender says that given the GOP base's hostility to the reform plan and independents' unease, it is likely that "most potential [Republican] candidates will argue for wholesale replacement with their own version of ... reform."

If Obama passes health reform and the GOP then seeks its repeal, the next presidential election could lastingly redefine America's social safety net. Like 1936 and 1968, 2012 looms as a crossroads in the relationship between Americans and their government.

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Doomsday? Not to the Maya

Mary Jo McConahay
WRITING FROM GUATEMALA CITY

THE WORLD may not end two years from now, despite Internet predictions and this week's blockbuster disaster movie, "2012." On screen, the final day in the 5,126-year Maya calendar brings global destruction, and Los Angeles slides inexorably into the sea.

Here in the cradle of Maya civilization, however, shaman/priest Calixta Gabriel said Mother Earth — Madre Tierra — would suffer "hunger, wind and thunder," but rumors of its demise are greatly exaggerated.

This is relatively good news coming from an *aq'ij*, a "calendar keeper" or spiritual guide among the indigenous Maya people, whose traditions and astronomy-based cosmology originated more than 2,000 years ago. Maya today number about 7 million in Central America and Mexico. One million Maya live in the United States. Their Long Count

calendar, which began Aug. 11, 3114 BC, ends on Dec. 21, 2012.

During Guatemala's 36-year civil war, which ended in 1996, the Maya were suspected of supporting insurgents, and they were "disappeared" by the thousands. Their religion, which had survived the Spanish conquest with influences from Catholicism, was practiced discreetly, far from non-Maya eyes. Gabriel, 52, fled into exile in California after death squads murdered three brothers in the 1980s, returning as the war ended to her "gift" as a shaman through study with elders.

Now some Maya priests have moved their rituals from caves and remote mountain locations to public areas, including temple ruins frequented by tourists. Calendar keepers perform ceremonies using fire, pine incense, colored candles, chocolate and other elements, petitioning for a community good, such as rain, or protection. The religion matches certain days with certain spirits, and interpreting time and the calendar in daily life is the main responsibility of a Maya priest.

More than a thousand years ago, astronomer priests determined Long Count dates of kingly reigns, inscribed on Maya monuments along with dates of royal births and deaths. Kings and queens had priestly duties by virtue of their position, and might sacrifice their own blood to communicate with the gods. Today, believers ask the shaman/priests to determine the propitious day to

OLD TIME: Glyphs representing Maya calendar months.

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marry or travel, or to bless efforts. The signing of the 1996 peace accords was preceded by a Maya ceremony at the ancient site of Kaminaljuyu in Guatemala City and public prayers at the National Palace.

For these purposes, Maya priests use a 260-day calendar called the Short Count. The Long Count tracks Maya millennia, centuries, years, months and days, starting with the supposed date of Maya creation and extending thousands of years into the future. A third way of reckoning approximates the 365-day calendar.

Some Maya spiritual guides say they have been consulting among themselves on the significance of 2012, traveling informally by foot and bus, including to Mexico. (There is no pope or central doctrinal authority to whom *aq'ijab* look for counsel, although some elders command particular respect.)

Some experts on the Maya believe Dec. 21, 2012, merits no great attention, pointing out that only one inconclusive mention of the date appears among thousands of deciphered Maya texts. It's simply the end of an era — of about 5,000 years — with another one beginning the next day.

"The scale of Maya time-reckoning dwarfs anything in our own cosmology by many orders of magnitude," wrote epigrapher David Stuart on his blog devoted to ancient Maya script.

Gabriel said she was cautious about magnifying the 2012 date's significance in a way that may be misunderstood. "We do not want to commit the error that some Christians made at the turn of the millennium," she said, referencing much-hyped doomsday predictions about the year 2000, which passed quietly. Nevertheless, she said, we live in "a time of transition" between epochs, when men and women will realize — or not — how to pull back from "de-

stroying" the Earth with pollution and by cutting down forests.

"Conditions could be severe," she said. "It depends on our answer. The universe responds according to the treatment it is given."

Another *aq'ij*, Gregorio Chayax, 70, wears a baseball cap, T-shirt and pants rolled above rubber sandals. He serves as a spiritual guide among the towering temples of Tikal, the most visited Maya site in the Guatemalan Petén rain forest. (Tikal has a cameo in "2012.")

Chayax has already seen his familiar world disappear, well before 2012. He is one of only eight remaining speakers of Petén's once predominant Itza Maya tongue, according to the Guatemalan Academy of Maya Languages.

From 1991 to 2001, about 815,000 acres of protected Petén rain forest were lost to unlawful settlers, drug traffickers and cattle ranchers. Since then, the rate of loss has accelerated, according to Edin Lopez, technical director of the government's National Council of Protected Areas in Petén. "We are not going to speak badly of cows," Chayax said. "But the ranchers have no heart."

Chayax suggested that a transition between eras, signaled by the end of the Long Count calendar, started more than 20 years ago and would continue for at least another 20. "We are going to suffer more heat than now," he said. "We are out of balance. We have become excessive in what we demand."

Yet he said the actions of men and women might head off deterioration of life on Earth.

"Roots are still there, if we know how to find them, and make them live again," he said.

MARY JO MCCONAHAY'S "Maya Roads, Travels through Space and Time in the American Rainforest," will be published in 2011.

