

Opinion

Cuban prisoner's tale reveals true nature of Castro regime

Shortly after a Cuban tribunal sentenced Humberto Sorí Marin to death, his mother went to visit Fidel Castro to plead for her son's life. Marin and Castro had fought as comrades in the mountains, and after the revolution they often dined together at Marin's home with Senora Marin doing the cooking. At the meeting Castro assured her: "Don't worry, nothing will happen to Humberto." The next night Castro himself ordered the execution.



Richard Cohen

That incident comes from the pen of Armando Valladares, whose book, *Against All Hope*, is an account of the 22 years he spent in various Cuban prisons for the "crime" of speaking out against communism. To say that the book is compelling is to understate its power; to say that it is horrific is also an understatement. With this book, Fidel Castro takes his place as yet another of this century's mass murderers.

The execution of Sorí Marin was just another day's work for Castro. Turning on enemies and former colleagues alike, the Cuban dictator dispatched several thousand political prisoners (the exact figure is unknown) and imprisoned countless others. Valladares gives an account of a Latin Gulag where prisoners were terrorized, beaten, starved, tortured and casually executed, often on the caprice of some uniformed sadist. Many were like Valladares — convicted by tribunals that, for the sake of effi-

ciency, handed down their verdicts before the trial had begun.

One of the benefits of being a liberal in a conservative era is that easy assumptions get challenged. One of those assumptions has been that Fidel Castro was not, all in all, such a bad guy. He was credited with improving the standard of living — particularly health care — for most Cubans, with cleaning up notorious Havana (the prostitution capital of the Western Hemisphere) and, of course, with toppling the repressive Batista regime.

It was conceded that he was a dictator, that he was responsible for human rights abuses. But it was argued that these were insignificant and paled in comparison to what was happening elsewhere in the hemisphere — Chile, Argentina, Guatemala and El Salvador. Liberals held their fire.

In an essay in a recent issue of *The New York Review of Books*, Aryeh Neier tries to account for such a double standard. Neier, vice chairman of the American Watch Committee, attributes the left's preoccupation with atrocities by rightist regimes to the tendency of those regimes to label their own enemies Castroites.

It seemed that to concede the case against Castro would also concede the case, right-wing dictators were making against their own dissidents — not to mention the case being made by American conservatives. The reasoning is no more sophisticated than the old maxim that the enemy of my enemy is my friend.

Neier's credentials as a critic of all oppressive regimes are beyond reproach. He offers some reasonable justifications

for what amounted to Castro playing American liberals for a patsy, but they in no way take the left off the hook. In fact, not only were Castro's crimes ignored, but the man himself was depicted as the romantic revolutionary — a baseball-playing companion, a macho Hemingway type in the land of "Poppa" himself. Castro's compelling and attractive antics totally overshadowed the sinister aspects of his reign — so much so that even conservatives, who loathed Castro for his communism, remained ignorant of the true nature of his regime. For whatever reason, the American left is at last coming to terms with Castro. The Neier review, plus the reviews that *Against All Hope* received in *The Washington Post* and *The New York Times*, has done much to rectify matters.

Now it is the conservatives who follow false messiahs. President Reagan's characterization of virtually any Third World anti-communist as a "Freedom Fighter" is the moral equivalent of calling Castro an agrarian reformer. We await patiently the mea culpas from the right.

According to America Watch, at least 1100 political prisoners remain in Cuban jails and hundreds more in so-called "political education programs." Some of them have been incarcerated for more than 25 years — old men whose executions effectively have been played out in slow motion.

In *Against All Hope*, Valladares tells their story just as surely as he tells his own. Through the personal intercession of French President Francois Mitterand, Valladares was freed from Castro's grasp. Through his book, so have we all.

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Mail Call

On our high horse

EDITOR:

While the Battalion Editorial Board gloats over the economic and political unrest in South Africa, why not examine the "benefits" of divestment. Better yet, let's examine America's "moral convictions" which are being saved by hearted big business.

Monday's editorial reported that whites were emigrating from South Africa in increasing numbers. Many of these whites come from South Africa's slumped business sector. What is not stated in the editorial is that South Africa's business sector is made up of whites of British descent. These people didn't invent, didn't implement and do not condone apartheid.

The South African government was purged of high-ranking Britons when the National Party came to power in 1948. The whites who will invariably remain are, of course, Afrikaners. Their presence in South Africa is justified in a myriad of historical events both real and legendary. The Afrikaner run 350 years deep, roots which no sanction will ever kill.

On television, we see images of chanting blacks, protesting, demanding. The crowd moves to a fevered pitch. Then, the police move in to crush the fire in the crowd. Is this Soweto? Cape Town? Durban? Try Miami, Chicago, Watts or Birmingham. America has a so-called "moral conviction" to bring change to South Africa.

The United States, a nation which has more civil rights laws on the books than any other, is still grappling with its own racial problems. America, a nation that subdued, exploited and practically exterminated its native peoples, South Africa to give its blacks a degree of universal franchise that few black Africans will ever see.

What a high horse we have mounted for ourselves.

Aaron P. Kiker

Writing about stereotypes

EDITOR:

I was very disappointed with Loren Steffy's column of July 29. For the most it was caricature and ridicule, relying on catch-phrases like "monkey trial" and "bible banging." The ideas and questions involved were stated only briefly and in the most simplistic terms and a simplistic answer given. I think the column was a waste of Steffy's writing ability, and I would like to make a couple of suggestions.

I would suggest first that Steffy write more about ideas and issues and about personalities. There are important ideas involved, and they are seen most clearly when one actually does compare the two "monkey trials." The authorities were the plaintiffs in the first trial, in the second they are the defendants. In the first trial the state was asserting that only a certain religious and philosophical position could be taught. The state was certainly wrong to do that.

In the second trial, the parents are accusing the state of this same offense. They say that the required reading propagates a specific philosophy. If that accusation is true, then the answer Steffy gives, "Go to a private school," is a bad as telling Scopes to go teach in a private school.

Of course, Steffy may think that their allegations are false. He should use his column to show their fallacy. He should give us his thoughts on how one deals with ideas in literature and philosophy in the setting of public schools. It is a hard question, because the law not only protects the majority from religious minorities, but also those minorities from the majority.

Second, if Steffy does write about people, he should do so with respect. Good name calling. He should put himself in their shoes. He need not agree with them; but his columns would be better if he wrote about real people, not stereotypes.

Randy Davy
Graduate student
Department of Chemistry

Lacking actual experience

EDITOR:

In reference to William Buckley's article in the July 22 *Battalion* and Mark Ude's on July 23; I think that we are making a pitiful mistake by simply labeling as "wrong" the widespread growth of drug usage in our society. Neither Buckley or Ude seem to have any actual experience with drugs (and this is not unusual for detractors) — the illustration of the drug user that Buckley offers is limited in that for him, "it is agony whether you go on to die or whether you go on to live." This seems ridiculous. They never consider why the person chooses to use drugs in the first place — and so it is not difficult for the person to mouth support for the death penalty for anyone caught selling drugs.

When asked, many people will respond that they use drugs to, "have a good time . . . to party," which is word for word the reason many use to justify drinking, which is, of course, a completely legal, though no less dangerous escape from reality. I think that this is only a superficial explanation for a general dissatisfaction with life.

It is not difficult to see that there are ample justifications for a person to occasionally escape from the "realities" of modern existence: alienation from other humans, who, like everyone else, feel themselves alienated; the limited possibilities of ever finding a career that is both truly fulfilling and truly humanizing in a society that is becoming less and less personal (there is nothing attractive about becoming an emotionally bankrupt, brain-dead television addict); the rise of the power of an obsolete religion to influence final decisions relating to morality that, in the end will affect us all — and that same religion is operating in what seems to be exactly the opposite interest of the very word of the founder! . . . need I continue?

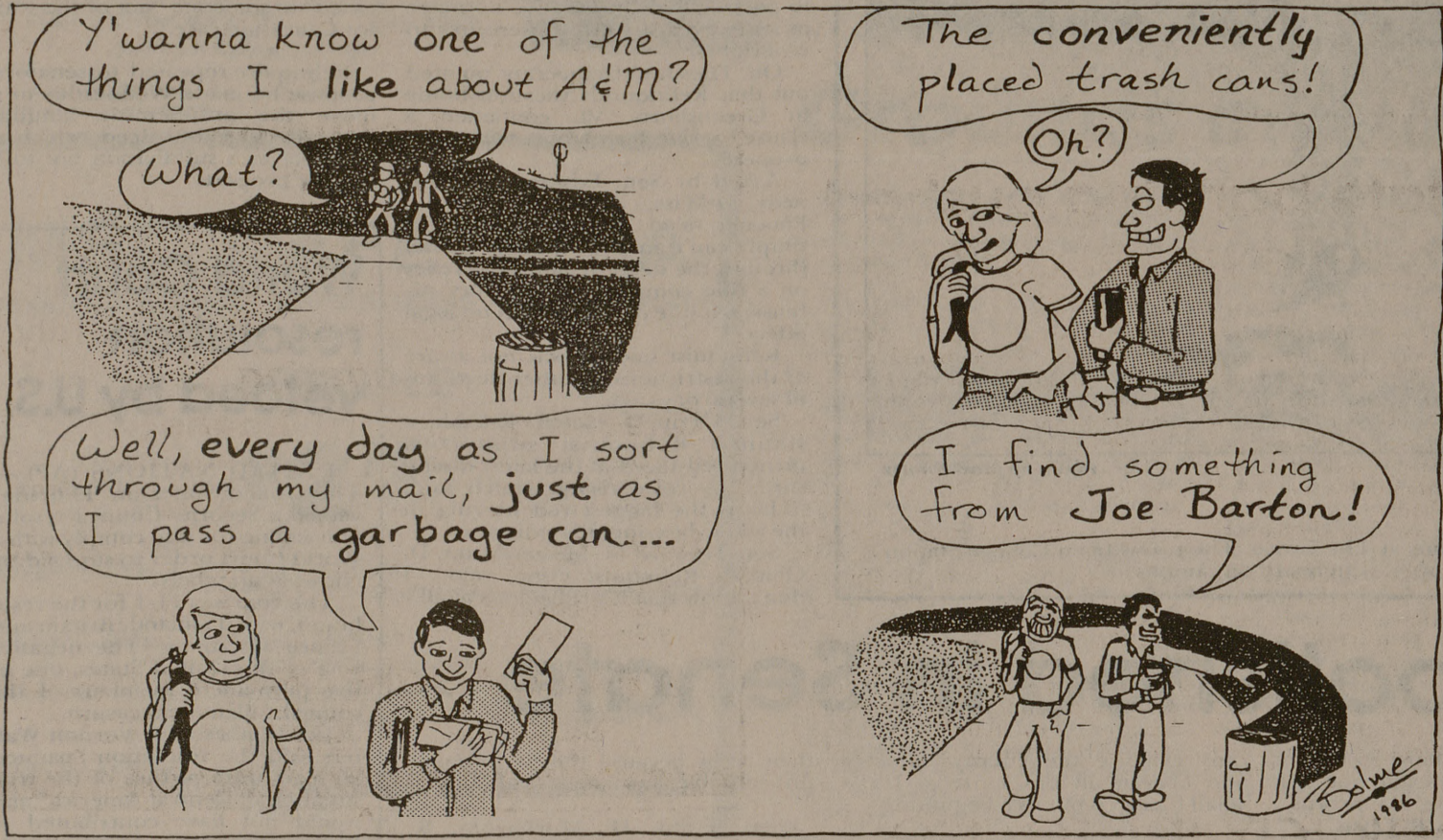
For many, it is only by the temporary derangement of the senses, by a conscious letting-go of reality that they are able to assume a new position and see suddenly either the ignorance and fallacy of the path of their existence or perhaps glimpse the heaven that may have been sitting right beside them all along. And this is a dangerous thing in a society of machines, for it is very often by this same process of "poisoning" that so many have begun to question and/or reject the norms of society, and continue, long after the discontinuation of their drug use, the process of finding themselves and becoming that ultimatemodern criminal — the individual.

And what is it about the "individual" among the herd that excites so much emotion? I am talking about those rare people that cross our actual existence from time to time and who draw out most often completely conflicting inward and outward responses. The bonds of kinship tighten when the individual is among us — we eye each other knowingly, making all sorts of supposedly secret gestures and acting as if there is something faintly obscure and humorous about his or her words, actions and demeanor, while inwardly we feel both jealously and the hope that they will soon fail and conveniently disappear. The true individual among us is the ultimate modern criminal, for it is his or her courage that exposes so blatantly our own cowardice.

A law in itself is not necessarily correct by the virtue of simply being law. Only hope Ude will someday more carefully consider his point of view before digesting wholesale the morality and prejudices of his great-great grandfathers.

Cara Clark
Bill Sparks

Letters to the editor should not exceed 300 words in length. The editorial staff reserves the right to edit letters for style and length, but will make every effort to maintain the author's intent. Each letter must be signed and must include the address and telephone number of the writer.



Study measures economic status by assets instead of income

A new Census Bureau study has created a stir in political and economic circles because, among other things, it reveals a sharp disparity of assets between white and blacks.

But it does something more as well: It removes the focus from income, which long has been the primary measure of economic status, and shifts that focus to

a more significant measure, the manner in which that income is used.

Why is it that two families of like income can live radically different lives, one accumulating assets, the other a pile of bills?

The consumer's dollar is the subject of a great battle every day of the week, with billions of stimuli constantly bombarding him and her to spend. To spend is easy, but to know what to spend on is not.

For example, many families place home ownership at the top of their list, and sacrifice in order to achieve the down payment. Some families prefer to have the use of their income immediately, and rent rather than buy.

While some families are better off renting, and conceivably can come out ahead by doing so, home-ownership is by far the biggest factor in the sharp diversity of assets noted in the Census study.

Home ownership receives special treatment in the United States and in many other countries. Homeowners are allowed various tax deductions, whereas renters receive few. Homeowners also receive preferential treatment from banks.

Because part of their monthly payments are used to build equity, homeowners are automatic savers. They are investors too, since home prices gener-

ally rise, often sharply. Some, in fact, have doubled in the past four years.

In contrast, those who pay rent receive few, if any, tax benefits. And they build no equity. Moreover, they are often damaged badly by inflation, whereas homeowners sometimes benefit from that condition.

Oddly, assets as a determination of economic well-being — as opposed to income — has been all but ignored by public officials and sometimes even by bankers.

The granting of home-mortgage loans, for example, is often on the basis of income rather than assets — even today, when assets such as home equity are sometimes as available for spending as money in a checking account.

That is, equity that once was frozen in a house until the homeowner sold or took out a second mortgage can now be borrowed by the stroke of a pen. Unlike the situation just a decade ago, equity is now a liquid asset.

No wonder the Census Bureau study has created so much attention. It focuses on "permanent" assets, an objective measure, as a determinant of wealth — rather than on income, which can mean many things, depending on how it is used.

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