

## HAS UNSINKABLE TRUMP CAMPAIGN SHIP RUN AGROUND?

**WASHINGTON:** Donald Trump prospers where other candidates perish. His abrasive rhetoric, repudiated by some, is embraced by many more. But after comments on Tuesday that could be interpreted as a call for violence against his rival Hillary Clinton or her judicial nominees, observers, including stalwarts within his own Republican Party, were wondering aloud whether the Republican's campaign is beyond repair.

"The Republican Party needs to start examining quickly their options for removing the Republican nominee," former GOP congressman Joe Scarborough, now a television host, wrote in a Washington Post opinion column. Trump was the unsinkable candidate throughout the primaries, besting 16 other Republican rivals, infuriating and entrancing voters with rhetoric while fuelling a year-long media frenzy over The Donald. He clashed harshly with a female Fox News anchor, inflaming debate about his treatment of women. He called Mexican immigrants "rapists," alienating the powerful Hispanic voting bloc. He called for a temporary ban on Muslims entering the country, drawing widespread concern about bigotry. And yet no controversy has proved serious enough to torpedo Trump's candidacy. But the general election is widely seen as a different animal than the primaries, and recent polls show his campaign listing badly after a series of stumbles in which critics accused him of disrespecting military families. He trails Clinton by nearly eight points nationally, according to a RealClearPolitics average.

### Rare precedent

Seldom has a candidate bounced back from such poor poll numbers less than three months before an election in the modern era, but it has happened. In May 1988, Democrat Michael Dukakis stormed into the lead against vice president George H.W. Bush and held it for more than three months, taking a 17-point advantage in August, according to Gallup. But Bush regained the lead shortly after the Republican convention and coasted to victory. John McCain surged ahead of Barack Obama in 2008 to a five-point advantage after the Republican convention in September, only to fade to defeat.

Trump has no such convention luxury ahead of him. He already enjoyed his post-convention bump late last month, prior to the Democratic confab. "Whoever is leading two weeks after the second convention has won every time," Christopher Wlezien, a government professor at University of Texas at Austin said. "Preferences are substantially baked by that point." Recent polls show Trump trailing in crucial battleground states Ohio and Pennsylvania, and virtually tied with Clinton in Florida.

Traditionally Republican strongholds Georgia and Arizona are now described as "in play," with one recent Georgia poll putting Clinton ahead by four points. With pressure building on the provocative billionaire to stay on message, he has proven to be a bridge too far for many Republicans. Fifty senior national security experts wrote an open letter this week saying Trump "lacks the character, values, and experience" to be president. In a scathing editorial, The New York Times appeared to agree. "The time has come for Republicans—including Mr. McCain—to repudiate Mr. Trump once and for all," it said.

### 'No power' to dump Trump

Although a movement is afoot among some Republicans to dump Trump, scrapping a fairly elected presidential nominee from the ticket would be unprecedented in the modern era. Longtime Republican National Committee member Morton Blackwell, president of the Leadership Institute which trains conservative activists, said the committee has "no power" to remove a nominee. "They simply can not override the decision of the national convention," said Blackwell, who was a Ted Cruz supporter but now backs Trump. Doing so would effectively require a political coup, an effort that would likely end up in court, sully the party at a critical juncture. Even if it worked, no Republican heavy-weight has stepped forward to serve as savior.—AFP

# FIDEL CASTRO: 90 YEARS

**HAVANA:** After surviving more than 600 assassination attempts, defying 10 US presidents and shaping half a century of history, Fidel Castro turns 90 on Saturday. Here are snapshots of this magnetic, polarizing giant of the 20th century, who has beaten the odds to hang on well into the 21st.

### The survivor

The years have left their mark on the father of the Cuban Revolution, who transferred power to his younger brother Raul 10 years ago. His long black beard has turned a wispy gray. He has given up his iconic Cohiba cigars. He rarely appears in public.

But Fidel lives on. No one could have predicted his place in history when he launched his revolutionary career with a botched attack on Cuba's Moncada military barracks in 1953. The 26-year-old lawyer was captured and jailed for the failed raid, which ended with dozens of rebels killed or executed by dictator Fulgencio Batista's forces.

Fast forward six years, and Castro was triumphantly rolling into Havana, having returned from exile to lead a guerrilla army that once numbered just 12 men to defeat Batista and his military of 80,000. The unlikely victory brought the "red menace" of Communism to the United States' doorstep at the height of the Cold War.

Alarmed, the US Central Intelligence Agency and Cuban exiles tried to assassinate Castro 634 times, his ex-intelligence chief, Fabian Escalante, has estimated. Castro once told Spanish journalist Ignacio Ramonet he nearly always carried his Browning pistol just in case. But he denied reports he wore a bullet-proof vest. "I have a moral vest. It's strong. It has always protected me," he told journalists in 1979, baring his chest to prove the point.

### The seducer

"I was so impressed! I could only look at his face and say, 'I love him,'" says Mercedes Gonzalez, 59, who has only seen Castro twice up close. But she says she felt an overpowering attraction. With his rugged rebel look and imposing persona, Castro has long fascinated people, and women in particular.

"He projects a very attractive public image," says Salomon Susi, the author of a "Dictionary of Fidel Castro's Thoughts." "It's part of his legend." Officially, Castro has been married twice and fathered seven children by three women.

Rumors of secret affairs and more children abound. But he keeps his private life to himself. "Private life, in my opinion, should not be an instrument for publicity or politics," he said in 1992.

### The enemy

Castro defined himself in opposition to the American "empire," and the resentment lingers to this day. After Barack Obama sealed the two nations' historic rapprochement by visiting Cuba in March, Castro told Cubans not to be fooled by the US president's "syrupy words." He recalled the island's long enmity with the US, including Washington's backing for the failed invasion of Cuba at the Bay of Pigs in 1961. His bitterness over that botched CIA plot played a part in pushing the



**HAVANA, CUBA:** This file photo taken on June 01, 1957 shows Fidel Castro (top, 2-R), his brother Raul Castro (at bottom) and Argentinean born Ernesto Che Guevara (top, 2-L) and newspaper, Granma. After surviving more than 600 assassination attempts, defying 10 US presidents and shaping half a century of history.—AFP

world to the brink of nuclear war during the Cuban Missile Crisis the following year, when the Soviet Union agreed to his request to send ballistic missiles to Cuba. You don't want to be on Castro's bad side. He opened his half-century of iron-fisted rule in 1959 by jailing one of his own guerrilla commanders, Huber Matos, for 20 years when he criticized the new regime's turn toward Communism.

Castro meted out even harsher treatment to Cuban dissidents. "He is the man of 'E's: egomaniacal, egotistical, egocentric," said Martha Beatriz Roque, 71, an anti-Castro dissident who was one of 75 opponents jailed in the "black spring" of 2003. "I will remember him as a dictator."

### The underdog

Castro had a penchant for trying to pull off the seemingly impossible. In 1961, he all but eradicated illiteracy with an ambitious rural education campaign. When the exodus of Cuban exiles left the country with just 3,000 doctors, he vowed to make the island a "medical superpower." Today it has 88,000 doctors and one of the most respected health systems in the world.

Other projects were less successful. In 1970, with Cuba's economy strangled by the US embargo, he ordered a nationwide campaign to harvest a record-shattering 10 million tons of sugar. Despite mobilizing Cubans en masse to work the fields, the campaign failed. Cubans are all too used to "Fidel Plans" that never quite pan out, like the ones to raise buffalo or turn Cuba into a world-class cheese producer despite a shortage of cows.

### The icon

Castro was a hero to revolutionary movements and independence struggles worldwide. He sent 386,000 troops to fight in spots where the Cold War turned hot: Angola, Ethiopia, the Congo, Algeria and Syria. And he backed leftist guerrillas across Latin America.

The military results were mixed. But the symbolism was powerful. "He's the most important personality of the 20th century in the Western hemisphere," said Ivan Marquez, second-in-command of the Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia (FARC). Castro's revolution "ignited... the desire to struggle, to take to the mountains, to grab a rifle and try to change things," Marquez told AFP.—AFP