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Washington Watch

**SECRECY SHROUDED  
 DETAILS OF FIDEL  
 CASTRO'S HEALTH**

By Paul Handley

Cuban leader Fidel Castro would always laugh off speculation about his health. With an athletic build, and physical stamina that lasted deep into his 70s, it seemed he would continue to rule for many more years. Castro's own physician, a specialist in longevity, even suggested in 2004 that the leader could live to 140. "I am not exaggerating," Dr Eugenio Selman said.

So Cubans were stunned when their aging, yet seemingly indefatigable leader announced he had undergone emergency intestinal surgery and temporarily relinquished presidential powers on July 31, 2006, 13 days before his 80th birthday. He vanished from sight for four years, with videos and photographs of him being released only sporadically. Even his good friend and ally, Venezuelan President Hugo Chavez, said in early 2009 that he doubted Castro would ever return to the public stage.

But Chavez was wrong. In July 2010, Castro surprised everyone when he was photographed meeting with scientists at a Havana institute, then gave an interview on state television. Soon he seemed to be popping up everywhere, meeting with economists, veterans and even visiting the aquarium. He used the publicity to warn the world of what he described as the threat of a nuclear war pitting the United States and Israel against Iran.

**Looked frail, mentally sharp**

The revolutionary leader looked frail but mentally sharp, and he seemed to gain strength with each appearance. By September, Castro was strong enough to give two outdoor speeches under Havana's blazing sun: the first on the steps of Havana University, and the second in front of the capital's former presidential palace.

That second speech went on for more than an hour and was attended by tens of thousands of people, and Castro felt comfortable enough to poke fun at his long-faded reputation for oratorical endurance. "We haven't even been here two hours," he grinned in conclusion. "But I'm leaving now. It's getting hot."

Castro's reemergence proved short-lived. By 2011 he was seen less and less often. At a brief appearance at a key Communist Party Congress in April 2011, Castro formally resigned as party leader and he appeared unsteady as he was led to his seat by a young aide. He had apologized in an article days earlier for not having attended a march marking the 50th anniversary of Cuba's victory at the Bay of Pigs invasion. "Believe me that I felt pain when I saw that some of you were looking for me on the dais," Castro wrote. "I thought everyone understood that I can no longer do what I have done so many times before."

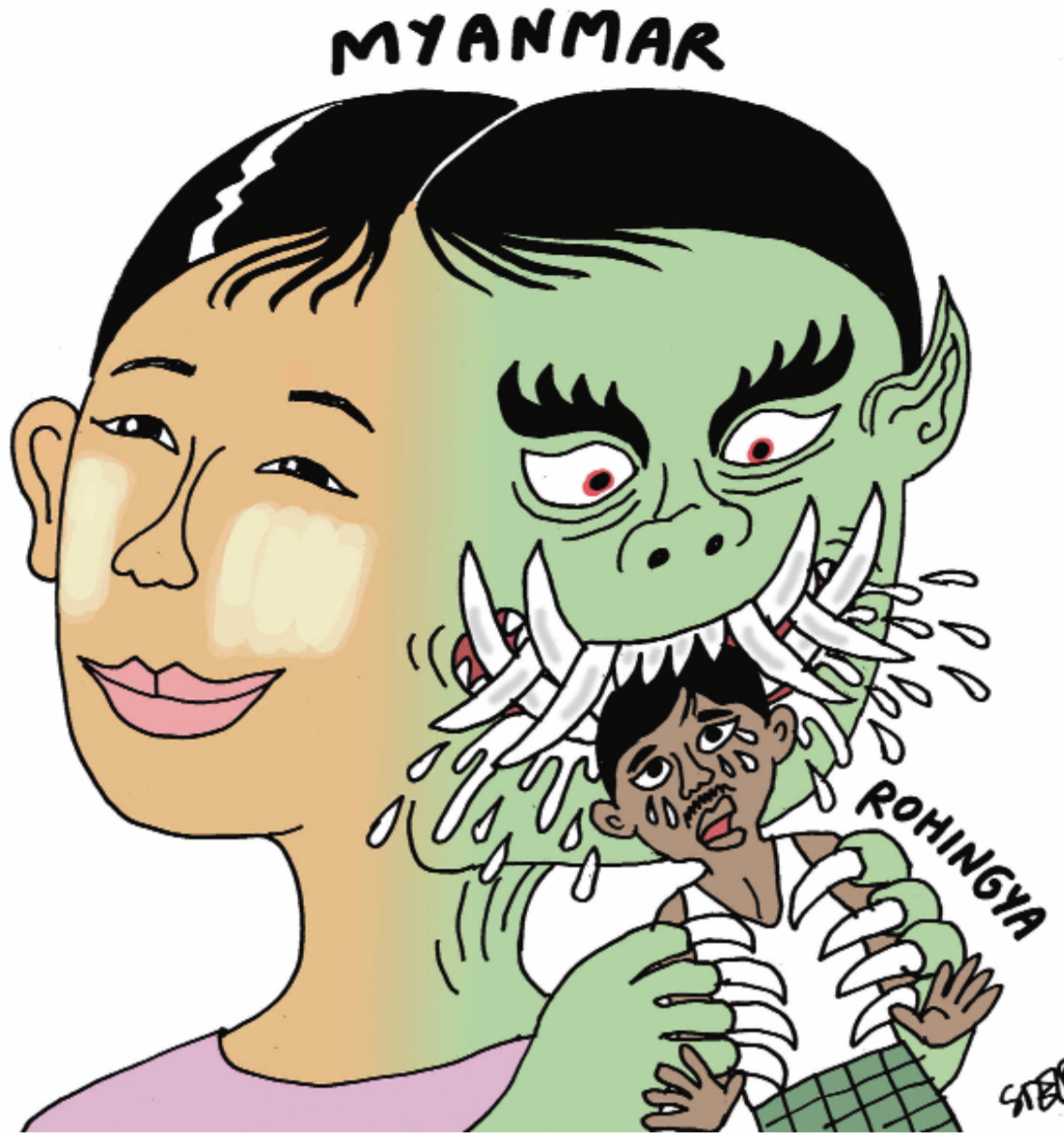
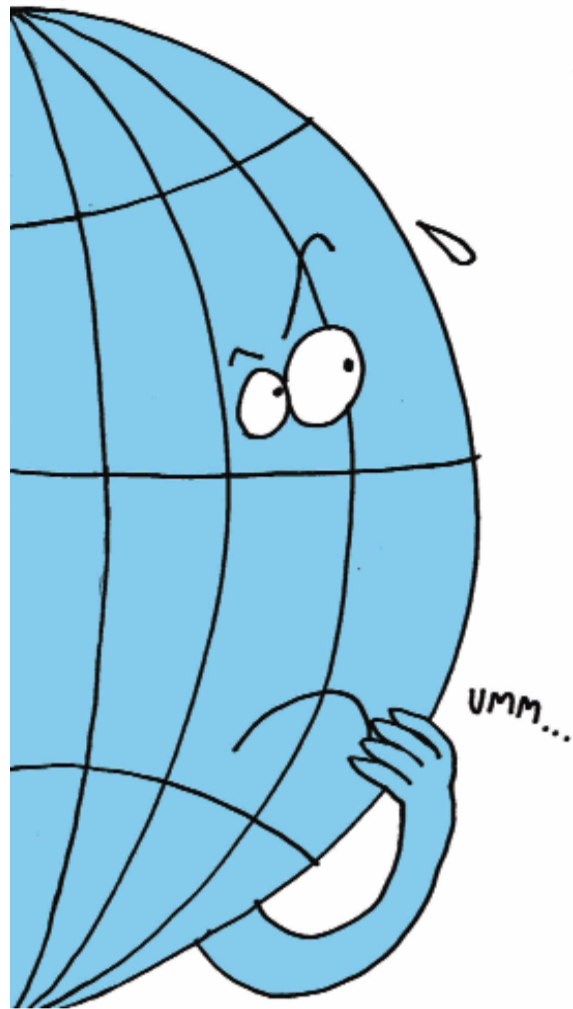
**Appearances**

After his resignation, the length of time between Fidel's appearances grew and he appeared older and weaker each time. After a Jan 8, 2014 appearance at a Havana art exhibit, he did not appear in public for at least a year. Photos of Castro with world leaders appeared only a handful of times in 2014.

Cuba's government has never said officially what Castro was suffering from when he fell ill, even when he announced in February 2008 that he was resigning for health reasons. But it was widely reported to have been complications involving diverticulitis, an intestinal ailment common in older people. Castro gave a few details of just how sick he was in an Aug 2010 interview with the Mexican newspaper La Jornada, saying his weight fell to 66 kg. That's extremely thin for a man known for his large frame. "I was at death's door, but I came back," Castro told the paper.

In the interview, Castro described lying in a hospital room during the illness, hooked up to machines, and wondering how long it would be before his suffering would be over. "Laid out in that bed, I could only see what was around me, machines I did not understand," Castro said. "I didn't know how long this torment would continue. The only thing I could hope for was that the world would stop." "But I recovered," he added, proudly. Months after falling ill, Castro acknowledged he underwent numerous surgeries for his condition and at least one had gone badly, almost killing him. Cubans first had to face up to their president's advancing age when, on June 23, 2001, he fainted briefly while giving a speech in the searing sun. — AP

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**WARM AND COOL: CUBA'S TIES WITH USSR**

The death of Cuban socialist icon Fidel Castro at age 90 on Friday stirred memories of his island nation's close but at times fraught relations with the Soviet Union. Mikhail Gorbachev, the last leader of the USSR, on Saturday hailed Castro for having strengthened Cuba in the face of an American economic blockade, praising his former counterpart for having left a "deep mark in the history of mankind." But Gorbachev, 85, shied from invoking the cooling of relations between Cuba and the Soviet Union, telling Interfax news agency he would not discuss that period "on this day of mourning."

**A New Ally**

The end of the Cuban revolution in 1959, which propelled Castro to power, saw Moscow gain an ally in the backyard of the United States, its Cold War foe. Initially Soviet authorities were uncertain about how to deal with the new leader in Havana. But the US blockade, which increased pressure on Castro to find external support, led Cuba to develop its burgeoning relations with the Soviet Union. Castro appealed to Soviet leader Nikita Khrushchev for help. Moscow provided Havana with fuel in exchange for Cuban sugar. The move saw Cuba progressively become totally dependent on the Soviet Union. Havana's relations with the Soviet Union deepened further after Castro's forces defeated the CIA-backed Bay of Pigs invasion in 1961, which led him to declare Cuba a socialist state.

**Strained relations**

The Soviet Union's support for the Cuban regime was far from selfless, serving as a part of its broader Cold War confrontations with the United States. In response to American ballistic missile deployments in Italy and Turkey in 1962, Moscow struck back by deploying its own missile to Cuba - just 144 km from the southern tip of the US state of Florida.

After a tense standoff between the rival superpowers, the world pulled back from the abyss as Moscow agreed to keep the missiles off Cuban soil in exchange for a US promise not to invade Cuba. Castro was angered for not having been consulted on the deal, straining relations with Moscow. In subsequent years Havana moved closer to the Chinese Communist regime while continuing to foster ties with Moscow, with Castro making his first visit to the Soviet Union in 1963. In the later years of the Soviet era, Moscow invested heavily in the Cuban economy and provided it with significant military assistance.

**Collapse**

In the final years of the Soviet Union, Moscow was struggling to meet its financial commitments to Cuba. After a cutoff of Soviet bloc aid in 1989 nearly collapsed the Cuban economy, Castro allowed more international tourism and modest economic reform.

Ties between Moscow and Havana suffered after the collapse of the USSR in 1991 as the massive flow of financial aid from Moscow dried up. President Vladimir Putin's deci-

sion to close a Soviet-era intelligence base south of Havana in 2001 also chilled relations. Ties picked up a few years later when Moscow began reasserting itself in Latin America.

The Kremlin has since been striving to revive its ties with Cuba as Russia increasingly squares off against Washington over Ukraine and Syria. Putin visited Cuba in 2014, agreeing to write off 90 percent of Havana's Soviet-era debt, a sum amounting to \$32 billion. — AFP

**MILITARY IN CASTRO'S CUBA:  
 POLITICAL, ECONOMIC PILLAR**

Cuba's Revolutionary Armed Forces, which preceded the bearded rebels Fidel Castro led to power in 1959, have become economic and political pillars that will remain crucial for the government following the ex-leader's death. During the golden age of Soviet support, the Cuban military was one of the world's most capable: with nearly 300,000 men, it projected Cuban power into Africa, notably Angola where it contended successfully with the formidable South African army.

The implosion of the Soviet bloc at the end of the 1980s and the 1989 execution of Cuba's most celebrated military commander, Arnaldo Ochoa, allegedly for drug trafficking, saw the army prove its resilience. Led from 1959 to 2008 by Fidel Castro's brother Raul, the FAR retreated from the battlefield and assumed a purely defensive posture, while quietly moving first into the island's political and then economic spheres.

With active duty troops in the tens of thousands, the FAR can also count on a million-member "territorial militia" and 3.5 million members enrolled in the country's "production and defense brigades". All are organized under a defensive doctrine of "total popular war," which would involve mobilizing the entire country in the event of a US invasion.

**Repairing Weapons**

Equipped by the Soviet Union until 1989, the army,

navy and air force today make do with weapons considered obsolete but kept going through an extraordinary domestic training, repair and modernization effort. Even as the military arm has weakened, the armed forces have gained political influence. As the FAR's boss for nearly half a century, President Raul Castro relied on associates from the military to run the country since he replaced Fidel in July 2006 after the latter fell ill. Raul Castro officially assumed the presidency in Feb 2008. Succeeding his brother in April 2011 at the head of the all-powerful Cuban Communist Party, Raul later named six generals to the 15-member Politburo, which also includes retired military officers and veterans of the guerrilla war. But today, the army's weight is felt most heavily in the economic realm. After becoming president, Raul named General Julio Casas Regueiro minister of defense, putting him in charge of all the army's commercial enterprises. He died in 2011.

**Economic Force**

The army's arrival as a force in the Cuban economy dates to the early 1990s. The collapse of the Soviet bloc plunged Cuba into an unprecedented crisis and the army was used to bring discipline and effectiveness to the economy. The military is active in many sectors: communications, transportation, industry, mines. Tens of thousands of young military recruits are employed in agriculture. — AFP

**FIDEL CASTRO: REVOLUTIONARY, RENAISSANCE MAN**

**HAVANA:** His long-winded political rants were legendary. But Fidel Castro also loved burning the midnight oil, the written word, and, ironically, the sport that unites Cuba and its US foe: baseball. Castro squeezed the maximum out of his 90 years which ended when he died late Friday, getting by on snatched rest, sustained by the passion of his interests and the revolution he nurtured for nearly half a century. "I will never retire from politics, the revolution or the ideas I have," Castro said late in his life.

Castro's legendary late-night-manship was a source of constant comment by journalists, biographers and the bemused. For Castro, it was utterly normal to dine into the wee hours, then hold interviews that stretched on hours as guests slumped over in their chairs.

Some of his closest allies and friends said Castro somehow learned to rest while awake, in a sort of active down-time of chatting, swimming or reading, another passion of his. "His devotion to the word is almost magical," wrote a personal friend, Colombian Nobel Prize winner Gabriel Garcia Marquez. He said he was convinced that when Castro is "tired of conversing, he rests by conversing more." Garcia Marquez died in 2014.

**Learning to surf Web**

Castro thirsted for knowledge, learning late in life to surf the Internet, even as his government controlled access to it. His personal library included books by Ernest Hemingway and texts on hydroponics, or growing plants without soil. There are photos of the day when the only Concorde to visit Havana touched down, and Castro headed to the airport to pepper the pilot with questions about the sleek supersonic jet. The youthful Castro of the 1950s was

fabled for incessant cigar smoking. When he stubbed out the habit, he was awarded a prize from the World Health Organization. Something of a gourmand, Castro collected cooking recipes which, according to Garcia Marquez, he liked to prepare "with a sort of scientific rigor." In his later years he went on diets, even as many Cubans struggled to put enough food on their own tables.

The first papal nuncio during his government, Monsignor Cesare Sacchi, taught him how to make pasta. Maybe because of his high energy, or maybe to work off dinner, Castro was no stranger to

the gym and he loved swimming. His great sporting loves, however, were basketball, diving and baseball, Cuba's national sport. An inveterate risk-taker, he did not balk at political and military high stakes.

Castro did not take kindly to defeat. When Cuba failed to meet its 1970 sugar

harvest target of 10 million tons (there were only eight) he urged Cubans to "turn misfortune into victory." "In my next incarnation I want to be a writer," Castro was once quoted as saying. He wrote many short pieces and editorials but his books are mainly compilations of his speeches. —AFP

**BAY OF PIGS: US' WATERLOO**

America's failure to overthrow Fidel Castro during the 1961 Bay of Pigs invasion lionized the Cuban leader in his country as a leftist David battling an imperialist Goliath. In the midst of the Cold War, six B-26 bombers painted with Cuban colors took off from Nicaragua on the morning of Saturday, April 15, 1961 to attack Cuban airbases. The CIA believed they had wiped out Castro's air force.

On April 16, at the funeral of seven victims of the bombing, Fidel Castro announces: "What the imperialists cannot forgive is the triumph of a socialist revolution right under the nose of the United States." It was the first time he publicly characterized his revolution as "socialist", a fact that would become more obvious in the future.

The next day, Monday, April 17 at 1:15 am, some 1,400 anti-Castro Cubans from "Brigade 2506", who had been trained in secret camps by the CIA, landed at the Bay of Pigs, less than 200 km south of Havana. Offshore, eight ships headed to establish a beachhead. However, nine aircraft from the remains of Castro's air force took off, attacking one ship and sinking another. The other freighters headed back to sea.

In the sky, Castro's T-33 aircraft shot down two B-26 bombers, killing four American pilots. The Cuban air force lost four aircraft. On the ground, the element of surprise had evaporated. The invasion was "an open secret," said Cuba's then interior minister Ramiro Valdes as 200,000 militia members prepared for battle. Castro arrived to direct the operations. Fierce fighting lasted for two days.

Lacking support, the "mercenaries" surrendered on April 19. There were 1,189 prisoners. Among the invaders, 107 were killed. Castro's forces suffered 161 losses.

Afterward, a nationwide police sweep led to the arrest of some 100,000 Cubans, including 35,000 in Havana. Captured combatants were exhibited on television. Five would be executed, nine sentenced to 30 years in prison, the others released in Dec 1962 in exchange for \$53 million worth of medicine and food.

In Havana, Castro savored his triumph. In Washington, it was a catastrophe. Historians say President John F Kennedy condemned the operation to failure in advance by refusing to give it military support. He was assassinated just two years later in 1963. — AFP

