

## CHAPTER 4

# Cuba and Castro: Beyond the “Battle of Ideas”

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*Abstract: This paper explores the logic, causes, and priorities of the “Battle of Ideas” in part through an analysis of Fidel Castro’s published statements in Reflexiones since 2006. This study suggests that this campaign harkens back to past efforts of the regime to reinforce ideological orthodoxy and revolutionary renewal through the regime’s fundamental belief in the power of ideology to consolidate political power.*

### **Out of the Special Period**

During the second half of the 1990s, Cuban authorities began to apply a series of countermeasures to the reform process adopted in the Special Period, seemingly confident that they had surmounted the worst of the economic crisis of the early decade. Already by 1995 the regime had defined the limits of the reform process and restricted some of the liberalizing measures, blaming them for growing social problems. By the end of the turn of the century, Fidel Castro was framing his own thoughts and perspective as the “Battle of Ideas.” He and the hardliners were ready for a renewal of the traditional Cuban model and initiated specific steps and ideas in that regard. Through 2006, the year Fidel Castro fell gravely ill, the “Battle of Ideas” campaign subsumed many initiatives to supplant the Special Period. This paper explores the role of the “Battle of Ideas” in opening a new chapter in the history of the Cuban revolution. The broader issue is how to characterize the timing, properties, and dynamics of the post Special Period years. An important issue is the extent to which a new coherent approach was launched in the early 2000s.

The collapse of socialism after 1989 forced drastic adjustments and change upon Cuba, as it challenged previous ideas about Cuba’s international role and the presumed superiority of its development strategy. The Cuban revolutionaries focused on regime survival and significantly

altered the highly centralized model of state socialism. The kind of socialist internationalism that brought Cuba to Africa in the 1970s was now a thing of the past. The armed forces contracted and refocused. The authorities called this the Special Period (more precisely, “Período Especial en Tiempos de Paz”), signaling a temporary critical moment of great collective sacrifice. Cubans faced an uncertain era of belt-tightening and hardship. The reforms that were to alleviate conditions brought additional tensions such as new forms of inequality based on access to hard currency.

Until its demise in 1991, Cuba had received vital support from the Soviet Union. The collapse of the Soviet model and the shift in international context brought about a very large contraction in trade and overall economic activity (by at least 35 percent). The leadership opted for market mechanisms that included the urgent development of tourism as the leading economic sector, legalization of the dollar, enhanced role for foreign capital, permission of small-scale entrepreneurs, encouragement of remittances, improved scope for farmers’ markets, and a general adjustment program.<sup>1</sup>

Cuban society was called upon to find a new model, but President Fidel Castro and other Cuban leaders expressed their reluctance to accept the reforms and did not hide their desire to curtail them after a period of adjustment. There was no serious criticism for the preceding measures and model, and the state never relinquished its role as a primary engine of economic development. In fact, the authorities insisted that the reforms were a temporary deviation from socialism. They left unanswered the question of when and under what conditions and how the country would return to the building of socialism.

The corrective policy measures and ideas embraced at the turn of the century emphasized such themes as the development of socialist values and consciousness that in some ways resembled earlier concepts and strategies pursued in the 1980s and even the 1960s. It was in this context that the Battle of Ideas crystallized, sounding at times like a broad new strategy. By late 2005, a new Cabinet-level office had become “a super-ministry with a wide array of programs covering the most diverse fields, ...

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1. My early analysis of the reform process is found in Font (1997).

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effectively sidelining the competencies of the respective ministries or other established government authorities.” (Hoffman and Whitehead 2006). Would this be a passing moment or a durable phenomenon?

## **I. The Battle of Ideas**

The Battle of Ideas has been discussed in different terms:

“When I visited Cuba (1999-2002), the phrase “Battle of Ideas” was a prominent slogan on state television, in the print media, and on billboards. The national media and political figures commonly used it in public forums to contextualize the international conflict surrounding Elián González.” (Tisdell Flikke 2007)

“a political operation of the Cuban state ...to maintain in power the historic bureaucracy of the “revolution” through a deepening of the cultural and media struggle against American imperialism, and whose principal object is the Cuban people.” (Paz Ortega)

“a multifaceted social, ideological and cultural counter-offensive, led by the country’s youth, against the corrosive impact of the market concessions.” (Cameron)

“We must continue to pulverize the lies that are told against us. . . .This is the ideological battle, everything is the Battle of Ideas.”(Fidel Castro, reported in Anderson 2006)

“... in this Battle of Ideas, the imperialists are headed for nothing other than a colossal Bay of Pigs ...” (Fidel Castro speech, March 31, 2001)

“The Battle of Ideas incorporates five political objectives: (1) the liberation of the five Cuban men incarcerated in Miami for espionage; (2) the end of the Helms-Burton Law, Torricelli Act, and other forms of the U.S. blockade; (3) the end of the world economic crisis that threatens humanity and particularly the Third World; (4) world peace; and (5) education and culture.” (García 2001:3)

“Castro's Last Great Battle. Castro’s goal is to reengage Cubans with the ideals of the revolution, especially young Cubans who came of age during what he called the Special Period.” (Jon Lee Anderson, *The New Yorker*)

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“The Battle of Ideas [was organized and led by the UJC as] ... a political counteroffensive to the imperialist ideological drive and the pro-capitalist values it promotes ...”(Silverman et al.)

“Imperialism will never succeed in crushing Cuba. The Battle of Ideas will go forth. Long Live the Homeland! Long Live the Revolution! Long Live Socialism! Ever Onward to Victory!” (Fidel Castro, “Proclama” of July 31, 2006)

“Battle of Ideas? That’s just politics,” said the 18-year-old. “It doesn’t help us.” “... basic freedoms outweigh benefits like free university education.” (Maria, philosophy student at the University of Havana, AP)

“...many Cubans regard the Battle of Ideas as a spectacle they must tolerate but which is irrelevant to their lives.” (Anderson, in *The New Yorker*)

The above list evokes the parable of the blind men describing an elephant based on touching only one of its very different anatomical parts, creating an unbalanced and incomplete picture of the whole.<sup>1</sup> Should the Battle of Ideas be seen as a composite of the above characterizations?

Key antecedents of the Battle of Ideas are found in the words and pronouncements of Fidel Castro himself through the 1990s. Even in the early part of the decade, the speeches of the embattled Cuban president maintained the *superiority of Cuban socialism* as a development model. He supported national and international ideological campaigns to highlight the importance of *social development* over that of economic development, and Cuba’s accomplishments in that regard. Leaders pointed to significant achievements in *education, health, sports*. Though Cuba increasingly relied on tourism, Castro could also call attention to such themes as the production of cheaper vaccines to meet the needs of *developing countries*. Castro’s trips and travel throughout the 1990s sought to sell his model.

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1. In John Godfrey Saxe’s version (1878) of this ancient Chinese parable, one blind man touches the tusk and argues that the elephant is like a spear; another feels the trunk and sees elephants as being like snakes; a third comes into contact with a leg and maintains that elephants are like trees; to a fourth who seized an ear elephants are like fans; the one stumbling upon a side concluded that the animal was like a wall; lastly, one reaching the tail argued as strenuously that elephants are like a rope. All were partly right yet largely wrong.

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The Cuban leaders tried to regain their footing through the 1990s. They made slow headway, but at the end of the century, political and international conditions turned more auspicious. Two events linking international and national arenas created a new context. Internationally, the rise of Hugo Chavez after 1998 meant support and new hope for Castro and the hardliners, particularly after subsidized Venezuelan oil began to flow into the island. Some Cuban institutions like the Latin American Medical School experienced revival or expansion. A *new (or soft) form of internationalism* was now emerging, centered not so much on military interventions but on an enhanced role for health, education, and security personnel in Venezuela—and later, Bolivia and Nicaragua. Naming 2005 as the “year of the Bolivarian Alternative,” the Cuban authorities signed a major cooperation agreement with Venezuela. At the same time, the rise in the international price of nickel raised Cuban nickel exports to two billion dollars.

The Elián González case was also important. On November 25, 1999, Thanksgiving Day in the United States, the shipwrecked five-year-old Cuban boy reached Florida shores on an inner tube, following a difficult escape from Cuba in which his mother perished in the open seas. Almost immediately, Elián became a rallying symbol for Miami Cubans, a large number of whom mounted a major campaign to retain the boy in the United States under the custody of relatives.

Within Cuba, the reaction was fast, forceful, and even furious. The government and the Unión de Jóvenes Comunistas (UJC) organized an increasingly well-orchestrated campaign to rally Cubans in support of Elián’s return to his father and other family who had stayed on the island. *Huge mass mobilizations* now became part of routine life in Cuba. FEU (University Student Federation) president Hassan Pérez, hitherto a relatively unknown and unpopular student leader, emerged as a national figure. National television ran numerous appeals and programs on the subject. Fidel Castro assumed personal leadership of the Cuban government’s international custody battle for Elián González’s repatriation. The authorities relied on the legal and political case to give custody to his father. Huge and frequent (at one point they were daily) mobilizations of Cuban youth and society called for his return. The Elián case was so important in the Battle of Ideas that Fidel designated December 5, 1999, the date of the very first rally, as its official beginning.

The campaign to gain custody of Elián as well as its outcome turned out to be a major political success for Castro personally and for his regime. In fact, it helped usher in notions of a *new phase in the construction of revolutionary socialism* in Cuba (Kapcia 2005). The mobilizations rallied many Cubans around their national leader, once again. The outcome confirmed the regime's claims to legality, and authorities basked in their ability to "protect a Cuban child against injustice." The case severely damaged the growing links between Cubans on the island and those in the United States—who had gained influence as a result of the role of remittances in alleviating the crisis that Cuba had experienced in the early 1990s. The Elián affair also gave new life to the historical animosity toward the United States. In 2001, Fidel Castro explicitly acknowledged the link between the Battle of Ideas, the mass mobilizations surrounding the Elián González case, and the new phase of the regime (speech of March 31, 2001).

The Battle of Ideas helped to further block the liberalizing reforms of the 1990s, and in that context can be seen as the basis for a strategy to strengthen the socialist revolution after years of tentative reform under the Special Period. The Battle of Ideas includes diverse goals and components.

**TABLE 4-1. "Battle of Ideas" and Related Themes**

Emphasis on Human and Social Development (even over economic growth)	(a) New investment in healthcare, education, and welfare (safety net). Pensions increased. (b) Large number of new social workers. Brigadas Estudiantiles de Trabajo Social. <sup>1</sup>
Educational Reform (2001-)	a) Social Work Training Colleges and other training or paraprofessional schools ( <i>Escuelas Emergentes</i> ): primary teaching, nursing, cultural education, information technology. (b) Universidad para Todos (new TV channel and courses) (c) University courses in all <i>municipios</i> (d) Special schools in sugar-producing and other rural areas (e) UCI: Universidad de las Ciencias Informaticas <sup>2</sup>

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Emphasis on Consciousness and Values	(a) Revolutionary renewal (new phase): moral/political incentives, superiority of socialism, Che Guevara as role model. (b) Engagement of intellectuals and role of culture. (c) Expansion of role of television and media. (Roundtables and others focus on attacking the US, Bush administration, and “Miami mafia”). (d) “Battle of Ideas” and revolutionary theory for the 21st century. (e) Museum for the Battle of Ideas (Cárdenas) (see Tisdel Flikke's analysis).
National Campaigns (direct leader-mass relationship)	(a) “Return Elián” campaign (b) Anti-Imperialism, anti-US nationalism (c) “Energy Revolution” (2005-; appliances, fluorescent light, new Contingentes after July 2007 ). (d) Combat theft of public assets/goods
Emphasis on Mass Mobilization	(a) Enhanced role to mass organizations, particularly youth organizations: UJC (Young Communists), FEU, and others. (b) Frequent ad hoc rallies and itinerant public meetings (Marchas and Tribunales Abiertas). (c) Brigadas, contingentes, and the like (linked to national campaigns).
Recentralization and Economic Role of the State	(a) Roll back dollarization (b) Decrease/neutralize role of small-scale entrepreneurs—2,000 private street stalls and other businesses shut down (June 2005), licensed entrepreneurs drop from 240,000 to 140,000. (c) Many foreign businesses leave Cuba: over half of the 800 firms registered in 2002 leave by mid-2005, as do 400 firms in free-trade zones and a large number of joint ventures. (d) State investments in tourism and services (e.g. modern restaurants).

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Reaffirmation of Socialist Norms and Concepts in Economy	(a) Statistical and economic agencies calculate economic activity using methods that differ from those of capitalist societies. (b) “...to each according to work” (c) Salary not enough. (d) Fighting new forms of inequality. (e) Beyond the Special Period.
New Internationalism	Medical and educational teams; Cuba as model; “Patria es humanidad;” defense of the poor against ‘neoliberalism’ and globalization; anti-Bush/US sentiment, ALBA.

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1. Uriarte (2005)
  2. Sources: Kapcia (2004), Uriarte (2005)

**The United States as Main Focus.** The heart of the Elián González repatriation campaign was to show Cuba’s ability to challenge and confront Washington DC and Miami. While Elián’s return to the island led to the gradual cooling of sentiments over the issues it had generated, this theme is echoed in such other Battle of Ideas’ campaigns as the Posada Carriles, Free the 5 Cuban (Anti-Terrorists), and various other mobilizations in front of the US Interests Section. The leaders argued that Cuba’s ability to remain on course depended on the high levels of consciousness and commitment of Cubans, and in concrete terms that was defined as the country’s ability to resist pressure from the United States. Attacks on the US first focused on opposition to neoliberalism, shifting to anti-imperialism during the second term of the George W. Bush presidency, in tandem with the rising global unpopularity of the war in Iraq.

**Human/Social Development.** Cuban authorities now focused more directly on mounting social problems. The 1990s had indeed brought rising unemployment and underemployment as well as new forms of inequality and even exclusion in such matters as access to hotels and tourist facilities. The generation coming of age in that decade had experienced adverse structural conditions and faced high levels of unemployment. This was a sharp contrast to expectations created in the much better conditions of the 1980s. There were signs of dissatisfaction. From the Unión de Jóvenes Comunistas (UJC) and other organizations central to the mobilizations surrounding the return of Elián came the impetus for some of the new programs that eventually coalesced into a new “educational

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revolution” and the broader Battle of Ideas. The youth wing of the party worked with state agencies in launching schools of social work (to include unemployed youth), television courses, extension programs, and computer use.

More broadly, the Battle of Ideas would be framed as part of Cuba’s long-term focus on the supremacy of human and social development over economics. The educational system at all levels began to be overhauled. But the Battle of Ideas came to entail major new investment in welfare, health, and cultural development.

The government settled on a massive program to train, mobilize, and deploy social workers. Four schools of social work were set up throughout the country. Particularly after the second student cohort, they “took unemployed youth who had not been admitted to a university and paid them to go to school for a year where they learned to become social workers in the poor communities they had come from” (DuRand 2005). Newspapers reported more than 28,000 graduates from the program by 2005, nearly 35,000 by early 2007, and 42,000 in September 2007.<sup>1</sup> These youth were sent to address the problems of communities, often their own.

The authorities focused next on former sugar cane workers, who had become unemployed as a result of the closing of a large number of sugar mills. These “redundant” workers were retrained for other jobs and received payment from the Cuban state. The University of Havana led a strategy of *universalización* or the universalization of education. University rector Juan Vela led in this initiative. He was named Minister of Higher Education in 2006 and was given the task to broaden the “educational revolution” central to the Battle of Ideas.

**Cuba Joins the Knowledge Revolution?** The Battle of Ideas projects extended university facilities to most counties on the island, expanded the training of teachers, and offered courses through new television channels. A new University of Information Sciences (UCI) was created in 2002 as

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1. The Social Work Program celebrated its 7th anniversary on September 10, 2007 (“Trabajadores sociales consolidan su papel en la Revolución,” *Granma* 9/11/2007). The *Granma* article claims an average age of 21, confirmed that the program was organized in 2000 by Fidel Castro himself, and alluded to some debate about future mission of the program. A speech by Carlos Lage argued that the program should not become either an administrative entity or a political organization.

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part of the 170 programs of the Battle of Ideas (Rodriguez 2004). President Castro himself set up UCI and referred to its students as “troops of the future” (Valenciaga 2007). Hundreds of “computation clubs” had been organized in prior years throughout the island (Rushton 2004). But that was truly a mild response to the information or knowledge revolution unfolding globally. Over 1,300 information science engineers graduated from the UCI in 2007. According to Valenciaga, that year the island had 16,395 university level computing students. Together with the 39,000 students in the computer polytechnics, Cuba hence had 50,000 young people in this field. The labor force would provide software and computing services to the country and “to the world.” Valenciaga’s speech reveals a Fidel Castro concerned with every detail of this program, including how the graduates would be distributed across government offices. The speech asked for total commitment from the graduates to the needs of the “threatened fatherland” and warned them about the possibility of a brain drain from the United States.

**National Campaigns and Mass Mobilizations.** The Battle of Ideas’ national campaigns have relied on Marchas, Tribunas Abiertas, various rallies, other forms of mass mobilization, and TV Round Tables (Mesas Redondas Informativas). While young leaders emerged from these campaigns, Fidel Castro was the main speaker or figure in these events. The organizational ideas of the Elián campaign were later adapted to other purposes.

Television and other media have been harnessed to the goals and methods of the Battle of Ideas. Attacks on the US, particularly the Bush administration and Cubans in Miami (“Miami mafia”), have remained constant themes. Of the traditional mass organizations, the UJC has been particularly important in the Battle of Ideas. The Brigadas Técnicas Juveniles (BTJ) were involved in the Tribunas Abiertas rallies, many of which took place in front of the US Interests Section (a space later named Tribuna Anti-imperialista José Martí). Young Pioneers and formations of Social Workers have also mobilized in support of these activities, reflecting the focus on the Cuban youth. Castro has framed the campaign to combat corruption and theft of state property, largely as part of the battle against inequality resulting from access to hard currency by a significant number of Cubans (more than half of whom are reported as receiving remittances).

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**The Battle of Ideas, Youth, and Regime Survival.** Fidel Castro has repeatedly argued that socialism is fundamentally different from capitalism and has to be built through new forms of consciousness and solidarity. In his view, socialism collapsed in Eastern Europe and the former Soviet Union because of an inability or unwillingness to resist the growing influence of capitalism and capitalist ideas in the 1980s. In contrast, Cuban socialism did not collapse in the early 1990s because of revolutionary consciousness and communist ideology. The commitment of leaders to defend socialism at all costs has been essential, according to Castro. It hence follows that the revolution will survive to the extent that revolutionaries continue to believe in their ability to address the needs of the most vulnerable in society and neutralize the impact of inequality and privilege.

A few months before the onset of his illness in July 2006, President Castro himself raised the possibility that the revolution could be ultimately defeated from within, as a result of demoralization from the failure to prevent inequalities, capitalist influences, and corruption. “Revolutions in great countries fell or collapsed precisely because of corruption, bureaucracy, lack of consciousness, bad methods of working with the masses and other [internal] failures,” Castro stated in a December 6, 2005 rally celebrating the official sixth anniversary of the Battle of Ideas. If youth is essential in the renewal of revolutionary socialism, youth must be called into service in a manner that promotes socialist consciousness. This goal helps explain the new programs that train many of the young as social workers and other socially-aware instructors.

Youth organizations, the newly trained social workers, and other instructors focus on specific neighborhoods and homes, thereby studying social conditions and helping families solve their problems. They gather information on various issues, including the number of seniors needing personal services. Social workers appear to have been well received by the general population. They often have working-class backgrounds and are seen as defending the interests of the people against the “new rich.” Since the basic premise is that workers and retired workers in Cuba’s aging population must be given priority in the socialist revolution, having the youth focus on providing services for them reinforces inter-generational bonds and social harmony.

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The newly trained workers are also engaged in fighting the theft of state-owned energy resources and the use of bribes at gas stations. Their vigilance in preventing workers from appropriating or diverting fuel for personal benefit led to the doubling of gasoline sales receipts within a few weeks—according to the authorities. “Just how many ways of stealing do we have in this country?” asked Castro on November 17, 2005. According to him, common Cubans welcomed the new forms of vigilance in dollar stores, drugstores, and other places. Earlier speeches acknowledge the widespread presence of theft in “ports, trains, pharmacies, stores, and factories,” and Castro was convinced that this would be effectively resolved by training and organization (e.g., speech at the sixth anniversary of the battle of ideas, December 6, 2005). He expressed admiration for youths coming from economically disadvantaged environments and becoming highly prepared and well trained.

The Battles of Ideas can be seen as “a catch-phrase for efforts to win them [disaffected Youth] over through improvements in education, housing, health care and the everyday quality of life,” claims journalist Will Weissert (Weissert 2007). But, many share his view to the effect that “these days, many young Cubans are more interested in access to the Internet, music, television and movies than upholding revolutionary ideals.”

**State Socialism and Socialist Norms.** The Cuban economy experienced some degree of economic recovery after 2004. Aid from Venezuela and China, the rising price of nickel and other commodities, the consolidation of the tourist sector (notwithstanding the recent slowdown in the number of tourists), new forms of management, and the relative modernization of production processes in some sectors are largely responsible for the improvements in economic conditions. But hardliners, many of whom play major roles in the Battle of Ideas, take the recent partial recovery as support for the idea of maintaining or even increasing the economic role of the Cuban state. They have favored the movement against small-scale entrepreneurship. Hardliners also share the goal of returning the economy to socialist norms of production. Statistical and economic agencies now calculate economic activity using methods that differ from those of capitalist societies or those previously used in Cuba—confirming, incidentally, that care needs to be exercised in using official statistics.

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The return to statist ideologies implies a break from the liberalizing reforms associated with the Special Period. For instance, the reliance on two currencies shapes the broader policy debate in Cuba. In late 2004, the government announced that the US dollar would no longer be accepted as payment for goods and services. Though created in the early 1990s, the Cuban Convertible Peso or CUC had been in limited use. By 2004, the CUC, a functional equivalent of hard currency, was reinforced, and was even to be used in purchases in “dollar stores.” To further penalize holders of US dollars, a 10 percent fee started to be applied to dollar-CUC currency exchanges. Tourists and visitors are encouraged to bring euros, which are exchanged at the standard rate. At one point, Cuban bank account holders were reported to have reduced their dollar holdings by 57 percent, while saving accounts in Cuban convertible pesos have grown more than threefold.

## **II. Limits and Prospects of the Battle of Ideas**

Fidel Castro aimed at turning key elements of the Battle of Ideas into an international campaign. According to some reports, the 2006 Havana summit of the non-aligned countries would have done so by means of a proposal for international cooperation in which Cuba would send teachers, medical personnel, and ideas to further a worldwide energy revolution. In this account, the Cuban Foreign Ministry pulled the proposal out of the summit’s agenda after confirming less than enthusiastic interest on the part of many member countries.

It is quite clear, however, that pragmatic policymakers and reformers within the regime itself are not enthusiastic about the idea of a major shift toward orthodox socialism or turning back to the Rectification period creed. Many feel that the country needs to focus on key internal priorities, rather than the international promotion of a Cuban model of socialist development. Cuba needs to act practically in terms of agreements with Venezuela and other countries. According to Maingot (2007), the real battle of ideas in Cuba is that between internal reformers and hardliners.

There are indeed various cases and evidence that suggest a substantial number of reformers, managers, specialists, and ordinary Cubans hold views, preferences, and assumptions that differ considerably from the return to socialist orthodoxy of the Battle of Ideas.

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Yet, if opposing sentiment was in fact growing, the Battle of Ideas strategy would have entered a period of decline with Castro's own poor health during the second half of 2006 and the first quarter of 2007. During this interlude, Cuba should have turned, even if slowly and tentatively, toward pragmatism and reform. Indeed, accounts by a number of observers tend to confirm this view and rationale.

However, Fidel Castro's recovery and gradual return to public attention since March 2007 renewed the suspense of the impending change and direction of Cuban society in the immediate future. In this context, this paper gauges Fidel Castro's current and prospective role and priorities in terms of the close scrutiny of over thirty articles—*Reflexiones del Comandante en Jefe*—published under his name in Cuban newspapers (*Granma*, but also *Juventud Rebelde*, *Trabajadores*), news services Prensa Latina and AIN, and other media from late March through December 2007 (see Appendix). I apply content analysis techniques to the study of these texts. Some basic results are reported here.<sup>1</sup>

This series of pronouncements succeeded in attracting considerable international media attention, actually refocusing the spotlight on Fidel Castro. After eight months largely away from center stage, starting in late March 2007 the Cuban leader returned to the headlines and resumed his standing as the main figure in Cuba's national psyche. *Granma*, *Juventud Rebelde*, and other newspapers and news agencies promptly published or released these essays. Most did so in front-page columns titled "Reflexiones del Comandante en Jefe," with links to versions in at least eight languages (Spanish, English, French, Portuguese, German, Italian, Russian, and Arabic). The author's instructions indicated that the Ideology Department of the Communist Party of Cuba and the Chief of Staff (Jefe de Despacho) of the Council of State were to be in charge of disseminating these articles. Most Cuban newspapers and media made full use of these essays. Newscasts repeated them several times, while Mesa Redonda discussed them in primetime television. The international media frequently cites them, gradually focusing on content more than on questions about Castro's health. In the column written on June 22, Castro states that his *Reflexiones* are not the result of a careful plan, but rather of his strong

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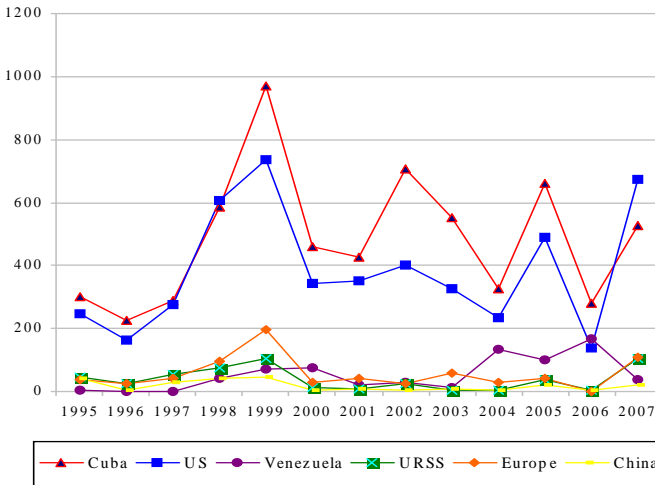
1. I thank Marcela Gonzalez and Amara Davidson for excellent research assistance in the content analysis of texts by Fidel Castro.

desire to communicate with “el protagonista principal de nuestra resistencia a medida que observo las acciones estúpidas del imperio.”

What are the main themes found in these articles and what do they indicate about trends in Cuban society, including the Battle of Ideas?

Of the 66 *Reflexiones* published through December 31, 2007 the vast majority of these essays have some criticism or attack directed at the United States as prominent or central points. The specific targets are Pres-

**FIGURE 4-1. Mentions of US and other countries in F. Castro's Speeches and *Reflexiones***



ident George W. Bush, the CIA, US imperialism, and the broader “world tyranny” represented by the United States. Challenges or critiques of the US are present even in articles focused on seemingly unrelated topics, such as sports.

**Ethanol.** Several of the essays attack the US-favored energy strategy promoting ethanol. The title of the first article, “Condenados a muerte prematura por hambre y sed mas de 3 mil millones de personas en el mundo” was published on March 28, 2007. It suggests in rather dramatic terms that such US policies will bring death, hunger, or thirst to 3 billion persons. The essay itself focuses on the costs of producing ethanol from corn (“la idea siniestra de convertir alimentos en combustible”), with implicit

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reference to the Brazil-US accords on ethanol. The second article, published on April 3, elaborates Castro's arguments in specific reference to the Camp David meeting of presidents Bush and Lula (Brazil). Six additional articles (4/30, 5/9, 5/14, 5/16, 5/22, 5/23) further extend Castro's challenge of the new emphasis on ethanol.

These writings use forceful language to challenge the ethanol strategy, arguing that it will harm the developing and poor countries in the Southern hemisphere. Expanding the use of agriculture to produce fuel will worsen already high food prices, global warming, and the exploitation of agricultural workers. In Castro's view, the world does indeed need a new energy regime ("an energy revolution"), but one that will focus on the adoption of conservation measures—much like Cuba's shift from incandescent to fluorescent lighting. More broadly, President Castro was using his critique of the proposed ethanol regime as a platform for the superior "energy revolution" adopted by Cuba under his leadership.

Since Brazil is in fact the pioneer and possibly most interested party in the wider use of ethanol to fuel cars, this line of argument has brought Castro and the Cuban government into debate with Brazil and President Lula. The Brazilians have been emphatic about the success of their approach. They therefore rapidly distanced themselves from claims by Castro and the Cuban government in regard to their views on this topic. Why was this issue so important to Castro and to the Cuban government that they would risk harming relations with Brazil? The answer appears to center on Castro's desire to internationalize key elements of his idea—directly and forcefully challenging US policies and approaches, while claiming moral and ideological superiority to the principles and policies of his Cuban Revolution and its allies. But it may also be speculated that he did not fully anticipate the impact that his reasoning would have on the Brazilians. Or else, Castro could also have been trying either to draw Lula and Brazil to his way of thinking, or to side with Hugo Chavez in terms of leftist politics in South America. (While Castro's arguments imply strong criticism of the Brazilian position, some passages simply praise the policies of Venezuela and China).

The ethanol reflections clarify Castro's profound animosity toward president George W. Bush and the United States. In these articles as well as in others, he refers to Bush as "jefe máximo del imperio." In Castro's account, Bush "decided" to take away food needed to feed the world's

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hungry and poor. His “diabolical” plans to use food as fuel amounts to genocide against the poor, while the emerging ethanol regime should be seen as a major factor in global warming.

At the same time, the *Reflexiones* turn Cuba’s economic problems into virtue by arguing that the world’s energy revolution should not be based on false hopes for growth and consumerism. The Cuban leader’s position on energy further aims at claiming the moral and political high ground by defending the world’s poor against the ravages of the developed North. He champions such causes as cheap food for the poor, the welfare of sugarcane workers, environmental protection, and the battle against global warming.

**Resisting Imperialism.** But the main theme in Fidel Castro’s *Reflexiones* is the view that the United States is aggressive, imperial, and prone to the use of violence and terror—including assassination attempts on his own life.

On April 3, “La respuesta brutal” cites a ruling on Posada Carriles, charged with masterminding the blowing up of a Cubana de Aviación plane in 1976, to argue that “El más genuino representante de un sistema de terror que ha sido impuesto al mundo por la superioridad tecnológica, económica y política de la potencia más poderosa que ha conocido nuestro planeta, es sin duda George W. Bush.” Bush is referred to as a “tirano mundial,” “apocalíptico,” and “jefe máximo del imperio.” Nine additional essays attack or denounce three main phenomena: advanced arms build-up by the US and threats to world peace; US imperial designs on Cuba (“No Tendrán Jamás a Cuba,” June 17); and orders or attempts to assassinate Castro by the CIA or Bush himself (6/24, 6/28, 7/1).

**Free Trade Agreements.** A third theme against the United States is criticisms of free trade agreements signed by the US.

**Europe.** Three essays criticize the European Union or the UK for subservience to the US on Cuba policy, arms buildup (including a new British submarine), and the like.

**Sports: Pan-American Games in Brazil (late July).** Four pieces written in the *Reflexiones* series comment on the XV Pan-American games held in Rio de Janeiro in July of 2007. The first two note Fidel’s excitement about the competition and the level of excellence of the Cuban team. Approvingly, Castro applauds that Cuban athletes are ready to compete

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“even in the mud,” implying a contrast with comments about the US baseball team’s unwillingness to do so because of rain. The tone shifts in the third article, “Is Brazil a Substitute for the United States?” in which Castro denounces the defection of several members of the Cuban team (including a no-show by two top Cuban boxers), and dismisses the defectors as traitors and mercenaries. He blames the event on the US and market-driven international recruiters—a mafia that uses “refined psychological methods and many millions of dollars” to persuade Cuban athletes to participate in international sports competitions. “Treason for money is one of the favorite arms of the United States to destroy Cuba’s resistance,” he maintains. Castro argues against the idea of granting these athletes asylum in Brazil (though the terms he uses to characterize the athletes might be considered sufficient evidence of threats or future danger to the authorities assessing the defectors request for asylum). The fourth article, published one day after Raúl Castro’s speech in the July 26 celebrations, quotes extensively from international cables on how the two defecting boxers were being incorporated into the international sports industry.<sup>1</sup>

**Conditions in Cuba.** Aside from US criticisms, some of the articles focus on the conditions in Cuba and the socialist spirit. One column commented on Vilma Espín upon her death. “Las luchas de Vilma” focuses on her role as a revolutionary and her example to other Cuban women. The column reads as a call for Cuban women to emulate her. The article does not mention Vilma Espín as a mother, wife, or even as Castro’s sister-in-law—other than once sentence near the end of the article that reads, “Los deberes revolucionarios y su inmenso trabajo nunca le impidieron a Vilma cumplir sus responsabilidades como compañera leal y madre de numerosos hijos.”

An essay titled “Cuba’s Self-Criticism” addresses patterns of inequality in Cuba resulting from remittances and hard currency flows. “A flood of foreign currency has created irritating inequalities.” Cuba was not a “consumer society,” but some Cubans who receive foreign currency from abroad set up “illicit” activities and at the same time enjoy the ration cards, housing, healthcare, and other free benefits. Those who do not

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1. In subsequent days, these boxers would be detained by the Brazilian police and returned to Cuba.

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receive convertible currency are at a disadvantage. “The real and visible lack of equality” results in criticisms by the disadvantaged. Castro lamented in particular “the juicy profits” earned by unlicensed taxi services. Their use of scarce gasoline for profit “can compromise the independence and life of Cuba.” “We cannot fool around with that!”—states the Cuban leader.

The scrutiny of Fidel Castro’s *Reflexiones* points to a leader focused on the survival of the revolution, attacking its archenemy, convincing Cubans of the need for clarity of ideas to preserve the revolution, calling on Cubans to cultivate revolutionary virtue, defending the revolution from various threats, and maintaining his own role and legacy. Castro argues that socialism collapsed in the USSR and Eastern Europe precisely because of internal neglect and unclear ideas, resulting in wavering commitment and opening Cuban society to dangerous Western influences. These essays highlight the importance Castro places on the battle of ideas, values, and related measures to preserve the revolution.

The Jefe Máximo insists on a strategy to keep the United States at bay. Interestingly, Miami and Cuban Americans receive relatively little direct attention in the *Reflexiones*. The *Reflexiones* are a call to defend the revolution’s virtues at all costs, reclaiming a high international profile and moral high ground. The frequency and timing of these essays suggest that Castro is leaving open the possibility of reclaiming his leading role, though he also presents himself as humble seemingly reconciled with his role as convalescent statesman.

### **III. “Battle of Ideas” and Socialist Renewals**

Fuller insights into the emergent model of the Battle of Ideas model can be derived from comparing it with previous shifts in the Cuban regime, particularly that of the mid-1980s, as well as to comparable changes in other socialist societies. Internationally, China’s Cultural Revolution is an obvious candidate for comparison.

In fact, much of the impulse behind the Battle of Ideas may appropriately be compared to earlier chapters of socialist radicalization or renewal in the Cuban revolution.

The most directly relevant moment is the 1986 “Rectification,” which both put a break on liberalization processes and institutional development

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in place since 1970, and set in motion a return to socialist orthodoxy. Though Rectification (the full name was “Rectification of Errors and Negative Tendencies”) came to a screeching halt with the crisis of socialism and the onset of the Special Period, it was the dominant policy paradigm in Cuba for more than five years. It advanced principles and ideas close to those of the Battle of Ideas. Rectification returned Cuba to the notion of radical statism, sharply curtailing forms of market expansion allowed in the earlier part of the 1980s. But instead of planning, it rejected bureaucratization and embraced mass action. Against ‘selfish’ individualism and material incentives, it brought back egalitarianism, moral incentives, and voluntarism. To fight the black-market, low worker productivity, depoliticization, and demoralization, the Rectification advanced grassroots participation, microbrigades, Communist consciousness, and the example of a selfless Che Guevara. Fidel Castro maintained, “the construction of socialism and communism is essentially a political task and a revolutionary task. It must be fundamentally the fruit of the development of awareness and educating people for socialism and communism” (Azicri 1990).

In turn, both the Battle of Ideas and Rectification draw from the radical socialism of the 1960s, when nationalizations, large mobilizations, and reliance on moral incentives resulted in a highly centralized form of state socialism—a process that reached its limits with the disastrous sugar harvest of 1970. In the 1980s as well as the 1960s, Fidel Castro relied on charisma, anti-bureaucracy (institutions), mass mobilization, ethical appeals, moral rather than material incentives, and related measures to return Cuban society to what was viewed as a unitary, monolithic form of socialism.

The Battle of Ideas should only in part be understood as an expression of the strength of the ideological fundamentalism of Fidel Castro and Cuban revolutionaries. The continuity in discourse, political forms, and protagonists is clear. But as in the past, reassertions of orthodoxy also imply enhanced political roles for Fidel Castro and must also be viewed in terms of a political logic. In addition, the Battle of Ideas gives Castro a relatively coherent strategy for burnishing his legacy and enhancing his international standing after the hard times of the Special Period and intimations of his own mortality.

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## The Cuban Puzzle

However, the distinct context of the Battle of Ideas makes the outcome considerably more uncertain than in the case of the Rectification of the 1980s. As a model or strategy, the Battle of Ideas depends on Fidel Castro himself, who claims to have worked more than 7,000 hours on its original design (Castro 2004). It is true that young leaders Otto Rivero, Hassan Pérez, Randy Alonso, and others have catapulted into prominence or high office because of their roles in the campaign, but they lack legitimacy and control of political bases. The comparison with other episodes of socialist renewal, such as China's Cultural Revolution, suggests that they are often political processes in which leader-mass (and great leader-youth) phenomena reflect and reaffirm the centrality of the former. It is hence to be surmised that the future of the Battle of Ideas depends in large measure on the extent to which Fidel Castro recovers his health and his full political authority.

Fidel Castro's recent return as a public figure, even if primarily through the *Reflexiones*, suggests that the Battle of Ideas is itself still alive. Even if the campaign is not as frequently mentioned in the recent past, the Cuban leader's essays contain persistent appeals to revolutionary consciousness and ideas. Is the reform process on hold? Is Cuba likely to return to the path of socialist orthodoxy the way it did at critical junctures in the 1960s and 1986?

That appears highly unlikely—at least in the sense of the possibility that the policy will endure for a sufficiently long period of time. First, even if Castro were to return to power, he is not the leader he once was, and would find it very difficult to steer Cuba in that direction. In any case, it would seem to be unlikely that he would rule Cuba for a sufficiently long duration. Without Castro, hardliners as a group do not seem to have particularly appealing leaders, despite the salience of young leaders recruited from the UJC and FEU.

Meanwhile, Cuba's reformers are a significant force now and one likely to continue to gain strength. Some recent changes in Cuban society favor them. Cuba today is a significantly more complex society than in the past. The island's management structure is now more effectively decentralized and even segmented than it was at any other point since the 1960s. The largest enterprises and agencies in tourism and the hard-cur-

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rency sector (hotels, restaurants, transportation, and the like) are run with considerable operational autonomy. Various large projects in mining are also under complex management arrangements, as are key components of Havana's central or historical core. Managers have succeeded in creating conditions for a modest recovery and stand to benefit more from a pragmatic expansion of the reform process than from the return of socialist orthodoxy. More importantly, even before his recent speech on July 26, 2007, acting president Raúl Castro was known to be in favor of reforms.

In political economic terms, it may be possible to speak of a loose and informal coalition of actors whose transactions are routinely conducted in hard-currency equivalents such as the Cuban convertible peso (CUCs). Remittances, gifts, and purchases by outsiders and by Cubans with access to foreign currency generate substantial flows vital to the economy and affect the lives of many Cubans who are in effect part of this loose and informal coalition.<sup>1</sup> Operators and holders of hard currency equivalents currently hold an important position in Cuban society.

In addition, a large and seemingly growing number of individuals, many of them in the traditional *peso* economy, share a problematic allegiance to the idea of a renewed revolutionary project envisioned by some hardliners. Youth are the main case in point. Notwithstanding the government's efforts to instill consciousness in the young and enhance their support of the revolution project, disillusionment is rampant. Most Cuban youths want to live their lives in their own terms, rather than sacrifice themselves for some distant national goal. A large number would rather migrate to another country if they could. It will take more than dreams and promises to regain the affective allegiance of these actors.

The government is delivering refurbished medical facilities, training thousands of new teachers, and offering cultural programs such as book and video clubs. However, "it's not hard to find teenagers who say such things are not enough" (Weissert 2007). As this source reports, these are the views of Francisco Hernandez, an English major at the University of Havana, for whom "The Battle of Ideas has nothing to do with change. It

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1. Currency dualism does generate tension, but despite notions of a return to a single currency it would seem rather difficult to imagine an alternative to the existing system in the near future.

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## Appendix I

is the opposite.” To this student, “Cuba’s communism is ‘broken’ and [with] gaping income gaps. Some people have money, some people can travel. Some people can live in big houses and eat in restaurants... The rest of us can do none of that.” Other reports point to Cuban youth’s dissatisfaction over limited economic opportunities and freedom. Public statements by Fidel Castro (e.g., 2007 letter to UJC), Carlos Lage, Raúl Castro, and other authorities have acknowledged the problem.

A full assessment of prospects for specific changes in the Cuban model is beyond this paper’s objectives. However, Raúl Castro’s speech of July 26, 2007 confirmed the strength of the reform process in Cuba and argued against the likelihood of a full episode of socialist renewal. An era of deepening structural reform awaits Cubans—announced Raúl. Cuba hence finds itself between contrasting paths offered by the Castro brothers. But the then interim president himself also stated that reformers will act slowly and cautiously. In no small way this is due to Fidel Castro’s own political positions and role. Meanwhile, though the more ambitious aims and hopes of the Battle of Ideas may not be sustained, several specific programs and tendencies (for example, educational institutions and programs, some entitlements, and the like) seem to have better short-term prospects. A turning point beyond the current stalemate with the hardliners will ultimately hinge on the reformers’ willingness and ability to confront and transcend the traditional orthodoxy of state socialism. Because so much of the debate within inside Cuba is framed in terms of mistrust of US policy toward the island, that too is no doubt an important factor in the resolution of this debate. For better or for worse, the United States is a big part of the Cuban puzzle.

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## Appendix I

### Chronology, 1986-2007

1986

Feb, Dec 3rd Congress of Communist Party of Cuba

December Rectification Policy

1989 Fall of Berlin Wall

1991 Demise of the URSS (and end of Soviet assistance)

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4TH Congress of Communist Party of Cuba

1991-1993 Onset and Peak of Economic Crisis

Toughening of US embargo (Torricelli's Cuban Democracy Act) as Soviets leave Cuba

1995 Break on Reform Process

1996 Helms-Burton Law (Cuban Liberty and Democratic Solidarity Act, [or, Libertad])

Revitalization of Communist Party

Speech of Raúl Castro to CCP (uses term "battle of ideas," CEA affair) launches ideological offensive

1997 5th Congress of Communist Party of Cuba (Strengthening of party)

1998 January Pope John Paul II visits Cuba

US eases restrictions on remittances

1999

November Elián González arrives in Florida, new chapter in US-Cuba relations

December Official launching of 'Battle of Ideas' (12/5, Elián's birthday)

2000 George W. Bush becomes president

June Elián González returned to Cuba

2002

May US Under Secretary John Bolton accuses Cuba of maintaining an "offensive biological warfare research and development effort"

Former president Jimmy Carter visits Cuba

2003 Peak of reform process initiated during the Special Period

2005

January Castro declares end of post-Soviet economic crisis

2006

## Appendix II Tables

July 31 Fidel Castro falls ill and cedes power to Raúl Castro and other officials (Proclama)

2007

January 1 Absent from the annual celebrations of the 1959 victory of the revolution.

March Fidel Castro begins writing *Reflexiones* (del Comandante en Jefe), widely covered in the Cuban media and internationally.

July 26 Raúl Castro delivers ‘reformist’ speech at celebration of Moncada attack. Fidel Castro absent.

2008

January 1 Fidel Castro absent from the anniversary celebrations of the Revolution opening the 50th year of the revolution. Has not been seen at a public event since July, 2006.

## Appendix II Tables

TABLE 4-2. United States Frequencies

Word Stem	95	96	97	98	99	00	01	02	03	04	05	06	07	Total
United States/ Estados Unidos	144	66	126	397	431	196	202	204	188	77	209	58	341	1639
Empire/ Imperio	20	30	40	34	45	15	34	34	20	23	89	19	60	463
Imperial- ism/ist	27	44	76	20	33	22	24	25	17	13	29	10	122	363
Bush	1	-	-	5	12	7	3	69	29	82	52	29	23	411
American	56	21	36	147	214	104	88	69	72	41	110	22	124	1104

Sources: 1995, 1996 & 1997: Granma Spanish. 1998-2007: Granma English. Only through July 31, 2006, when FC becomes ill

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**TABLE 4-2. United States Frequencies**

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<b>Word Stem</b>	<b>95</b>	<b>96</b>	<b>97</b>	<b>98</b>	<b>99</b>	<b>00</b>	<b>01</b>	<b>02</b>	<b>03</b>	<b>04</b>	<b>05</b>	<b>06</b>	<b>07</b>	<b>Total</b>
North American	-	-	-	5	2	-	1	1	1	-	-	-	3	13
Total	248	161	278	608	737	344	352	402	327	236	489	138	673	4993

Sources: 1995, 1996 & 1997: Granma Spanish. 1998-2007: Granma English. Only through July 31, 2006, when FC becomes ill

**TABLE 4-3. Country Frequencies**

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	<b>Cuba</b>	<b>US</b>	<b>Europe</b>	<b>China</b>	<b>Venez.</b>	<b>URSS</b>
<b>1995</b>	301	248	36	40	4	45
<b>1996</b>	225	161	24	4	0	24
<b>1997</b>	289	278	40	30	1	54
<b>1998</b>	584	608	97	42	40	77
<b>1999</b>	970	737	198	45	73	106
<b>2000</b>	461	344	31	5	74	14
<b>2001</b>	425	352	42	8	22	9
<b>2002</b>	708	402	24	6	29	23
<b>2003</b>	551	327	59	10	14	6
<b>2004</b>	326	236	31	6	133	3
<b>2005</b>	662	489	40	19	99	39
<b>2006</b>	281	138	2	5	168	3
<b>2007</b>	527	673	109	19	37	106
<b>Total</b>	3106	4993	733	239	694	509

## Appendix II Tables

**TABLE 4-4. World Frequencies**

<b>Word Stem</b>	<b>95 sp</b>	<b>96 sp</b>	<b>97 sp</b>	<b>98</b>	<b>99</b>	<b>00</b>	<b>01</b>	<b>02</b>	<b>03</b>	<b>04</b>	<b>05</b>	<b>06</b>	<b>07</b>	<b>Total</b>
Socialis Social- ism/ socialist	152	112	141	67	72	34	68	54	20	9	31	2	18	780
Communis Communism/ commu- nist	29	17	44	16	36	20	4	19	6	10	33	3	30	267
Capitalis- Capital- ism/ capitalist	63	59	96	30	52	11	12	27	18	6	13	2	15	404
Battle of Ideas	-	-	-	-	4	4	9	15	8	23	25	5	3	96
Cuba Cuban	301	225	289	584	970	461	425	708	551	326	662	281	527	6310
United States- Bush/ Ameri- can/North Ameri- can / Empire/ Imperialis	248	161	278	608	737	344	352	402	327	236	489	138	673	4993
Cuban- American	-	-	-	11	40	19	6	-	2	4	4	4	3	93
Europe European	36	24	40	97	198	31	42	24	59	31	40	2	109	733
Mexico Mexican	2	7	21	112	26	13	21	271	31	14	42	20	30	610

Sources: 1995, 1996 & 1997: Granma Spanish. 1998-2007: Granma English. Only through July 31, 2006, when FC becomes ill

**TABLE 4-4. World Frequencies**

<b>Word Stem</b>	<b>95 sp</b>	<b>96 sp</b>	<b>97 sp</b>	<b>98</b>	<b>99</b>	<b>00</b>	<b>01</b>	<b>02</b>	<b>03</b>	<b>04</b>	<b>05</b>	<b>06</b>	<b>07</b>	<b>Total</b>
Brazil-Brazilian	4	-	7	56	54	2	8	7	12	-	1	3	62	216
Chile-Chilean	4	10	5	19	6	3	6	8	10	3	6	2	6	88
Venezuela Bolivar/Chavez	4	-	1	40	73	74	22	29	14	133	99	168	37	694
Argentina-Argentinian/Argentina	4	-	4	20	13	4	7	20	4	-	3	6	2	119
China-Chinese	40	4	30	42	45	5	8	6	10	6	19	5	19	239
Russia-Russian/URSS/Soviet	45	24	54	77	106	14	9	23	6	3	39	3	106	509
Asia-Asian	10	8	15	36	19	4	11	6	8	3	7	-	5	132

Sources: 1995, 1996 & 1997: Granma Spanish. 1998-2007: Granma English. Only through July 31, 2006, when FC becomes ill

## Appendix II Tables

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