

The famous *New York Times* newsroom story goes something like this: In 1957, at the invitation of a charismatic young revolutionary name Fidel Alejandro Castro Ruz, the paper dispatched its veteran war correspondent, Herbert Matthews, to Cuba.

Although Castro had been rumored to be dead since his disastrous, so-called invasion of Cuba and there was little evidence of a widespread insurrection or any significant support for a rebellion, the exclusive was still too juicy to resist.

# The Lessons Learned from Inventing Castro

AN INTERVIEW WITH  
ANTHONY DePALMA

Once there, Matthews trekked into the Sierra Maestra Mountains, skirting Batista's troops until he rendezvoused with Castro and his ragtag handful of men. The front-page article portrayed Castro heroically in his fight against Batista's dictatorship, and incorrectly asserted that his rebel force numbered around 1,000 men.

Matthews's story altered the fortunes of Castro and his beleaguered rebels.

The story cast the bearded guerrilla fighter as the new democratic hope for a nation tired of tyranny, and triggered a series of events that would ultimately bring down Fulgencio Batista's regime.

However, as Castro's designs on power and his Marxist leanings became clear, questions arose about Matthews's reporting that forever tarnished his reputation.

This story formed the basis for former Kellogg Visiting Fellow ANTHONY DePALMA's new book, *The Man Who Invented Fidel*, and the lecture he gave at Kellogg in the spring.

The idea for the book emerged when DePalma was assigned to write an obituary on Castro for later use and learned of Matthews's role in Castro's rise to power.

In reinvestigating this story, DePalma combed through archives at the *New York Times* and the personal papers of Matthews, and retraced Matthews's trip into the Sierra Maestra Mountains in Cuba.

DePalma, a correspondent for the *New York Times* for 20 years, was the first journalist to hold a Kellogg visiting fellowship. Known primarily for his reporting on Latin America (he was bureau chief in both Mexico and Canada), he currently covers the environment beat for the *Times*.

**There continues to be widespread mistrust of the media and very contemporary issues related to the use or misuse of the media. Do you think this book will add fuel to the fire?**

I try to keep in mind that this was something that happened 50 years ago, but the issues are still current. The only solution [for journalism] is transparency. Journalism is an imperfect process. Which is worse, admitting there were mistakes, or not acknowledging them when everyone knows there have been mistakes? I've made the decision—as have many in the mainstream media—that transparency is the only remedy for us.

There are lots of sources of news today, but I'm not sure they as trustworthy as ... before, for better or worse. We used to trust television anchors unquestioningly when there were only a couple of voices [in the media]. Now there are many voices—and we're better for that—but all you need

today to put out your point of view is a computer. We've already seen with the Swift Boat story and Dan Rather's reporting on President Bush's service in [the] National Guard, both during the last campaign, that those were driven stories were driven by the bloggers.

**What lessons did other political movements in Latin America learn from Castro?**

The clearest example was Mexico in 1994 with the Zapatistas (EZLN). Subcomandante Marcos played Fidel Castro. He comes out of the mountains, invades four cities, and then disappears. He decides after several months to talk to a foreign correspondent; decides when the interview will take place and who will do it.

Like Castro, he attacks isolated army garrisons that were poorly defended but have caches of arms. They learned militarily from Castro, but more importantly, they learned the power of propaganda. As Che Guevara said, the interview with Matthews was worth more than any decisive battle. In truth, the Zapatista revolution consisted

of 10 days of fighting, followed by 12 years of rhetoric. Marcos understood that it was the battle of ideas that he really needs to win.

**What do you think residing as a visiting fellow at Kellogg contributed to the book?**

It was essential. It came at a point where all I had was an idea and many questions about Matthews, journalism, and the intersection between journalism and public policy. What I needed was time to step back to think about those questions and do some basic research to grasp the facts of the case.

In addition, there were a number of Cuba scholars here and we spent many hours talking about Cuba and the revolution. By the time I left here, I was two weeks away from a proposal for the publisher.

The visiting fellowship was the foundation stone of the project, and while we were here we carved it and put it in place. Once I had that, building the rest was much easier.

