

# The Collegians and Castro



Sooners Witt and Johnson ponder the Castro question.

THE BEARDED REBEL—  
SAINT OR SINNER?

**F**IDEL CASTRO—a liberator or a dictator—a menace or a saint?

Perhaps there is no one true picture of this bearded Cuban rebel who faced almost certain defeat in 1956 when his invading force was cut to 11 men—but who never gave up and swept on to victory in 1959, gathering the strength to rout a modern army of 30,000.

Castro and his "26 of July" movement, so called because he and a handful of rebels attacked a government fort on that date in 1953, stand as an embodiment of freedom to many and as a symbol of evil to others.

Many Americans associate Castro with the famed war trials and with a refusal to permit free elections until 1961. To many Cubans, however, Fidel Castro is their savior—a combination of Jefferson, Lincoln and Eisenhower.

Two young Americans, Jed Johnson, Jr., '59, Chickasha, and Paul Witt, '59, Denton, Tex., have taken a long second look at their views of the man and his aims in the light of a seven-day, all-expense paid tour of Cuba provided by the Cuban students association.

The two were among 190 American collegians selected for the trip from some 1,000 attending the National Student Association convention in New York City August 26-31. The invitation to the NSA representatives came after the Cuban student group had found only 210 takers among students of eastern seaboard colleges, who were invited last spring.

On September 5 Johnson, Witt and 188 other young Americans boarded a Cu-

bana airlines turbojet for the 3-hour, 58-minute flight from New York to Havana.

That was the start of seven whirlwind days that were to cause the Oklahomans to reconsider the picture of Cuba they had carried in their minds and to substitute instead a picture in their hearts.

Johnson, a pre-law student, and Witt, a petroleum engineering student, are both slow talking and quick witted. They looked and they talked. They considered and they thought. They haven't come home as mere springboards for Cuban propaganda.

"We were down there only a week," Johnson emphasizes quickly, "and we don't profess to know all the answers. We are just telling of our impressions and what we saw. We are far from being authorities. It isn't true, however, that we saw only what the Cuban government wanted us to see. We could go where we wished and talk to anybody, and we did."

"I have come home with a completely different view from that I held when we left," Paul said. "I didn't fully understand what had existed in the past, so I didn't understand the present."

Johnson stresses that no one can really hope to understand what has happened or how it is viewed by the Cubans themselves unless they are aware of what the Batista regime was like.

"I went to Cuba thinking that Castro was a dictator like Batista, but I have come home thinking that although he is a dictator, he is the popular choice," Johnson continued.

The Cubans love Castro; they hated Ba-

tista. This is the theme that struck both Johnson and Witt broadside.

"Everywhere you see little cloth dolls of Castro and '26 of July' caps, T-shirts and flags. There are signs across the streets, saying 'Gracias, Fidel,'" Witt said.

"Everyone I talked to, on the streets or in the country, told me the same story—under Batista life was intolerable. The press attache at the American Embassy confirmed this. He told us that under Batista armed men would go to a home, knock on the door and shoot whoever walked out, whether it was the one they sought or not.

"I talked to a boy whose brother was killed that way," Witt added. "They were looking for him, but they killed his brother."

"It is because the American public is not really acquainted with what went on under Batista that it cannot appreciate that 80 to 95 per cent of the Cubans back Castro," Johnson said. "It is hard to find any criticism of Castro at all. The Cubans have a saying, 'Jesus is in heaven. Castro is on earth.' Many hang up pictures of Castro with a halo around his head next to a picture of Christ and consider Castro a saint."

But Castro is hardly considered a saint by most Americans. Both the war trials, with their implication of kangaroo courtism, the denial of an immediate free election are repugnant to Americans, steeped as they are in the tradition of a slow-moving judiciary.

Continued on Page 24

## HAND BEHIND HEADLINES

Continued from Page 5

the Sooners, 33 of whom have been All-Americans during Keith's time at O.U.

A respected member of his profession's national organization, the College Sports Information Directors of America, Keith is considered one of the best in the nation. Besides having served on the board of directors and the public relations committee, Keith is currently charged with gathering contributions from NCAA member schools and compiling a public relations manual scheduled for publication next spring.

The biggest and most demanding phase of Keith's job at O.U. is in personal relations with the press, radio and television, national as well as local, state and regional. Press dinners in Oklahoma City are arranged yearly to enable writers to meet the entire coaching staff with press parties on Friday nights before home football games attended by both Sooner and opponent staffs.

Photo days for each sport before the seasons begin give dozens of photographers the chance to get their own custom-posed shots for immediate and future use.

If a single "biggest problem" exists, it is probably in furnishing the necessary convenient and comfortable working accommodations for press, radio, television, national magazines, syndicates and cartoonists while they are covering campus sports events.

The O.U. press box was the most improved in the nation after its 1951 enlargement—but is far from ideal. With a little careful stacking, Keith can house from 200 to 225 at an average game with the demand higher at the Big Red's "big" games. Every type of temporary quarters have been built on the roof, from platforms to lean-tos.

Since no darkroom facilities are available at the stadium, photographers must journey across campus to the Journalism Building to develop their pictures, then send them to Oklahoma City by car for transmission. Keith is looking forward to the day when all these operations can be accomplished within the stadium box.

In surveying his crowded sports and literary careers, Keith's only regret is the inroads they have made on his home life. He and his wife, Virginia, have two children, Kitty, '59ed, an elementary school teacher in Denver, and Johnny, a popular campus entertainer during his O.U. days, now with Clyde McCoy's Dixieland Band.

To the average 8-to-5er, Harold Keith's job looms as a back-breaker, but Harold Keith has a strong back and wouldn't trade places with anyone.

## COLLEGIANS AND CASTRO

Continued from Page 9

"The Cubans do not understand the agitation by Americans for an election," Johnson said. "They believe that he has been elected—through their blood, sweat and tears. I think he should have an election soon. It is necessary if his government is to be understood here, but I think he is popularly chosen now and would be the overwhelming choice in a free election."

The war trials, which broke in big, black headlines across America, were expected and demanded by the Cubans. Castro in 1958 had announced his intention of hunting down and punishing war criminals if he came to power.

The Cubans compare the trials to the Nuremburg trials, but point out that the machinery for their trials was established by Castro before the end of the war and not after the war as was the machinery for the Nuremburg trials.

"They cannot understand how we can criticize them for shooting down war criminals after they had been tried," Johnson said. "The trials prevented an extended period of rioting after Castro's victory. Always before, a revolution was followed by the slaughter, without benefit of trial, of those on the losing side. The war trials prevented this type of pandemonium. To the Cubans the trials were understandable.

"We could never condone such trials here," Witt said, "but to the Cubans they were justified and necessary and done with public approval. They did not start a reign of terror in Cuba. The people are not frightened of torture and death as they were under Batista."

Convinced that the Cubans themselves are happy with their new government, Johnson and Witt see economic policy as the biggest obstacle facing Castro.

Castro has abruptly put into force several wrenching economic changes, which are favored by most Cubans but hated by foreign landholding and business interests. He has cut the telephone rates and apartment rents drastically without consulting the companies or owners. His most far-reaching change is the land reform.

Castro plans to give the land to those who till it, breaking the stranglehold of wealthy landowners. Forty per cent of Cuba's land is in the hands of foreign interests, and 50 per cent is owned by 17 per cent of the Cubans.

"The landowners call it confiscation, but the people are definitely behind the land reform," Johnson said.

"The goals of the reform are satisfactory to the people," Witt said, "and if it can be done, it will be great. Economically it is probably an unsound proposition. They are going too fast, but the people are so nationalistic they believe they can do anything."

"I do not see the revolution as either all good or all bad," Witt said. "I believe the revolution was needed, but I think Castro is making several serious mistakes in his economic reforms. The Cuban people believe that his is an honest and noble attempt to improve the country, but I think the attempt may not be based on sound judgment."

The Cuban people, although basically not anti-America, are riled by slurs that have been heaped upon Castro, their leader and hero, in the American press. They cannot understand or forgive America's support of Batista with military training missions or her support of other autocratic dictators in Latin-America.

Johnson and Witt both believe that America will harvest nothing but hatred in Latin-America until her foreign policy is changed, and Americans take an interest in the welfare of those south of the border.

"The Cubans cannot understand our policies and so many of them are opposed to our government," Johnson said, and then added wistfully, "Castro has said he wishes all Americans could come to Cuba to see for themselves. I wish every Cuban could come to America."

IMAGE IS NOT AVAILABLE  
ONLINE DUE TO COPYRIGHT  
RESTRICTIONS.

A paper copy of this  
issue is available at  
call number LH 1 .06S6 in  
Bizzell Memorial Library.

TREAT YOURSELF TO



Potato Chips