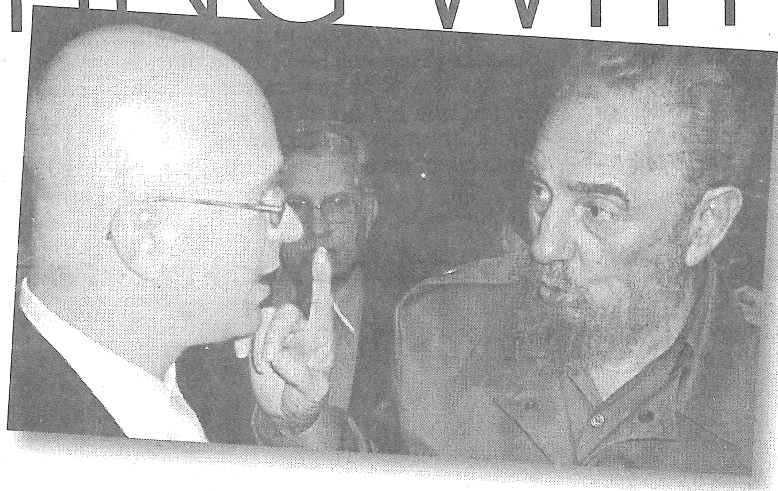


CURRENTS



Michael Smerconish (far right) in Havana in 2002 with (from left) lawyers Tom Kline and Shanin Specter, then-U.S. Sen. Arlen Specter (R., Pa.), and Cuban leader Fidel Castro. Smerconish was on the trip at Specter's invitation, on assignment as a columnist for the Philadelphia Daily News.

MY MEETING WITH FIDEL



Michael Smerconish listens as Fidel Castro makes a point during the 2002 Cuba visit. SHANIN SPECTER

On a 2002 trip to Cuba with Arlen Specter, I had a chance to talk with Castro and found him keenly aware of American politics and how the embargo helped him fend off dissent.

President Obama's reestablishment of relations with Cuba has me thinking about the night I spent more than six hours with Fidel Castro. I was in Havana in 2002 with U.S. Sen. Arlen Specter, on assignment as a columnist for the Philadelphia Daily News. It was the second time Specter, the architect of what he called the "single-bullet conclusion," met with the Cuban dictator, whom many believed played a role in JFK's assassination. Specter had first

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sought out Castro in 1999 as he wrote a memoir, *Passion for Truth*. When I interviewed Pennsylvania's longest-serving U.S. senator about the book, I'd quipped that if he returned to

Cuba I'd be willing to sit in his luggage.

Thirteen years ago this week, I received a call.

"How'd you like to go to Cuba with me and meet Fidel Castro?" he asked with that distinctive Kansas twang.

Which is how I found myself, just four months removed from 9/11, asking Fidel Castro to publicly condemn the terror attack against the United States.

Castro launched into a 10-minute discourse about the attacks and ultimately condemned

"whoever" was responsible. He also proposed that the United States and Cuba enter a bilateral agreement to fight terrorism.

"Cuba made the first statement against terrorism after Sept. 11," he told me. "We offered Cuban airports for the landing of any aircraft that needed to get on the ground. We offered blood. We offered nurses." He said America never acknowledged his offers.

But he didn't condemn Osama bin Laden, claiming not to know
See FIDEL on C3

THE PULSE | MICHAEL SMERCONISH

When columnist and Fidel Castro met

FIDEL from C1

definitively who was responsible. When I countered that bin Laden had taken credit, Castro said: "I can't judge a person based upon a videotape."

He said the only difference that he had with Americans on terrorism was how best to eradicate the problem, adding that it was important to "attack it from a moral and ethical point of view, not the bombing of innocent civilians."

There were plenty of memorable exchanges. "The DA vs. the dictator," I scratched on a notepad as I listened to Specter and Castro mix it up.

Specter: How long do you have before your next election, and I mean against an opponent?

Castro: You would have to tell me what type of election.

Specter: The type I ran for district attorney, where you have to campaign and people can vote for whomever the want.

Castro: Oh, you mean like you had in Florida in 2000?

Castro exhibited a keen awareness of the American politics that perpetuated the embargo. He fully understood that anyone running for president needed to court Florida, and to do so meant appealing to the then-monolithic Cuban-American vote.

Despite public protestations, he privately acknowledged that the embargo was a unifier of the Cuban people. This was confirmation of what I've long believed, that the embargo provided him with a ready answer to any complaint about Cuban life — namely, that it was the fault of the Americans and their foreign policy.



Michael Smerconish at the airport in Cuba in 2002. As he listened to Specter and Castro, he wrote "The DA vs. the dictator." SHANIN SPECTER

Beyond the substance, there were plenty of surprises:

Such as the Christmas tree in our hotel lobby, Coca-Cola in the minibar, and CNN on TV. When I dried my hands in the men's room of a new restaurant, I took note of the "Made in Illinois" stamp on the appliance.

I did not find Castro to be a Central Casting communist. He spoke with conviction, but not slogans and ideology. And he was surrounded by a cadre of surprisingly young staffers, Capitol Hill types, calling into question my assumption that communism was an old man's game.

I was then working for the local NBC affiliate, WCAU, and upon arrival, had asked Castro whether a camera could film the meeting. He readily agreed. His aides were ashen. A negotiation en-

sued, as they were loathe to allow an NBC camera crew into the Palacio de la Revolucion on short notice. The compromise: They would film it themselves and hand me a tape at the end of the night. I watched a Castro staffer record more than an hour of dialogue, but upon return to Philadelphia, I realized they'd provided me a tape with only five minutes of footage.

Two other Philadelphia lawyers were on the trip — Specter's son Shanin, and Shanin Specter's law partner, Tom Kline. (They paid their own way.) Approaching 2 a.m., while the three of us compared notes at a hotel bar, we recognized the common denomi-

nator in our room assignments at the Golden Tulip Central Park Hotel. Despite eight stories and 200-plus rooms, we were each in a room that ended in "46." I went to bed convinced that was the "stack" in which the listening devices had been run.

Those weren't the only Big Brother moments. Castro revealed a total awareness of how Specter had spent his day. He was clearly irked that the senator had met with Cuban dissidents, as he ticked off Specter's itinerary since he'd arrived at Jose Marti airport.

Kline presented Castro with an NYFD hat, explaining that it was to be worn in solidarity against terrorism and as a testament to those who lost their lives trying to save others.

Castro wore the hat, causing me to later write that, for a moment, "he looked no different than Rudy Giuliani." Days later,

I never lost my perspective. I viewed the evening as a once-in-a-lifetime opportunity to survey a world leader up close and personal.

amid a mountain of hate mail, much of it postmarked from Miami, one e-mailer told me the comparison "made [me] sick to my stomach." Another said I'd "fawned over this man like a long-lost grandfather."

Actually, I never lost my perspective. I viewed the evening as a once-in-a-lifetime opportunity to survey a world leader up close and personal, but my takeaway

was that Cuba would be better served without him at the helm.

Portions of our trip may have been choreographed, but I got enough of a look around to know that Cubans lived a Third World existence 90 miles from Florida. The streets of Havana were straight out of the scene in *Godfather II*, when Michael Corleone is in Havana while Batista is toppled on New Year's Eve, 1958. Gorgeous architecture, but tons of decay. Castro touted many statistics about education and infant mortality, but the presence of 1950s American automobiles spoke volumes.

That the Cuban people and America would be best served by new Cuban leadership has never been a question, at least for me. The only issue has been how best to bring that about. As I wrote upon my return:

"Despite more than 40 years of effort, the Cuban embargo has failed miserably in its objective — to oust Castro."

Fourteen years later, an American president who faces no more elections has taken the appropriate action. In the process, he's removed from the Castro brothers their bogeyman, an ever-present excuse for all the failings of their rule. It will be interesting to see how this plays out. Only one thing is certain, it can't be more of a failure than the policy we've had for the last 54 years.

Michael Smerconish can be heard from 9 a.m. to noon on Sirius XM's POTUS Channel 124 and seen hosting "Smerconish" at 9 a.m. Saturdays on CNN.