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THE NEW YORK TIMES LEARNS AFTER 29 YEARS

"Truth will come to light," promised the Bard. Indeed. But sometimes it takes a long, long time.

The New York Times published a book review of an anti-Communist book last month. That, in itself, was news. Titled "Against All Hope," it is the autobiography of Armando Valladares who was imprisoned by Fidel Castro for 22 years for the "crime" of speaking against Communism. His book vividly describes the endless succession of tortures and obscenities which he witnessed at the hands of Castro's thugs. Valladares would still be in prison if it had not been for the personal intervention of France's President Francois Mitterrand and the agitation of Amnesty International.

The Times review is significant for another reason. "It should not be forgotten," reviewer John Gross said, "that while the horrendous scenes described were taking place, a procession of influential visitors from the United States and elsewhere -- writers, academics and others -- were busy proclaiming the virtues of the Cuban revolution in the most radiant terms."

The reviewer is correct. Such tragic, costly errors of judgment should not be forgotten. But the reviewer failed to mention that preeminent among those influential visitors was top New York Times reporter Herbert Matthews.

In February 1957 Matthews visited Fidel Castro in the hills of the Sierra Maestra and wrote three front-page articles in the New York Times portraying Castro as a political Robin Hood and comparing him to Abraham Lincoln. Prior to that time, Castro had been just another bandit in the hills, engaging in acts of terrorism.

After the New York Times anointed Castro with such international prestige and legitimacy, he was able to get followers and funds in Cuba and the United States. By 1959 Matthews was working closely with William Wieland on the Latin American desk in the State Department to expedite Castro's victory and the return of U.S. Ambassador Earl E. T. Smith.

It didn't take any great smarts to know in the 1950s that Fidel Castro was a Communist. If it walks like a duck, swims like a duck, quacks like a duck, reasonably intelligent people can assume it is a duck. I dug into my old files and found an article I wrote for publication on April 15, 1959, during the period when the New York Times was consistently dishing out disinformation on Castro.

"The pattern was clear from the start -- in the promises, associates and tactics of Castro, and in the propaganda war being waged in the American press. Castro was a leader of Communist students at the University of Havana, where he is reported to have killed his own roommate.

"Castro has surrounded himself with hard-shell veterans of Communist hot and cold wars all over the world. His brother, Raul, who is head of the army, takes pride in calling himself an atheist and was greeted as 'Comrade Communist' by the Communist radio. Castro's right-hand man is the Argentine 'Che' Guevara, who fought on the Communist side in Guatemala. Castro's rebels were trained in Mexico in guerrilla tactics by Alberto Bayo, a veteran leader of Communist forces in the Spanish Civil War. Material aid for Castro's rebellion came from pro-Communist Venezuelans. Castro's government newspaper is run by Carlos Franqui, former proofreader on the Communist organ 'Hoy.'

"Anyone who is familiar with the pattern of Red takeover in other countries knows how closely Castro followed the Chinese, Hungarian and Yugoslav precedents. Castro's mass executions (a Red trademark since the Soviet purge 'trials' of the 1930s) have mounted to 500 -- many more than the total number of persons killed in the entire revolution!

"It is characteristic of Communist courts that 99 percent of all trials result in convictions. When one court acquitted 43 fliers, Castro demanded a second trial, following which they were sentenced to 40 years.

"The Castro revolt appears to be a Communist operation intended primarily to secure bases for Soviet submarines within 100 miles of American soil. Let us not wait for atomic warheads and rockets to be launched from a Caribbean base before we take the steps essential for our survival as a free nation."

Alas, such obvious truths did not appear in the New York Times. Three years later, Castro conspired with Nikita Khrushchev to place offensive nuclear missiles in Cuba, and the stage was set for the Cuban Missile Crisis.