


September 10, 2010



Fidel Castro Blasts Ahmadinejad As Anti-Semitic

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WILL WEISSERT | 09/ 7/10 09:01 PM | 

HAVANA — Fidel Castro criticized Iranian President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad for what he called his anti-Semitic attitudes and questioned his own actions during the Cuban Missile Crisis of 1962 during interviews with an American journalist he summoned to Havana to discuss fears of global nuclear war.

Jeffrey Goldberg, a national correspondent for The Atlantic, blogged on the magazine's website Tuesday that he was on vacation last month when the head of the Cuban Interests Section in Washington — which Cuba maintains there instead of an embassy — called to say Castro had read his recent article about Israel and Iran and wanted him to come to Cuba.

Goldberg asked Julia Sweig, a Cuba-U.S. policy expert at the Council on Foreign Relations, to accompany him, and the pair spent portions of three days talking with Castro.

Cuba's state-controlled media reported Aug. 31 that Goldberg and Sweig met with Castro and attended the dolphin show at Havana's aquarium, but the blog was the first to reveal details of what they discussed.

Goldberg said their first meeting lasted five hours and featured appearances by Castro's wife, Dalia, his son Antonio, and several bodyguards, two of which held his elbow to steady Castro when he moved.

"His body may be frail, but his mind is acute, his energy level is high," wrote Goldberg, who also noted Castro's self-deprecating humor.

The 84-year-old ex-president wore full military fatigues and an olive-green cap while addressing university students last week, and had previously appeared in public in a military shirt. But Goldberg saw Castro in a red shirt, sweat pants, and black New Balance sneakers.

He said Castro, who himself has been a fierce critic of Israel, "repeatedly returned to his excoriation of anti-Semitism," chiding Ahmadinejad for denying the Holocaust. Castro said that Iran could further the cause of peace by "acknowledging the 'unique' history of anti-Semitism and trying to understand why Israelis fear for their existence."

The gray-bearded revolutionary related to Goldberg a story from his childhood that has been detailed by some biographers: that he overheard classmates saying Jews killed Jesus Christ.

"I didn't know what a Jew was. I knew of a bird that was called a 'Jew,' and so for me the Jews were those birds," Goldberg quoted Castro as telling him. Castro later added, "This is how ignorant the entire population was."

According to Goldberg, Castro said, "I don't think anyone has been slandered more than the Jews. I would say much more than the Muslims."

Castro also said that the Iranian government should understand that the Jews "were expelled from their land, persecuted and mistreated all over the world, as the ones who killed God."

After undergoing emergency intestinal surgery in July 2006, giving up Cuba's presidency and dropping out of sight for four years, Castro has begun making near-daily public appearances to warn of a nuclear war pitting the U.S. and Israel against Iran and also featuring a Washington-led attack on North Korea.

"This problem is not going to get resolved, because the Iranians are not going to back down in the face of threats," Castro told Goldberg.

Goldberg also said he revisited the Cuban Missile Crisis with Castro, asking if once "it seemed logical for you to recommend that the Soviets bomb the U.S."

"Does what you recommended still seem logical now?"

Castro's answer surprised him: "After I've seen what I've seen, and knowing what I know now, it wasn't worth it all."

Online:

<http://www.theatlantic.com/international/archive/2010/09/fidel-to-ahmadinejad-stop-slandering-the-jews/62566/>