

# Blowing Smoke

BY JEREMY N. SMITH

**P**resident John F. Kennedy gave his press secretary Pierre Salinger a simple shopping list on the evening of February 6, 1962: 1,000 H. Upmann brand petit corona Cuban cigars. Knowing the request urgent, Salinger delivered the order the next morning. Soon thereafter the President issued his most famous executive order, a comprehensive Cuban trade embargo. Henceforth, for any resident of the United States, a 'Cuban' was contraband.

Five years earlier, Americans had been by far the biggest purchasers of Cuban sugar and tobacco. The island nation was a quasi-colony and U.S. investors owned most of its agricultural land and processing facilities. In 1959, however, Fidel Castro overthrew the military dictator Batista, promising prosperity, democracy, and the restoration of Cuba's civil constitution. When foreign-owned land was expropriated, the U.S.

government responded with a series of export prohibitions. Until Kennedy's executive order, however, the cigar was safe.

Cigars originate in the Caribbean and Central America. Columbus introduced smoking to Europe. In 1492, the story goes, two of his crewmen disembarked in Cuba, where they received tobacco wrapped in smoldering maize husks. A century later, Spanish traders divided 50 kilograms of Cuban tobacco seed amongst the Roman Catholic missions of their

colonial empire. How the product then spread can be observed in its etymology: the English cigar derives from the French *cigare*, which derives from the Spanish *cigarro*, which itself originates from the Mayan word for smoking: *sik'ar*.

After the embargo, many major Cuban cigar makers moved their operations elsewhere in the region, but the lofty reputation Cuban cigars remains unmatched. The country's *Vuelta Abajo* district in the western Pinar del Río Province, in particular, is said to provide the perfect microclimate for growing tobacco. Top brands are entirely hand-rolled, advertised as such in Spanish: "totalmente a mano." Afterwards the product enters a climate-controlled box, generally 70 degrees Fahr-

enheit and 70 percent relative humidity, where it can be stored for 50 years

Good thing. Almost half a century since President Kennedy's executive order, the American trade embargo against Cuba endures. With few exceptions, U.S. citizens cannot travel to or conduct business in Cuba, and foreign companies who do so are seen as criminal "traffickers" in stolen U.S. goods. While other countries protest—in 1996, the Canadian House of Commons saw the mock introduction of a bill demanding the American government return property of "United Empire Loyalists" seized in the course of the American Revolution—high prices for smuggled Cubans invite mass counterfeiting (nine out of ten 'Cuban' cigars sold in the U.S. are fakes). While Cuba exports some 100 million cigars a year, a single contraband double corona can cost American smokers \$20.

As long as a Castro controls Cuba and Cuban-American voters control the most populous U.S. swing state, Florida, the embargo will likely endure. Meanwhile, law-abiding smokers make do with second-best and ordinary Cubans suffer.

When Castro took power, per capita GDP in Cuba was \$3,170, higher than Hong Kong, Singapore, or South Korea, and only \$120 short of Japan. "Cuba in 2008 should be the Hong Kong or Singapore of Latin America," says public policy analyst Mark Milke. That it is not (GDP remains around \$3000), he believes, is the fault first of Fidel Castro, but second of stubborn U.S. lawmakers. "Cuban-Americans don't have to give up their claims to property confiscated by Castro and his thugs, but that can be dealt with if and when Cuba becomes a liberal, market-oriented democracy," Milke argues. "In the meantime, money is power and the Americans should try another strategy: wash the Communists out to sea on a tidal wave of U.S. dollars from investment, trade and tourism."

In late February of this year, Fidel Castro, now 82 years old, announced his retirement as Cuba's president. His younger brother Raúl promptly succeeded him. Rumors abound about the exact condition of his health, but odds are, this month, Castro will witness the election of the twelfth American president since he took power in 1959. Though he has officially given up smoking, special occasions invite an indulgence.

As Che Guevara said, "A smoke in times of rest is a great companion to the solitary soldier." ■

