

Who is the world's greatest leader?

Pop quiz: Who is José Mujica and why should you care?

If the answer doesn't trip off your tongue, I sympathize. Until recently, I had no idea.

I discovered him, in fact, serendipitously and circuitously.

My most recent book, *What Lies Across the Water: The Real Story of the Cuban Five*, unravels the tale of a Cuban intelligence network dispatched to South Florida in the 1990s to infiltrate Miami-based exile groups busily plotting terrorist attacks against Cuba under the watchful but neglectful eyes of American law enforcement. An Italian-Canadian businessman was killed in one of those attacks, which targeted Havana tourist hotels and even included a plot to blow up an airplane carrying hundreds of tourists to Cuba. In 1998, the Cubans shared that information with the U.S. government. Three months later, the FBI arrested... not the terrorist plotters but the Cuban agents who'd exposed them. In 2000, the agents, now known as the Cuban Five, were tried in hostile-to-anything-that-smells-of-Fidel Miami, convicted and sentenced to unconscionably long prison terms, including one double-life-plus-15-year sentence. Three of the five are still in American prisons. They are certifiable heroes in Cuba.

That's the Cliff's Notes version. The longer, more nuanced story is in my book.

When I started researching the story, which I also discovered by accident, I knew nothing of the Five, little about Cuba beyond its beaches and less still about the history of Cuban-American relations. I still don't speak Spanish.

It's been... an education.

I also understood nothing about Uruguay or its president, José Mujica (answer to pop quiz, part 1), until his story recently intersected with the Five.

In March, U.S. President Barack Obama asked a number of world leaders, including Mujica, to allow 154 detainees at the American base in Guantanamo, Cuba, to settle in their countries. The prisoners, held since the early 2000s, face no criminal charges. But the U.S. refuses to send them back to their al Qaeda-influenced home countries.

Mujica quickly agreed, "for human rights reasons," to accept five prisoners. But he added a caveat. "We don't do this for money or material things," Mujica explained, but



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he did ask the U.S. government to "please ... release those two or three Cuban prisoners who have been there for many years, because that, too, is a shame."

Who is this guy, I wondered, who seemed prepared, in the kindest possible way, to tweak the American giant?

Mujica, I quickly discovered, is considered the world's "poorest president." He refuses to live in Uruguay's opulent presidential palace with its staff of 42 and donates 90 per cent of his \$8,000 (US) monthly salary, most to a program to improve housing for the poor. The grandfatherly 79-year-old lives on a small, servant-less farm outside Montevideo and drives himself around in an aging Volkswagen Beetle.

"It is not the man who has too little, but the man who craves more, who is poor," he quotes a Roman court philosopher.

In his pre-presidential life, Mujica was a founder of the Tupamaros guerilla movement, which waged a decades-long armed struggle against Uruguay's repressive government. Mujica

himself spent 14 years in prison, including two at the bottom of a well, before finally being freed in a 1985 amnesty.

In 2009, under the banner "an honest government, a first-class country," Mujica won the presidency with the support of a broad coalition. "It is a mistake to think that power comes from above when it comes from within the hearts of the masses," he declared. "It has taken me a lifetime to learn this."

Uruguay, one of the world's most socially progressive countries — the first in the world to legalize marijuana, one of the few in Latin America to recognize same sex marriage — is also among "the region's least corrupt and least unequal," according to the *New York Times*.

Although the twice Nobel-prize nominated Mujica argues that our obsession with economic growth is "a problem for our civilization" because of its claims to the planet's resources, his own economy is growing 3.6 per cent a year.

Why am I telling you all this? Because I find it fascinating. And because we should occasionally look beyond what's news on CNN or The National. There are other, even perhaps better ways to run countries, economies, the world.

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