

Fifty Truths about Fidel Castro

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Five Years Ago, the Passing of Fidel Castro

The historic leader of the Cuban Revolution has forever marked the history of Cuba and Latin America, making his country a symbol of dignity and resistance.

1. Fidel Castro was born into a family of seven children on August 13, 1926, at Birán in the current province of Holguín, from a union between Angel Castro Argiz, a wealthy Spanish landowner from Galicia and Cuban born Lina Ruz González.

2. At the age of seven, he was sent to the city of Santiago de Cuba where he lived with the teacher who was to be responsible for his education. She nonetheless abandoned him to his fate. "She deceived my family", and "I have known hunger", Fidel Castro recalled. A year later, in January 1935, he entered the religious school, *Hermanos de La Salle*, as an intern. In January 1938, after rebelling against the authoritarianism of a teacher, he left the institution at the age of eleven for Dolores College. From 1942 to 1945 he continued his schooling in Havana with the Jesuits at Belen College. After receiving high marks in his studies, his teacher, Father Armando Llorente, wrote in the institution's directory, "He has distinguished himself in all literary subjects. He has also been a true athlete, an excellent and team-oriented player. Always courageously and proudly defending the college flag, he earned the admiration and affection of all. He intends to continue his studies in law and we have no doubt that he will fill brilliantly the pages of his book of life".

3. Despite having gone into exile in Miami in 1961, following the tensions between the revolutionary government and the Cuban Catholic church, Father Llorente always retained fond memories of his former student: "I am often blamed for speaking well of Fidel. But I cannot speak ill of the Fidel that I knew. Moreover, one day, he saved my life. These are things that you can never forget". Fidel Castro had jumped into a river to save his teacher who was being carried away by the current.

4. In 1945, Fidel Castro entered the University of Havana, where he began a law career. Elected as Faculty of Law delegate, he actively participated in demonstrations against corruption in the government of President Ramón Grau San Martín. He did not hesitate to publicly denounce the armed gangs of BAGA, a group with links to government authorities. Max Lesnik, then Secretary General of the Orthodox Youth group and a comrade of Fidel Castro, recalls an episode: "The committee '30 September' [created to fight against the armed gangs] had decided to denounce the government and the gangsters during the plenary session of the Students' Federation. More than 300 students from various faculties thronged the hall to listen to Fidel when someone shouted [...]: 'He, who speaks too long, will speak for the last time'. It was clear to whom the threat was addressed. Fidel got up from his chair and, with a firm and poised step, walked to the center of the hall. After requesting a moment of silence in memory of the martyrs [...], he began reading an official

list of the names of all gang members and the leaders of the Federation of University Students who had received stipends from the government”.

5. In 1947, at the age of 22, Fidel Castro participated with Juan Bosch, the future President of the Dominican Republic, in an attempted landing at Cayo Confite intended to overthrow the dictator Rafael Trujillo, then supported by the United States.

6. A year later, in 1948, he participated in the Bogotazo popular uprising triggered by the assassination of Jorge Eliecer Gaitan, a progressive political leader and presidential candidate in Colombia.

7. After finishing his graduate studies in law in 1950, Fidel Castro worked as a lawyer until 1952, defending the poor, before entering politics.

8. Fidel Castro never militated for the Popular Socialist Party (PSP), the communist party of pre-revolutionary Cuba. Rather, he joined the Cuban People's Party, also called the Orthodox Party, which had been founded in 1947 by Eduardo Chibás. Chibás' progressive Orthodox Party program was based on several key elements: national sovereignty, economic independence achieved through the diversification of agricultural production, banning the latifundios (large estates), the development of industry, the nationalization of utilities, the fight against corruption, the struggle for social justice and the defense of workers. Fidel Castro has expressed his belief in the thinking of José Martí, of Chibás and in anti-imperialism. A talented orator, he ran in the parliamentary elections of 1952 as a candidate of the Cuban People's Party.

9. On March 10, 1952, three months before the presidential elections, General Fulgencio Batista shattered the constitutional order by overthrowing the government of Carlos Prío Socarrás. He won the immediate support of the United States, which officially recognized the new military dictatorship.

10. Fidel Castro the lawyer filed a complaint against Batista for breach of the constitutional order: “If courts exist, Batista should be punished, and if Batista is not punished [...], how then can the court judge a citizen for sedition or rebellion against a regime that is both illegal and the product of unpunished betrayal?” The Supreme Court, subservient to the new regime, found his complaint to be inadmissible.

11. On July 26, 1953, Fidel Castro became head of an expedition of 131 men committed to launching attacks against the Moncada barracks in Santiago de Cuba, the second most important military fortress in the country, and the Carlos Manuel de Cespedes barracks in the city of Bayamo. The goal was to take control of Santiago –the historical cradle of all revolutions– and launch a call to rebellion throughout the country to overthrow the dictator Batista.

12. The operation was a bloody failure and many fighters –55 in total– were murdered after being brutally tortured by Batista's military, while only six had been killed in combat. Some managed to escape thanks to the support of the local population.

13. Fidel Castro, captured a few days later, owes his life to Sergeant Pedro Sarría, who refused to follow the orders of his superiors and execute the Moncada leader. “Do not shoot! Do not shoot! You cannot kill ideas”, he exclaimed to his soldiers.

14. During his historic defense entitled “History Will Absolve Me”, Fidel Castro, defending

himself, denounced Batista's crimes and the misery in which the Cuban people lived. He presented his program for a free Cuba, based on national sovereignty, economic independence and social justice.

15. Sentenced to 15 years in prison, Castro was released two years later in 1955, following an amnesty granted by the Batista regime. He then founded the July 26 Movement (M 26-7) and announced his plan to continue the fight against the military dictatorship before going into exile in Mexico.

16. With a young doctor named Ernesto Guevara, Fidel Castro organized the Granma expedition. Castro had no trouble convincing the young Argentine who later recalled: "I met him during a cool night in Mexico City, and I remember that our first discussion revolved around international politics. A few hours later –in the early morning– I had decided to become a member of the future expedition".

17. In August of 1955, Fidel Castro published the first manifesto of the 26th of July Movement, a document that included the main points he had made in his "History Will Absolve Me" defense. There is the question of land reform, banning latifundios, social and economic reforms that favor the underprivileged, national industrialization, housing construction, lowering rents, nationalization of telephone, gas and electrical services, education and culture for all, tax reform and the reorganization of government services to fight against corruption.

18. In October 1955, in order to raise funds for the expedition, Fidel Castro made a tour of the United States where he met with Cuban exiles. The FBI put the patriotic clubs that were founded in different cities by 26-7 M under close surveillance.

19. On November 25, 1956, Fidel Castro left from the port of Tuxpan, Mexico, aboard the *Granma*, a boat designed to hold 25 people. There were in total 82 revolutionaries aboard when it set sail for Cuba with the aim to triggering a guerrilla war in the mountains of the Sierra Maestra.

20. Due to climatic conditions, the crossing was a nightmare. One member of the expedition fell overboard. Juan Almeida, a member of the group and future Commander of the Revolution, recalls the episode. "Fidel told us the following: 'As long as we have not saved him, we will not move from here'. Everyone was touched by his words and it aroused our fighting spirit. We felt that with this man, nobody would be abandoned. Yet, it was jeopardizing the expedition. Still he was finally saved".

21. After a voyage that lasted seven days, instead of the five that had been forecast, the troupe landed on December 2, 1956 in what was, according to Raúl Castro, "the worst swamp anyone had ever seen". The revolutionaries were dispersed by gunfire from Cuban aviation, and pursued by some 2,000 of Batista's soldiers who had been waiting for them.

22. A few days later, in Cinco Palmas, Fidel Castro rejoined his brother Raúl and ten other members of the expedition. "Now we're going to win the war", the M 26-7 leader said to his men. The guerrilla war had begun. It would last for 25 months.

23. In February 1957, the Herbert Matthews interview with Fidel Castro appeared in the *New York Times*, thereby permitting US and world public opinion to discover the existence of a guerrilla force in Cuba. Batista later admitted in his memoirs that through this media coup

“Castro was becoming a legendary figure”. Matthews, however, nuanced the importance of his interview: “No advertising, as sensational as it might have been, would have made any difference, if Fidel Castro had not been exactly the man I described”.

24. Despite official declarations of neutrality in the Cuban conflict, the US provided political, economic and military support to Batista, and opposed Fidel Castro up to the final moments. On December 23, 1958, one week before the triumph of the Revolution, while Fulgencio Batista’s army was in disarray despite its superiority in men and weapons, the 392nd meeting of the National Security Council, with President Eisenhower in attendance, took place. Allen Dulles, the CIA director, made the US position quite clear: “We must prevent Castro’s victory”.

25. Despite the support of the United States, his 20,000 soldiers and material superiority, Batista could not defeat a guerrilla force comprised 300 armed men during the final offensive in the summer of 1958 that had gone on to mobilize more than 10,000 soldiers. This “strategic victory” demonstrated the military genius of Fidel Castro who had anticipated and defeated the “End of Fidel” operation launched by Batista.

26. On January 1, 1959, five years, five months and five days after the July 26, 1953 attack on the Moncada garrison, the Cuban Revolution emerged triumphant.

27. During the formation of the revolutionary government in January 1959, Fidel Castro was appointed Minister of the Armed Forces. He did not occupy the presidency, which devolved on Judge Manuel Urrutia, nor the post of Prime Minister, which went to the lawyer José Miró Cardona.

28. In February 1959, Prime Minister Cardona, opposed to economic and social reforms he considered too radical (the land reform project, for example), resigned. Manuel Urrutia then appointed Fidel Castro to the position.

29. In July 1959, faced with the opposition of President Urrutia, who refused further reforms, Fidel Castro resigned as Prime Minister. Huge popular demonstrations broke out across Cuba, calling for the departure of Urrutia and the return of Fidel Castro. The new President of the Republic, Osvaldo Dorticós, then reappointed Fidel Castro Prime Minister.

30. The US immediately showed itself hostile to Fidel Castro by welcoming the dignitaries of the former regime, among whom were several war criminals who had looted the national treasury and fled with some 424 million dollars.

31. Yet from the start, Fidel Castro demonstrated his willingness to maintain good relations with Washington. Nevertheless, during his first visit to the United States in April 1959, President Eisenhower refused to receive him and preferred to go golfing instead. John F. Kennedy expressed his regret about the incident: “Fidel Castro is part of the legacy of Bolívar. We should have given a warmer welcome to the fiery young rebel at the moment of his triumph”.

32. In October 1959, pilots from the US bombed Cuba and returned to Florida where they were unmolested by authorities. On October 21, 1959, a bomb dropped on Havana left two dead and 45 wounded. The person responsible for the crime, Pedro Luis Díaz Lanz, returned to Miami. He was not questioned and Washington refused to extradite him to Cuba.

33. In February 1960, Fidel Castro drew closer to Moscow, acquiring Soviet weapons only after the United States refused to provide the arsenal necessary for the island's defense. Washington also pressured Canada and the European nations that had been approached by Cuba in order to force Cuba to turn to the socialist bloc, thereby justifying its own hostile policy toward Havana.

34. In March 1960, the Eisenhower administration made a formal decision to overthrow Fidel Castro. In total, the leader of the Cuban Revolution escaped no fewer than 637 assassination attempts on his life.

35. In March 1960, the French ship *La Coubre*, carrying weapons, was sabotaged by the CIA in the port of Havana. More than one hundred persons were left dead. In his address in tribute to the victims, Fidel Castro launched the slogan "*Patria o Muerte*" (Homeland or Death) inspired by that of the French Revolution of 1793, "Liberty, Equality, Fraternity or Death."

36. On April 16, 1961, following the bombing of the main airports in the country by the CIA, a prelude to the invasion of the Bay of Pigs, Fidel Castro proclaimed the "socialist" character of the Revolution.

37. During the Bay of Pigs invasion, conducted by some 1400 exiles supported by the CIA, Fidel Castro was to be found on the front lines of the battle. He inflicted a severe defeat on the US by crushing the invaders in 66 hours. His popularity then skyrocketed worldwide.

38. During the October 1962 missile crisis, Soviet General Alexei Dementiev was at the side of Fidel Castro. He recounted in his memories: "I spent the most impressive moments of my life with Fidel. I was with him most of the time. There was a moment when we considered that a military attack by the United States was close at hand. Fidel made the decision to sound the alarm. Within hours, his people were in combat position. Fidel's faith in his people was impressive, as was the faith of his people and of ourselves, Soviets, in him. Fidel is, without any question, one of the political and military geniuses of the century".

39. In October 1965, the Cuban Communist Party (PCC) replaced the United Party of the Socialist Revolution (PURE) which had been created in 1962 (it, in turn, had replaced the Integrated Revolutionary Organizations -ORI- created in 1961). Fidel Castro was appointed First Secretary.

40. In 1975, following the adoption of the new Constitution, Fidel Castro was elected President of the Republic for the first time. He would be re-elected to this post up until 2006.

41. In 1988, from more than 20,000 kilometers away, Fidel Castro, in Havana, led the battle of Cuito Cuanavale in Angola. It was in this battle that the Cuban and Angolan troops inflicted a crushing defeat on the South African armed forces that had invaded Angola and occupied Namibia. The historian Piero Gleijeses, a professor at Johns Hopkins University in Washington, wrote: "Despite Washington's efforts [allied with the apartheid regime], Cuba changed the course of history in Southern Africa [...]. The Cubans' prowess on the battlefield and their virtuosity at the negotiating table proved decisive in compelling South Africa to accept Namibia's independence. The victorious defense of Cuito Cuanavale was the prelude to a campaign that compelled the South African Defense Force (SADF) to leave Angola. This victory had repercussions far beyond the borders of Namibia".

42. A lucid observer of perestroika, Fidel Castro, in a prescient speech given on July 26, 1989, declared to the nation that should the Soviet Union disappear, Cuba would resist and continue along the path of socialism: "If tomorrow or some other day we wake up to the news that a great civil war has broken out in the USSR, or even if we wake up with the news that the USSR has disintegrated [...] Cuba and the Cuban Revolution will continue to fight and resist".

43. In 1994, at the height of the Special Period, he met Hugo Chavez for the first time. They formed a strong friendship that lasted until the latter's death in 2013. According to Fidel Castro, the Venezuelan president was "the best friend the Cuban people ever had". They set up a strategic partnership with the creation in 2005 of the Bolivarian Alliance for the Peoples of Our America, which now includes eight countries in Latin America and the Caribbean.

44. In 1998, Fidel Castro received the visit to Havana of Pope John Paul II. The latter demanded that "the world open up to Cuba and Cuba open up to the world".

45. In 2002, former President of the United States Jimmy Carter made a historic visit to Cuba. He spoke directly on live television: "I did not come here to interfere in Cuba's internal affairs, but rather to extend a hand of friendship to the Cuban people and to offer a vision of the future for both countries and for the Americas [...]. I want us to be friends and to respect each other [...]. Since the US is the most powerful of the two nations, it is for us to make the first move".

46. In July 2006, following a serious intestinal illness, Fidel Castro was forced to retire from power. In accordance with the Constitution, Vice-President Raúl Castro succeeded him.

47. In February 2008, Fidel Castro permanently renounced any executive office. He has since devoted himself to writing his memoirs and regularly publishing articles under the caption "Reflections".

48. After a trip to Cuba in 2001, Arthur Schlesinger Jr., a historian and special advisor to President Kennedy, raised the question of the cult of personality: "Fidel Castro does not encourage the cult of personality. In Havana it is difficult to find a poster or even a post card with a photo of Castro on it. The icon of Fidel's revolution, visible everywhere, is Che Guevara".

49. Gabriel García Márquez, Colombian writer and Nobel Prize in Literature, was a close friend of Fidel Castro. He drew up a brief profile that underscores "the absolute trust he places in direct contact. His power is seduction. He looks for problems where they are to be found. [...] His patience is invincible. His discipline is ironclad. The force of his imagination expands the limits of the unexpected".

50. The triumph of the Cuban Revolution on January 1, 1959, led by Fidel Castro, is the most significant event in the history of twentieth century Latin America. While Fidel Castro may remain one of the most controversial figures of that century, even his fiercest critics acknowledge that he has made Cuba a sovereign nation whose independence is respected internationally. His country has made undeniable social achievements in the fields of education, health, culture, sport and international solidarity. He will forever be the symbol of national dignity, someone who is always aligned with the oppressed and all those who fight for their emancipation.

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