

The Remarkable Story of Fidel Castro

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When Fidel Castro died on Nov. 25 at the age of 90, we lost one of the most remarkable leaders of the Twentieth Century.

No other head of state has so steadfastly stood up to the United States and survived.



Cuban leader Fidel Castro with his trademark cigar.

In 1959, the [Cuban Revolution](#), led by Castro and Ernesto “Che” Guevara, overthrew the ruthless Fulgencio Batista, who had come to power in a coup d’état. Batista’s government had protected the interests of the wealthy landowners. In order to control the populace, Batista had carried out torture and public executions, killing as many as 20,000 people. During his regime, Batista was supported — financially and militarily — by the United States. Indeed, the U.S. Mafia’s gambling, drug and prostitution operations flourished under Batista’s government.

Led by Castro, the new Cuban government expropriated U.S.-owned property, companies and holdings in Cuba. The United States responded with a punishing economic embargo, which later became a blockade. The CIA attempted unsuccessfully to overthrow the revolution in the disastrous 1961 [Bay of Pigs](#) invasion.

Since 1959, the U.S. government and the expatriated Cuban-Americans who fled Cuba after the revolution have tried mightily to topple the Castro government, without success. Castro survived more than 630 assassination attempts.

Legacy of Fidel Castro

“What’s amazing here is you’ve got a country that’s suffered an illegal economic blockade

by the United States for almost half a century and yet it's been able to give its people the best standard of health care, brilliant education," Ken Livingstone, former mayor of London, said in 2006. "To do this in the teeth of an almost economic war is a tribute to Fidel Castro."



Cuban leader Fidel Castro speaking at the Jose Marti Monument in 2003. (Photo credit: Ricardo Stuckert/ABr.)

Castro practiced a unique form of internationalism. Nelson Mandela credited Cuba with helping to bring down the system of apartheid in South Africa. Cuba fought with the revolutionaries in Angola. And Cuba regularly sends doctors to other countries and provides foreign nationals with free medical education.

As Nelson Valdes noted in 2013, Castro, together with others, "shaped a foreign policy and national movement around the fundamental concept of national sovereignty, yet devoid of any self-centered nationalism." He added, "This unique form of national self-determination incorporated other countries on an equal footing. In fact, national sovereignty and solidarity had precedence over ideology." Thus, Valdes wrote, "Cuba has aided countries, despite the economic and political differences they may have."

In 1953, in what is considered the beginning of the Cuban Revolution, Castro, his brother Raul and more than 100 other rebels mounted a failed attack against the Batista regime at the [Moncada Barracks](#). Castro was arrested, tried, sentenced to 15 years in prison and released in an amnesty deal two years later.

At his trial, Castro famously said in his defense, "Condemn me, it does not matter. History will absolve me."

U.S. Inference in Cuba

The [U.S. economic embargo](#) was initiated in 1960 by President Dwight D. Eisenhower in response to a memorandum written by L.D. Mallory, a senior State Department official. Mallory proposed "a line of action that makes the greatest inroads in denying money and supplies to Cuba, to decrease monetary and real wages, to bring about hunger, desperation

and the overthrow of the government.”



President Dwight Eisenhower

Cuba turned to the U.S.S.R. for assistance, which supported the Cuban Revolution until the [collapse of the Soviet Union](#) in 1991. In 1962, in response to the stationing of U.S. nuclear missiles in Turkey, Soviet leader Nikita Khrushchev placed nuclear missiles in Cuba. After a tense standoff, Khrushchev and U.S. President John F. Kennedy negotiated a withdrawal of the missiles from both Cuba and Turkey.

The economic blockade continues to this day. It is an illegal interference in the affairs of the Cuban people, in violation of the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights and the Charter of the Organization of American States. Every year for 26 consecutive years, the United Nations General Assembly has called on the United States to lift the blockade, which has cost Cuba in excess of \$ 1 trillion.

U.S. meddling in Cuban affairs did not start in 1959. Since 1898, when the United States intervened in Cuba's war for independence, the U.S. government has tried to dominate Cuba. The United States gained control of Guantanamo Bay in 1903, when Cuba was occupied by the U.S. Army after its intervention in Cuba's war of independence against Spain.

Cuba was forced to accept the [Platt Amendment](#) to its constitution as a prerequisite for the withdrawal of U.S. troops from Cuba. That amendment provided the basis for a treaty granting the United States jurisdiction over Guantanamo Bay.

The 1903 agreement gave the United States the right to use Guantanamo Bay “exclusively as coaling or naval stations, and for no other purpose.” A 1934 treaty maintained U.S. control over Guantanamo Bay in perpetuity until the United States abandons it or until both Cuba and the United States agree to modify it. That treaty also limits its uses to “coaling and naval stations.”

None of these treaties or agreements gives the United States the right to use Guantanamo Bay as a prison, or to subject detainees to arbitrary detention or torture, cruel, inhuman or

degrading treatment, which have been documented at the prison.

Castro, who called the Guantanamo base “a dagger plunged into the heart of Cuban soil,” refused to cash the rent checks the U.S. government sends annually. “An elemental sense of dignity and absolute disagreement with what happens in that portion of our national territory has prevented Cuba from cashing those checks,” he noted. The United States, according to Castro, transformed the Guantanamo base into a “horrible prison, one that bears no difference with the Nazi concentration camps.”

It is no accident that President George W. Bush chose Guantanamo Bay as the site for his illegal prison camp. His administration maintained that Guantanamo Bay is not a U.S. territory, and thus, U.S. courts were not available to the prisoners there. But, as the Supreme Court later affirmed, the United States, not Cuba, exercises exclusive jurisdiction over Guantanamo Bay, so [habeas corpus](#) is available to prisoners there.

Amnesty International aptly described the irony: “Given the USA’s criticism of the human rights record of Cuba, it is deeply ironic that it is violating fundamental rights on Cuban soil, and seeking to rely on the fact that it is on Cuban soil to keep the U.S. courts from examining its conduct.”

Since the revolution, anti-Cuba organizations based in Miami have engaged in countless terrorist activities against Cuba and anyone who advocated normalization of relations between the U.S. and Cuba. These terrorist groups have operated with impunity in the United States with the knowledge and support of the FBI and CIA.

For example, Ruben Dario Lopez-Castro, associated with several anti-Castro organizations, and Orlando Bosch, who planted a bomb on a Cubana airliner in 1976, killing all 73 people aboard, “planned to ship weapons into Cuba for an assassination attempt on [Fidel] Castro.”

In the face of this terrorism, the [Cuban Five](#) came from Cuba to gather intelligence in Miami in order to prevent future terrorist acts against Cuba. The men peacefully infiltrated criminal exile groups. The Five turned over the results of their investigation to the FBI. But instead of working with Cuba to fight terrorism, the U.S. government arrested and convicted the five men of unfounded charges.

Human Rights in Cuba

The International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights and the International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights contain two different sets of human rights, respectively.



Some of the original detainees jailed at the Guantanamo Bay prison, as put on display by the U.S. military.

Civil and political rights include the rights to life, free expression, freedom of religion, fair trial, self-determination; and to be free from torture, cruel treatment and arbitrary detention.

Economic, social and cultural rights comprise the rights to education, health care, social

security, unemployment insurance, paid maternity leave, equal pay for equal work, reduction of infant mortality; prevention, treatment and control of diseases, as well as the rights to form and join unions and strike.

The U.S. government criticizes civil and political rights in Cuba while disregarding Cubans' superior access to universal housing, health care, education and its guarantee of paid maternity leave and equal-pay rates.

Unlike in the United States, health care is considered a right in Cuba. Universal health care is free to all. Cuba has the highest ratio of doctors to patients in the world, at 6.7 per 1,000 people. The 2014 infant mortality rate was 4.2 per 1,000 live births — one of the lowest in the world.

Free education is a universal right, up to and including higher education. Cuba spends a larger proportion of its gross domestic product on education than any other country in the world.

Cuban law guarantees the right to voluntarily form and join trade unions. Unions are legally independent and financially autonomous, independent of the Communist Party and the state. Unions have the right to stop work they consider dangerous. They have the right to participate in company management, to receive management information, to office space and materials, and to facility time for representatives. Union agreement is required for layoffs, changes in patterns of working hours and overtime, and for input on the annual safety report.

As of 2018, the date of the next Cuban general election and the date Raul Castro has promised to step down from the presidency, there will be a limit of no more than two five-year terms for all senior elected positions, including the president. Anyone can be nominated to be a candidate. It is not required that one be a member of the Communist Party. No money can be spent promoting candidates and no political parties (including the Communist Party) are permitted to campaign during elections. Military personnel are not on duty at polling stations; school children guard the ballot boxes.

In 2006, the World Wildlife Fund, a leading global environmental organization, determined that Cuba was the only country in the world to have achieved sustainable development.

Meanwhile, the U.S. government has committed serious human rights violations on Cuban soil, including torture, cruel treatment and arbitrary detention at Guantanamo. And since 1960, the United States has expressly interfered with Cuba's economic rights and its right to self-determination through the economic embargo.

Cuba is criticized for its restrictions on freedom of expression. Castro learned from the Guatemalan experience what would happen if he did not keep a tight rein on his revolutionary government. Jacobo Arbenz, a democratically elected president of Guatemala, carried out agrarian land reform, which expropriated uncultivated lands, compensated the owners and redistributed them to the peasantry. This program raised the hackles of the United Fruit Company, which enlisted the U.S. government to overthrow Arbenz. The CIA and the State Department obliged.

Stephen Kinzer wrote in his [biography of the Dulles brothers](#) that Guevara "told Castro why [the CIA coup in Guatemala] succeeded. He said Arbenz had foolishly tolerated an open

society, which the CIA penetrated and subverted, and also preserved the existing army, which the CIA turned into its instrument. Castro agreed that a revolutionary regime in Cuba must avoid those mistakes. Upon taking power, he cracked down on dissent and purged the army.”

Obama Opens the Door

In 2006, Castro suffered a serious illness and turned over the reins of power in Cuba to his brother Raul, who became president in 2008.



President Barack Obama talks with Ricardo Zuniga, National Security Council’s Senior Director for Western Hemisphere Affairs, after the President delivered a statement on Cuba, in the Oval Office, Dec. 17, 2014. National Security Advisor Susan E. Rice watches from the doorway. (Official White House Photo by Pete Souza)

On March 21, 2016, President Obama and Raul Castro held a joint press conference at the Palace of the Revolution in Havana. Obama notably declared, “Perhaps most importantly, I affirmed that Cuba’s destiny will not be decided by the United States or any other nation. Cuba is sovereign and, rightly, has great pride. And the future of Cuba will be decided by Cubans, not by anybody else.” Unlike all prior U.S. presidents, Obama understands the significance of treating Cuba with respect.

This is a lesson Donald Trump will hopefully learn. The President-elect has sent mixed signals about whether he will continue Obama’s steps toward normalization of relations between the U.S. and Cuba. The businessman in him will be receptive to investment, and, indeed, hotel building, in Cuba.

But, pandering to Cuban-Americans in Florida during the election, Trump talked tough against Cuba’s government. “Many of our leaders seem to view Florida’s Cuban conservatives, including the assassins and terrorists among them, as People Who Vote,” Alice Walker wrote in *The Sweet Abyss*.

On the Cuban side, Raul Castro has made it clear that normalization cannot occur until the blockade is lifted and the United States returns Guantanamo to Cuba. In an op-ed in The New York Times, Harvard lecturer Jonathan Hansen wrote, “It is past time to return this imperialist enclave to Cuba,” adding, “It has served to remind the world of America’s long

history of interventionist militarism.”

Normalization of relations will not happen overnight, Rene Gonzalez, one of the Cuban Five, told me when I visited Cuba last year. “We have to remember that relations between the countries have never been normal.” Antonio Guerrero, another member of the Five, added that normalization will require “the dismantling of the whole system of aggression against Cuba, especially the blockade.”

Castro survived 90 years. And Castro’s revolution survives, notwithstanding 57 years of aggression and assassination attempts by the United States.

“Fidel Castro was an authoritarian. He ruled with an iron fist. There was repression and is repression in Cuba. In Fidel’s kind of argument, he did it in the name of a different kind of democracy, a different kind of freedom — the freedom from illness, the freedom from racism, the freedom from social inequality,” Peter Kornbluh, director of the Cuba Documentation Project, told Amy Goodman on Democracy Now! “And Cuba has a lot of very positives that all the other countries that we don’t talk about don’t have. There isn’t gang violence in Cuba. People aren’t being slaughtered around the streets by guns every day. They defeated the Zika virus right away. There is universal health care and universal education.”

In a 1998 NBC interview with Maria Shriver, Castro wryly noted, “For a small country such as Cuba to have such a gigantic country as the United States live so obsessed with this island, it is an honor for us.”

History has absolved, and promises to continue to absolve, “El Comandante” Fidel Castro.

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