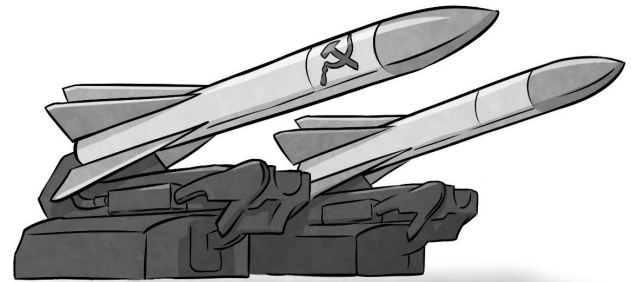


Socialism or death!



Fidel CASTRO

Born into wealth and radicalized through the corruption and violence he witnessed in his youth, Fidel Castro became a charismatic leader. His eventual rise to power through revolution brought hope to the people of Cuba, but his record shows a history of struggle, violence, and despair.



Rise of a Rebel

Fidel Castro was born August 13, 1926, in rural southeast Cuba. He was the son of a wealthy farmer and a servant on that same farm. As a child, he enjoyed many benefits as a result of the family's financial position. He attended private Jesuit schools in Santiago. By all accounts, Castro was the Cuban equivalent of the "all-American boy." He was very athletic and enjoyed playing basketball and baseball, the latter he enjoyed during his whole life.

After finishing primary school, Castro attended college. When he arrived at the University of Havana in 1945, Cuba was stuck in a period of political unrest. The island had only been a nation for about 40 years at this point, gaining independence from Spain in 1902. That four-decade span of its political history had been filled with ups and downs.

When compared to many other Latin American countries that had won independence, Cuba had been relatively successful. This was due in large part to support from America. The large sugar cane production in Cuba had drawn the attention of politicians in America who helped to ensure various classes in the country were protected.

With this protection came abuses. Havana became known as a playground for America's wealthy. Gambling, drugs, crime, and other vices were all very common. This prompted men like Castro to try and "take back" Cuba for the good of its people, by opposing American interests and influence.

As a new government was established in 1940, there were still many who were dissatisfied with the direction of the

country. Being a student at the University of Havana gave Castro the platform to voice his displeasure with what he was seeing—corruption and a selling out of the Cuban people by big businesses. In addition, there was perceived moral decay in cities like Havana. Castro displayed his anger by participating in protests, many of which became violent.

By 1953, Castro had seen enough and helped start a full-blown revolution against the leader of the time, Fulgencio Batista. To Castro and his supporters, Batista was a corrupt and dirty politician. They criticized him for allowing westerners to degrade the beauty of Cuba by allowing gambling, organized crime, and other sinful activities. There were even claims that Batista and members of his government were personally profiting from deals they made with American businesses by collecting licensing fees and profits from American-run businesses in Havana.

Castro found the corruption unacceptable—and his rage turned him into a revolutionary. With a group of approximately one hundred militants, he led an assault on an army outpost in Santiago. Castro and his band of soldiers were crushed, and he was arrested and put on trial.

While the assault failed, what happened next may have been what propelled Castro to become a beloved figure by the common people in Cuba. At his trial, Castro represented himself as his own lawyer. The defense he delivered in court laid out his plan against Batista and was printed as a pamphlet called "History Will Absolve Me." This document demonstrated how committed he was to the cause of the common people in Cuba. This would earn him immense support later in his quest to rule the country.

As passionate as he was at this trial, he was found guilty and sent to prison. However, as the Batista government faced pressure from guerilla groups, they moved to win political favor with their enemies and struck a deal to release Fidel and his brother Raul from prison.

Fidel quickly looked to flee the country and actually spent time in Florida attempting to earn financial support to raise his revolutionary army. From there, Castro traveled to Mexico, where he met another villainous historical figure: Che Guevera. Along with Guevera, the Castro brothers formed a three-headed monster that set its eyes on Cuba. Fidel was now ready to see the revolution to its conclusion.

In 1956, Castro's group established military operations in the Sierra Maestra mountains in southern Cuba. From there, he led a small group of insurgents into Havana and overthrew Batista, sending him into exile.

Castro had realized his dream of liberating Cuba from the grip of corruption. At this point, Castro was still figuring out who he was as a person and a leader. However noble his intentions had been up to this point, that was all about to change, and he would quickly ascend to being the most powerful—and villainous—man Cuba had ever seen.

Why Was He a Villain?

The history of the Cuban people is both complicated and complex. Like many European colonies, their struggle for independence in the nineteenth century led to trying times—including political power struggles and rough economic times.

These events often allow the strongest personalities to rise to power. And while they may appear to start with noble and just causes, the results are not often as laudable. As Lord Acton famously said, “Power corrupts and absolute power corrupts absolutely.” Castro was no exception to this.

Shortly after Batista was exiled, Castro rode into Havana and was showered with praise and adoration. The people of Cuba viewed him as a great liberator. After years of abuse by Cuban elites and politicians, the people were ready for a champion of the people—and Castro was ready to oblige.

Initially, it appeared as if Castro might be someone the Americans, who had backed Batista, could work with to ensure their industries and interests would be protected. Indeed, Castro traveled to America and met with Vice President Richard Nixon.

It did not take long though, before Castro would start to flex his political muscles and begin to show tendencies of a dictator. Even worse, he began to embrace the ideology already being fought in the West: communism.

One of the first acts Castro undertook was to return lands to the Cuban people. He did this through a proclamation that broke up corporate farms. In addition, he began to lead an assault against American corporations in Cuba. These actions were extremely popular among common Cuban citizens.

Castro continued his assault on private property and business by nationalizing corporations—seizing their assets and placing the government in charge of the business.

Almost immediately, the middle- and upper-class citizens began to flee. Planes full of Cubans arrived in the United States, often in Miami, Florida. Meanwhile, Castro the villain was just getting started.

The economy was not the only institution that Castro altered radically. Castro had famously stated that elections would be held six months after the coup, or overthrow, of Batista. However, as time went on, he started assuming more power and determined that he would continue as the leader. He justified his actions by declaring that the people of Cuba loved him, and his popularity gave him legitimacy to rule the country as a dictator. It was at this time that leaders in other countries, like the United States, began to worry.

As Castro became more radical, he began targeting political rivals. He started arresting supporters of the Batista administration. This soon led to open persecution against anyone who dared to speak out against Castro. Many of them were tried in court, and they were often executed to serve as examples of the respect that was demanded by Castro and his regime. Ironically, he was now acting quite like the tyrant he had removed.

Throughout the next five decades of rule, Castro made life miserable for those living in the island nation. As he grew more radicalized, he formed an alliance with Russia in retaliation after the United States placed an embargo, or ban, on Cuban goods. Being isolated on an island, the leader had no choice but to take Russian money and goods to survive.

The relationship with Russia developed as Castro embraced the ideas of then-Russian-leader Nikita Khrush-

chev. Some Cuban citizens began to question the alliance with Russia. Castro now had to actively work to keep his citizens in line. No opposition would be tolerated. Freedom-loving Cubans were detained for no valid reason. Other basic rights were completely ignored and denied. Minority groups, such as homosexuals and blacks, were heavily targeted for punishment by the Castro regime.

The part of Castro's ideology and rule that caused the greatest damage to the greatest amount of people was his economic policies. Once Castro nationalized almost all aspects of the Cuban economy, the people were powerless to make important choices. There were many industries that were severely impacted by the decision to have the government control the means of production. Agriculture, manufacturing, health care, and even education all suffered greatly under these policies. The evidence of these failures is seen in the countless number of Cuban defectors who have risked their lives to flee the miserable conditions.

Why Did He Succeed?

There are several reasons Fidel Castro was able to rise to power. The mix of unstable government with a bold message he delivered well to the Cuban people propelled him into the hearts of his countrymen.

Military coups often produce very powerful emotions among the citizens of a country, and they usually view the conquering leaders as paternal, or fatherlike, figures. Castro was no exception. The citizens of Cuba were swept off their feet by the charm and rhetoric of this revolutionary and his professed ideals.

Those who were with Castro during his uprising and ultimate reign in Cuba are quick to defend how bright he was. He was well-educated, and, more importantly, he was charismatic. Video clips of his impassioned speeches to the Cuban people demonstrate how skilled he was at appealing to the masses.

In addition to being charming, Castro was also a brilliant strategist. He once commented about how impactful his time in prison was because all he did was read and think. It was during this time that he developed his worldview and passion to free the people of Cuba. He spent the time after his release in meetings with revolutionary leaders, mapping out moves several steps in advance. Moreover, the thing that separated him from others seeking to gain power is that he executed his plan very well. He persevered through early defeats and worked on his plan until he succeeded.

However important those traits and characteristics were for Castro, what ultimately helped propel him to the top was his use of propaganda. While formulating his plan to overthrow Batista, Castro studied the effectiveness of advertising products in America. He used the idea of repeating messages to gain support for his ideas. Using propaganda effectively is a wise move for a dictator because it is far more efficient and effective than having to physically coerce people into alignment. Make no mistake, Castro was not unwilling to use force to scare people into behaving appropriately. However, using propaganda proved to be more effective.

What Were His Ideas?

In a sense, Fidel Castro was not only a leader of a revolution, but he himself went through a revolution in his ideas. His formative years in Cuba exposed him to political struggle. He experienced firsthand the negative effects of growing up in a country that was led by a corrupt politician. What is clear, though, is that Castro was uncertain of what he truly believed. Eventually, he planted his flag in the camp of communism. The core ideas of this philosophy are centered around the idea of the collective and the suppression of individual liberty.

Since its creation as an ideology, there have been several variations of communism. The way in which Marx and Engels defined it in *The Communist Manifesto* has been tweaked and redefined by world leaders for decades. No matter how the ideology was morphed and adapted, one thing is certain: the ideology is fundamentally flawed. Communism strips away the individuality of people and places them into collective groups. In doing this, people lose their identity and sense of self. People cannot own private property, pursue desired careers, or purchase items they desire. The ideology removes all sense of personal purpose for people; a new purpose is to avoid being punished by the government. It is rooted in emotion that is intended to make people feel good, but in the end, that is simply a myth.

If harming people economically was not bad enough, Castro's application of Marxist ideology was also extremely racist and homophobic. Even though Castro spent time lecturing the United States on race issues, his government

had an awful record on race as well. Many black Cubans who called for change during Castro's reign were silenced, imprisoned, or exiled for speaking out against the regime. In addition to promoting racist policies, the Castro government attacked homosexuals in Cuba during the 1960s by rounding them up and placing them in labor camps. Castro openly admitted to this and tried to dismiss it by claiming he was preoccupied with other events and simply exercised bad judgment.

Castro built his brand of communism both at home and abroad. During his reign he was the beacon of communism in the West. This meant doing all he could to disrupt the efforts of the United States in the Cold War. Under Castro's rule, Cuba played a major role in Cold War affairs. No event was more impactful than the memorable Cuban Missile Crisis. After a failed attempt by exiles to overthrow Castro, he immediately granted permission for Russia to install nuclear weapons in Cuba. As tensions grew and eventually faded, it was revealed just how far Castro was willing to go. Indeed, he was willing to launch these missiles onto American soil to try and eliminate the threat of perceived imperialism by the USA. Castro also helped stunt efforts by Western countries to stop the spread of communism to other Latin American countries.

Castro also helped to establish a communist influence in the African country of Angola. Shortly after Angola gained independence from Portugal, there were groups within Angola that were backed by eastern- and western-led world powers. A civil war broke out in Angola, and Castro sent upwards of fifty thousand Cuban soldiers to fight against the U.S. and South African backed forces. This

intervention helped keep communist ideas alive in the southern part of Africa for decades to come.

In 2006, Castro relinquished power temporarily to his brother due to health issues. In 2008, he permanently resigned and in 2016, Fidel Castro passed away.

What Can We Learn?

- The story of Castro's disastrous reign highlights a pattern repeated by many dictators: they may rise to influence on the pretense of good intentions, but in the end, they often mirror (or make even worse) the situation they sought to fix. Historians and those who experienced life under the Castro Revolution have commented on how Cuba came to be no different than it was under the Batista regime. Castro once commented that he would not shave his beard until he had fulfilled the promise of good government for the Cuban people. (For what it is worth, Castro never did shave his beard.)
- Those who aspire to political power often care more about power than ideas; but they use ideas as useful vehicles to rally the masses in favor of giving them power. Castro was not passionate about a certain philosophy when he started his political efforts, as evidenced by his shifting interests and alliances. It appears, like many who seek for power, he used whatever tools were available to him in order to succeed—including later allying with Russia and supporting communism.

- Since Castro's death, relations between the United States and Cuba have improved. President Barack Obama visited the island and eased economic sanctions against the country (which had been hurting the masses, but not the elite, like the Castro family). With that, Americans have been able to see firsthand the horrible conditions the Cuban people have been living under for more than sixty years. The infrastructure of Cuba is virtually nonexistent. The healthcare industry is in shambles. There are websites and documentaries that have highlighted the difficult conditions the Cuban people are still experiencing. Hopefully, a close examination of the current environment will teach us that, at some point, socialist governments run out of other people's money, and with no working market system, there is only poverty and misery.