



Fidel Castro greets supporters after his rebels take Havana, Jan. 1, 1959.

THE CUBAN REVOLUTION

TIMES PAST
1959

When Fidel Castro seized control of Cuba 55 years ago, he set off a bitter confrontation with the U.S. that continues today

BY ANTHONY DEPALMA

WATCH A VIDEO

Guantánamo

WWW.UPFRONTMAGAZINE.COM

On New Year's Eve 1958, as partygoers at a swank Havana hotel feasted on turtle soup and filet mignon, Fidel Castro and his ragtag rebel army geared up in their mountaintop stronghold for a final, all-out offensive against the Cuban government they'd been fighting for two years. When Cubans awoke on the first morning of 1959, they were shocked to see Castro's rebels marching into Havana without a fight. Cuban President Fulgencio Batista was gone, having fled in the dark of night.

Americans were in for a surprise too:

Little did they realize that Castro's stunning victory would make the pint-size Caribbean nation just 90 miles from Florida a bitter enemy of the United States or that Cuba, the Soviet Union, and the U.S. would soon come very close to igniting the world's first nuclear war.

By the time Castro came to power, Cubans already had lived for most of the previous four centuries under repressive rulers. A colony of Spain since the early 1500s, Cuba tried to break free in the mid-19th century, but the independence movement was brutally suppressed. During the Spanish-American War of



Castro with Soviet leader Nikita Khrushchev in 1963 (above top), two years after Castro publicly declares himself a Socialist

1898, three years after the start of Cuba's second uprising, the U.S. intervened on Cuba's behalf, helping it form its first independent government in 1902. But the U.S. retained the right to intervene in Cuban affairs until 1934 and dominated Cuba's economy until 1959, fueling resentment among some Cubans (see *Timeline*, p. 20).

In 1933, Fulgencio Batista, who was a sergeant in the Cuban Army, staged a military coup and ruled the country through a series of puppet presidents for more than two decades.

The Cold War

Under Batista, gambling and corruption were widespread, political dissent was crushed, and elections were a farce. But as the Cold War between the U.S. and the Soviets heated up, the U.S. recognized Batista's government because he, like other Latin American strongmen in the 1950s, opposed Communism.

During that decade, Cuba was one of

the wealthiest countries in Latin America. But while people in large cities like Havana prospered, most people in the countryside were desperately poor.

Fidel Castro, a young Havana lawyer, had been a candidate for Cuba's congress in 1952, but the elections were canceled after Batista seized power in yet another coup. Capitalizing on anti-American sentiment, Castro launched an insurrection against Batista in 1953, starting with an attack on a military barracks in Santiago.

The attack failed. Most of Castro's men were killed or captured, and he and his younger brother Raúl were thrown into prison. Released in 1955, they went into exile in Mexico and plotted their return.

When the Castros and their small band of supporters came back to Cuba on a leaky yacht in December 1956, Batista's forces were waiting for them. Most of the invaders were wiped out, and *The New York Times* reported that Fidel and Raúl Castro were among those killed.

They survived, of course, along with the Argentine revolutionary Ernesto "Che" Guevara. Making their way into the Sierra Maestra mountains, they set up camp and began training a guerrilla army.

For the next two years, Batista fought Castro and other opposition groups. His regime became increasingly brutal, and in 1958, the U.S. cut off all support. By New Year's Eve, Batista knew he was doomed.

During the fighting, Castro never said he was a Communist. He said he didn't want power for himself and promised quick elections. In an interview with an American correspondent while in the mountains, Castro even sounded like someone the U.S. might like. "You can be sure we have no animosity toward the United States," Castro said. "Above all, we are fighting for a democratic Cuba and an end to the dictatorship."

Castro was only 32 when his army took Havana. When he visited New York and Washington a few months later, Americans greeted Castro like a rock star, with crowds spilling out in the streets chanting his name. *Time* magazine put him on its cover.

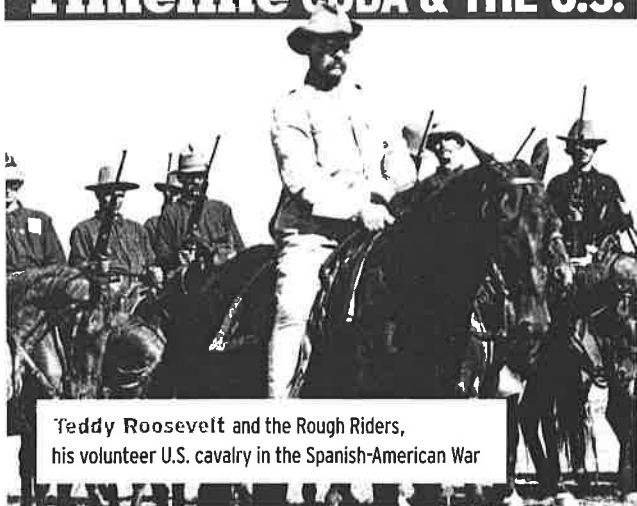
But it was soon clear that Castro wouldn't keep his promises. He executed Batista supporters without fair trials, dismissed a provisional president, and in July 1959 put himself in charge. He denounced U.S. "imperialism" and seized billions of dollars worth of American farms, mines, and businesses without paying for them, creating the basis for a Communist state.

In 1960, President Dwight Eisenhower imposed an economic embargo, making it illegal for Americans to do business with Cuba. (His successor, President John F. Kennedy, strengthened the embargo in 1962, and it's still in place today.)

Castro responded with even harsher criticism of the U.S., while seeking support from the Soviet Union. Moscow was willing to help a small country on the other side of the world because it saw an opportunity to bring the Cold War and Communism to America's doorstep.

To U.S. officials, a Communist stronghold just 90 miles off the coast of Florida

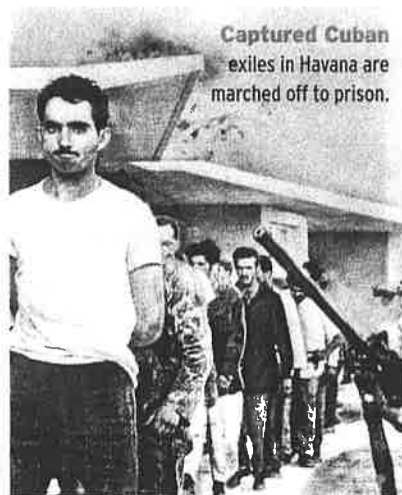
Timeline CUBA & THE U.S.



Teddy Roosevelt and the Rough Riders, his volunteer U.S. cavalry in the Spanish-American War



The Hotel Nacional in Havana was a trendy spot for American tourists.



Captured Cuban exiles in Havana are marched off to prison.

1898

Spanish-American War

During its war with Spain, the U.S. helps Cuba break free from its colonial ruler. Cuba establishes its first independent government in 1902, but the U.S. exerts political and economic influence over the island nation until 1959.

1933-59

Batista

Army Sergeant Fulgencio Batista stages a coup in Cuba. Under his long rule, Cuba is a "playground" for American socialites.

1959

The Cuban Revolution

1960

Seizing Businesses

Castro nationalizes most businesses, including American companies, without compensation. The U.S. imposes an embargo.

1961

Bay of Pigs

A U.S. plan to help Cuban exiles overthrow Castro fails. Castro announces he's a Socialist and bolsters ties with the Soviet Union.

was unacceptable, and several attempts were made to dislodge Castro. In 1961, President Kennedy authorized the disastrous Bay of Pigs invasion, a secret U.S. effort to help Cuban exiles launch an armed attack against Castro. The exiles were easily defeated when Kennedy got cold feet and ordered U.S. ships and planes to turn around. (Declassified documents later revealed at least eight failed C.I.A. attempts on Castro's life in the 1960s, involving poison pens, exploding cigars, and a booby-trapped seashell.)

Brink of World War III

In 1962, Kennedy learned the Soviets were building nuclear missile bases in Cuba that could easily target the U.S. He ordered a naval blockade to keep the Soviets from delivering nuclear warheads to the bases and put the U.S. military on high alert. For 13 days, Americans were paralyzed with fear, knowing one wrong move could trigger World War III.

The Soviets eventually backed down and dismantled the bases, giving Kennedy what seemed like a clear victory. (Two

decades later, it was revealed that the U.S. had secretly agreed to remove its missile bases in Turkey as part of a quid pro quo.)

By 1980, many Cubans were fed up with the dictatorship and poor economic conditions. From April to October of that year, about 125,000 Cubans crowded into small boats and made their way to Florida (at least two dozen died along the way) in what became known as the Mariel boatlift. To spite the U.S., Castro forced prisoners and people with mental illness to join the exodus.

The Cold War ended in 1991 when the Soviet Union collapsed. Without its biggest supporter, Cuba had to ration food, electricity, and other essentials, making life miserable for Cubans. Venezuela has helped a bit, though it's unclear how long it will continue its support.

Though Cuba has made progress in providing health care and education to most of its people, including the poor, it still jails political opponents and violates



Food shortages have long been common in Cuba.

the human rights of critics of the regime. Most Cubans aren't allowed to buy a computer or use the Internet, and the government controls newspapers and TV.

The U.S. and Cuba remain at odds, but things might be changing. Julia E. Sweig at the Council on Foreign Relations says that in the past few years both countries have taken steps toward improving the relationship, showing there's "goodwill on both sides" (see "The Handshake").



1962 Cuban Missile Crisis

The U.S. learns the Soviet Union is building missile bases in Cuba, bringing the two superpowers to the brink of nuclear war. After 13 days, the Soviets remove the missiles.



1980 Mariel Boatlift

Domestic unrest prompts Castro to allow anyone to leave; 125,000 Cubans head to Florida before Cuba closes its border after six months.

2009 Travel Ban Eased

A year after a frail Fidel formally cedes power to his brother Raúl, President Obama lifts restrictions for Cuban-Americans who want to travel or send money to their homeland.



2013 The Handshake

Sometimes a simple handshake can send shockwaves. On Dec. 10, 2013, President Obama and Cuban President Raúl Castro shook hands at the funeral of former South African President Nelson Mandela. Photos of the encounter went viral, setting off furious speculation around the world. Were the Cold War foes willing to put their differences aside after more than 50 years of frosty relations, or were the two leaders just trying to be respectful at a solemn occasion?

Even before the handshake, the two nations had taken baby steps toward a better relationship. In September, diplomats discussed resuming direct mail between the U.S. and Cuba, which has been suspended since 1963. In November, Obama made a speech saying it might be time to "update our policies" toward Cuba. After the handshake, Raúl Castro said he thought the two nations could establish a "civilized relationship."

But not everyone welcomes a reconciliation. Many Cuban-Americans—like Senator Marco Rubio of Florida, whose parents fled Cuba in the 1950s—think the U.S. should continue to pressure the Castro regime until it allows Cubans more personal and political freedoms.

"You're at this funeral for a figure that's identified with freedom," Rubio said, "and then you're shaking the hands of a brutal dictator."

—Veronica Majerol

In 2009, President Obama lifted restrictions on Cuban-Americans traveling to Cuba and sending money to family there. He also eased limits on U.S. telecom companies, enabling them to improve phone and Internet service to Cuba—one of the least wired countries in the world.

Cuban-Americans

Real change may not come to Cuba until both Fidel, now 87, and Raúl, 82, are gone. To pressure the regime, Cuban-Americans—who have political clout in Washington, with Senators Ted Cruz of Texas and Marco Rubio of Florida both of Cuban descent—are leading the effort to keep the U.S. embargo in place.

Still, since taking over after Fidel developed serious medical problems in 2006, Raúl Castro has allowed some Cubans to start their own businesses and to travel abroad without special permits. They can now buy and sell houses. And, in theory, they can buy new cars to replace the 1950s classics—many of them old

American models from before the embargo—that have become symbols of Cuba's stagnant economy. (For now, the cars are exorbitantly expensive.)

In 2010, Fidel Castro said "the Cuban model doesn't even work for us anymore."

Though he later said he was misunderstood, Cuba has since cut more than half a million government jobs, further nudging the economy toward private enterprise. Sweig says the Castro government is likely to keep moving away from a state-controlled economy—while leaving the one-party political system in place.

There is irony in all this. Cuba is now more open to American-style business than at any time since 1958. But because relations between the two countries remain troubled and the U.S. embargo is still in effect, most American companies still can't do business there. ◊

Anthony DePalma is a former Times reporter and author of "The Man Who Invented Fidel."

'The Cuban model doesn't even work for us anymore.'

—Fidel Castro, 2010