In Memoriam: Fidel Castro

Andria Preciado

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Recommended Citation
Preciado, Andria (2017) "In Memoriam: Fidel Castro," History in the Making: Vol. 10 , Article 10. Available at: https://scholarworks.lib.csusb.edu/history-in-the-making/vol10/iss1/10

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“*A revolution is a struggle to the death between the future and the past.*” – Fidel Castro

Fidel Castro died on November 25, 2016 at 90 years old in Havana, Cuba, after a dictatorship that lasted nearly five decades. Castro was a staple of the 20th century and an emblem of the Cold War. He was either loved or hated by those he encountered – national leaders and civilians alike – some were swayed by his charm and others fled from his brutal leadership. The Russians praised him; the Americans feared him; the world was perplexed by him; and his impact changed Cuba forever. Even after Castro’s death, people were still drawn to him; crowds mourned his passing in Havana, while others celebrated his death in the United States. The radically different reactions to his death across the globe stands as a testament to the revolutionary legacy he left behind.

In August 13, 1926, Fidel Castro was born in Birán, Cuba to a privileged family of Spanish descent. His father Ángel Castro and his family immigrated to Cuba and became a sugar plantation owner. Castro’s upbringing allowed him to enter the University of Havana where he studied law and became immersed in politics. His active role in politics focused on protection of the poor Cubans. Castro challenged the corrupt Cuban government under Fulgencio Batista that opposed the regime. He created an organization called “The Movement” that published ironic critiques of the government and expressed socialist ideas of the public and planned an attack of the Moncada army in Santiago de Cuba in 1953; Batista called martial law in response to the attack to maintain control. Because of Batista’s crackdown, Castro was sent on trial where he delivered a speech later titled “History Will Absolve Me”. Castro, in the end, was sentenced to 15 years in

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prison and was released in May of 1955.\(^2\)

After a series of revolts in conjunction with socialist revolutionary Ernesto “Che” Guevara, in 1959 the young charismatic revolutionary, Fidel Castro, led a rebellion that forced the military dictatorship of Fulgencio Batista out of power. Castro became the Prime Minister of Cuba and pursued socialist policies that promised to improve education, healthcare, and social welfare at the expense of democracy and freedom of speech.\(^3\) Castro promised that he would not become a dictator. In a rare interview with Ruth Lloyd in 1959 he stated: “I’m not a dictator...and I do not think I will become one. I will not maintain power with a machine gun.”\(^4\) Although Castro denied being a socialistic nation, he implemented the Agrarian Reform Law of 1959 that eliminated privatization of land and business, effectively socializing the economy in a single stroke. He remained popular among the working classes and peasants of Cuba even as doctors, engineers, and other professionals migrated to the United States.

Diplomatic relations between the United States and Cuba deteriorated when Castro’s socialist ideologies posed a threat to capitalistic ideologies. As result of deteriorating relations with the United States, Castro increased tariffs on U.S. imports and initiated trade deals with the Soviet Union. President Eisenhower imposed a partial embargo and cut ties with Cuba in 1960. Throughout the next decade, the resulting economic consequences continued to cause educated professionals to depart Cuba in favor of the United States. In 1961, Castro formally declared Cuba a socialist nation. This, combined with the ongoing flow of Cuban refugees to the United States, damaged his reputation as a liberator in the United States and led to the passage of the Cuban Adjustment Act in 1966 (allowing Cubans who had been present in the U. S. for two years to apply for permanent residency). The failed invasion by U.S.-sponsored Cuban emigres at the Bay of Pigs in 1961 led to the imposition of a total embargo on Cuba with severe consequences for the Cuban economy.

The United States embargo increased Castro’s reliance upon Soviet Union military and economic protection. In the aftermath of the embargo, the Soviet Union, under Nikita

\(^3\) Ibid., 283.
Khrushchev, encouraged by Castro, secretly deployed nuclear missiles to Cuba, in order to secure Soviet first strike capability in the event of a nuclear war with the United States. Subsequently, the United States became aware of the presence of these missiles, leading to the Cuban Missile Crisis and total blockade of Cuba in 1962. Castro asked the Soviet Union to consider retaliation against the U.S. if needed. He wrote to Khrushchev stating, “Given the analysis of the situation and the reports, which have reached us, [I] consider an attack to be almost imminent.”\(^5\) Castro’s request caused Khrushchev to question the Cuban leader’s sanity, but agreed to defend Cuba in the event of American invasion, including the potential use of nuclear weapons. For its part, the United States threatened to invade Cuba if the missiles were not removed. The crisis spanned 15 days in October, when the world was faced with serious possibility of nuclear war, and ended with Khrushchev’s retreat. Castro’s response to Khrushchev’s actions, in a second interview with Barbara Walters, stated that Khrushchev’s understanding in the launching of the missiles was a misinterpretation. Walters spoke about Castro’s charisma, she stated that he was a likeable man and she had to remind herself that there were two sides to Castro: Castro was both “a charming and a ruthless authoritarian dictator.”\(^6\)

Nations implored Castro’s generosity; Castro strongly believed in building the community of socialism and extended education and medical programs to poor communities to create unity in communism. Castro was known as a hero and liberator in countries throughout Africa as he supported them in their fight for independence. South African President Nelson Mandela received Castro with gratitude after Castro had sent medical aid to help with the HIV/AIDS epidemic. Castro also strengthened his global diplomatic relations with Africa after he established a government that functioned in Angola in 1975. Angolan President Manuel Vicente stated, “Fidel is a friend, a comrade. He is an unforgettable figure to us. His memory will be always remembered in Angola.” Castro had sent troops to protect the people of Angola and fought on the side of the African rebels to maintain “international solidarity” in the country.\(^7\)

\(^7\) David Deutschmann, Changing the History of Africa: Angola and Namibia,
In Latin America, Castro was an example of how to keep out imperialism from the infiltration of their countries. Castro provided his support to countries that sought to build away from monopolies and promoted Anti-American reformation. For Latin America, that meant various countries had the ability to run their country without foreign interference – such as World Banks or imperial monopolies. Castro played a major role in the peace development of Colombia and Venezuela. Colombian President Juan Manuel Santos, along with many Latin American leaders, were inspired by Castro’s authority and refusal to fight with armed forces. After Castro’s death, Venezuelan President Nicolás Maduro tweeted, in a general translation, “60 years after the departure of the Granma of Mexico joined the Immortality of those who fight all the Life... Until the Victory Always…” Castro became an icon of all leftist countries around the world.

Criticism, as much as praise, played a major role in Castro’s political career. In the fall of 1994, Cuban refugees were found floating along the Straits of Florida in a Cuban exodus. After the full embargo of the United Stated in the 1960s, Cuba economically depended upon the Soviet Union until it collapsed in 1994 – collapsing the economy of Cuba in turn. Castro had made controversial speeches that resulted in mass riots and anti-government campaigns in Havana. Castro stated that any person that wanted to leave Cuba could leave, and shortly after 30,000 Cubans fled Cuba to find sanction in the United States – similar to the refugees of the 60s-80s. The Clinton administration created the “Wet Foot, Dry Foot” policy that put certain conditions on Cuban refugees. For example, if Cuban refugees set foot on United States territory they were allowed sanction, but if the Coast Guard caught them at sea they had to return to Cuba. Castro aimed toward a government that was in full submission of him. However, the exiles complained about his rule of thumb government and that the poverty in the country, as a whole, continued to plummet.

Castro maintained an anti-democratic and anti-freedom-of-speech government and any person that criticized his regime was jailed. On March 18, 2003, in what is now called the Black Spring,
Castro cracked down on the press and 75 pro-democracy activists were jailed. The Cuban government harassed journalists if they questioned Castro’s regime. In an interview with Barbara Walters in 2002, she asked Castro to explain why there was suppression of the press – no freedom of the press, in any form. Castro confidently responded and stated, “We do not have your same [American] conceptions; like your concepts of the freedom of the press is not yours. And I say this very honestly; I have nothing to hide, if you ask, ‘Could a paper against socialism could appear here?’ I could say honestly ‘no, it cannot appear here’”. Though Castro did not permit criticism of his government, he expressed that if Cubans wanted to protest they had the ability to – if they really wanted a revolution – but nobody did. Castro believed that his government was for the people and there was no proper foundation for criticism nor would he allow someone who was indoctrinated in pro-capitalist ideology to insult his leadership.

Castro was resilient through the Cold War and into the new millennium, but his physical health took a toll on his body. Castro was a private man and never spoke about his personal life. Little information was known about what Castro experienced during his reign, but he maintained that he was suitable for the Presidency. In 2001, Castro appeared to have almost fainted during a live broadcasted speech in Havana, Cuba. He was immediately escorted from the podium by officials in order to allow him some rest after the incident. The crowd of people attending the speech, in the video, chanted “Fidel! Fidel!” in support of the leader. Shortly after, Castro made a reappearance to assure the people of Cuba that he was fine and the weather and lack of sleep had affected him and that he planned to finish his speech on a later date. Castro developed an intestinal disease that reduced his number of public appearances. The people of Cuba continued their support for Castro’s regime, meanwhile, the exiled Cubans in the United States waited anxiously for his death.

In 2006, Castro resigned as President and his brother Raúl Castro resumed as the President of Cuba. Castro stayed out of the public eye, but remained in the parliament. Castro was rarely seen in public and the United States, under President Obama, sought to rebuild relations with Cuba and lifted the embargo in March of 2016. Though Castro had resigned from the Presidency,

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and foreign relation was in the process of expansion, the people of Cuba and some nations around the world deeply respected Castro. Castro (in a rare appearance) commented on his own mortality: “Soon I will turn 90 years old, never would such a thing have occurred to me and it's not the outcome of any effort; it was fate’s whim, soon I will be like everyone else. To all of us comes our turn.” On November 25, 2016, Castro died in Havana, Cuba. Some mourned his death and others celebrated, but his extreme impact on the world cannot be denied.

Statements on Fidel Castro’s Death:

“Forever, Commander! This No. 25, at 10:29 p.m. the commander in Chief of the Cuban Revolution Fidel Castro Ruz passed away…”
– The Cuban Embassy in the U.S. (Twitter)

“At this time of Fidel Castro’s passing, we extend a hand of friendship to the Cuban people. We know that this moment fills Cubans – in Cuba and in the United States – with powerful emotions, recalling the countless ways in which Fidel Castro altered the course of individual lives, families, and of the Cuban nation. History will record and judge the enormous impact of this singular figure on the people and world around him…”
– President Barack Obama

“While a controversial figure, both Mr. Castro’s supporters and detractors recognized his tremendous dedication and love for the Cuban people who had a deep and lasting affection for ‘el Comandante'”
– Canadian Prime Mister Justin Trudeau

“R.I.P Fidel Castro, tenacious fighter who lived a full liberation and condolences to the resilient people of Cuba”
– Rwandan President Paul Kagame (Twitter)

And finally,

“Fidel Castro is dead!”
– President Donald Trump
Author Bio

Andria Preciado is a senior at California State University, San Bernardino. She is expected to graduate with a Bachelor of Arts degree in history in spring 2017. Her focus of study is on European history with an interest in the Cold War. In the fall of 2017, she will be attending San Jose State University for a graduate degree in Librarian and Information Science.
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