

*This is a chapter on the Cuban Revolution from a textbook, A History of Modern Latin America, 2<sup>nd</sup> edition, that I published in 2016. At the end there is a list of suggested readings, if you would like to pursue the history further. In addition, I will be mentioning films, documentaries, and other sources during the course, for those who are interested in deepening their understanding of Cuba and the revolution. ---T. Meade*

## **Chapter 11. Cuba: Guerrillas Take Power**

No event has played a greater role in realigning internal and external alliances, in reformulating national agendas, and even in inspiring change in the hemisphere than the Cuban Revolution. The events of January 1, 1959 had a dramatic effect on the US political agenda toward Latin America, as well as giving birth to a whole new branch of study in US universities. According to Stanford political science professor Richard Fagen, no one did more than Fidel Castro to promote the study of Latin America in academic and government circles. Ironically, it is to Castro and the Cuban Revolution that generations of US scholars working on Latin America owe their jobs.

Even before the 1959 revolution put Cuba more squarely on the international map, the Caribbean island was a major contributor to worldwide culture, politics, letters, and economics. For what might seem a tiny producer for the commodity chain, Cuba's output in the years before, and continuing after, the Revolution has been tremendous: major innovations in music, art, dance, literature, and political theory, not to mention rum, cigars, and baseball players. The rumba, cha cha, and mambo all originated in Cuba, as did salsa, the most recognizably Latin dance. Salsa developed out of Cuban rumba in the nineteenth century and, largely as a result of Puerto Rican influence, captured New York and the rest of the world in the late twentieth century. In the nineteenth and twentieth centuries Cuba was a pioneer in

orchestra and symphony music, opera and modern dance, while current artists, especially Silvio Rodríguez (b. 1946), are known throughout Latin America. Silvio's protest lyrics intersected with the New Song movement arising in Chile in the 1960s and have gone on to have enormous impact on Latin American protest music in every country. Cuba is, as well, the birthplace of some of the continent's major authors, poets, and theorists, including José Martí, Antonio Maceo, Guillermo Cabrera Infante (1929–2005), Nicolás Guillén (1902–89), Alejo Carpentier (1904–80), Fidel Castro, Reinaldo Arenas (1943–90), artists such as Ana Mendieta (1948–85), Wifredo Lam (1902–82), and José Bedia (b. 1959), and major prima ballerina and choreographer Alicia Alonso (b. 1920). Musicians famous in both the US and in Cuba are too many to name, including musicians and singers Beny Moré (1919–63), Celia Cruz (1925–2003), Israel “Cachao” López (1918–2008), Arturo Sandoval (b. 1949), Pablo Milanés (b. 1943), Ibrahim Ferrer (1927–2005) and Gloria Estefan (b. 1957), who began her singing career in Havana but reached pop stardom in the US.

Cuba has played a disproportionately significant role in the colonial and post-colonial eras. Its importance is evident in the splendor of Havana's architecture, emblematic of the importance of the city as a colonial capital. From the 1930s until the end of the 1950s, however, Havana was a wide open city where, for a price, most anything was available, and the wealthy from throughout the world made it a point to partake. In the heyday of US Prohibition (1919–33), rum-runners and other members of organized crime syndicates established a steady business supplying the speak-easies of the northeastern states with alcohol from Cuba. When Prohibition was repealed in 1933, organized crime was well established in Havana, and able to turn to other forms of lucrative entertainment, including prostitution, gambling, and drug peddling. Through the efforts of a string of military dictators, the most brutal being Gerardo Machado y Morales (1871–1939) whose nickname “The Butcher” conveys his particular governance style, Cuba remained for decades under the watchful gaze of its powerful northern neighbor. Machado was overthrown by the Cuban military in 1933 and forced into exile, eventually in Miami, where six years later he died. So disliked and

distrusted was Machado at the time of his death that the Cuban government refused to allow his body to be buried on the island—nor has any government since.

Similar to the brief democratic experiments in Bolivia and Guatemala, Cuba also entered a reformist phase in 1934 with the founding of the *Auténtico* (Authentic) Party under the leadership of Dr. Ramón Grau (1887–1969), who oversaw the writing of Cuba’s first genuinely independent constitution in 1940 and set in place a political reform program designed to lay the foundation for a democratic society. Despite the timidity of Grau’s plan, which made no mention of equalizing pervasive income inequalities, it provoked heated opposition. US investors, especially powerful sugar interests, perceived a threat to their power, while the Cuban left argued that the new constitution did not go far enough. The latter came together in the *Ortodoxo* (Orthodox) Party, whose charismatic leader Eddie Chibás (1907–51) was a young man with a strong following among fellow university students and other activists in Havana. Chibás warned that the 1952 election would be stolen by the right, and in an effort to draw attention to widespread corruption in the political process and the lack of justice in Cuban society, he committed suicide in 1951 in the radio studio shortly after the end of his weekly nationwide broadcast. It remains a point of contention whether Chibas planned to commit suicide or was enacting a dramatic oppositional protest intended to stop short of taking his own life. The election was indeed stolen, and Fulgencio Batista (1901–73), a member of the Cuban military, assumed the presidency, a post he held until January 1, 1959 when he fled the country just as Fidel Castro Ruz and his 26th of July Movement rolled into Havana.

### **“History Will Absolve Me”**

Inspired by earlier populist revolutionaries in other parts of Latin America (having been arrested in Colombia in 1948 while attending an anti-imperialist conference organized by Jorge Gaitán), Fidel Castro, a young lawyer from a prosperous planter background, led a small group of revolutionaries in an unsuccessful attack on the Moncada military barracks in the

southeastern city of Santiago de Cuba on July 26, 1953. Originally able to flee to the mountains nearby, Castro and his followers (subsequently labeled the “26th of July Movement”) were arrested and brought to trial. Fidel Castro’s defense at his trial on October 16, 1953 has since become one of the most famous speeches by a Latin American political leader, contained in the challenge delivered in the final line: “Sentence me. I don’t mind. History will absolve me.” The young lawyer’s trial had been moved to a hospital ward to keep it out of the public’s eye, so only a few members of the court, and medical personnel who stopped by to listen in, heard the five-hour-long speech delivered (as was to become Castro’s style) from a few pages of notes. In it the 27-year-old leader of this small group of youths described the country’s social conditions, and laid out the justification for taking up arms against the Batista dictatorship. Between the time of the speech defending the attack on Moncada in 1953, the group’s subsequent short prison term and later exile to Mexico, and the return invasion of the island in late 1956, both opposition to Batista and Castro’s popularity had spread. The latter had accurately articulated the grievances of many Cubans, and during his three-year absence the “History will absolve me” speech had been distributed and read. Much of the success of the Cuban Revolution can be attributed to widespread dislike of the Batista regime.<sup>1</sup>

### **Causes for Discontent**

Cuba’s problems were similar to those of other small countries in the region: sharp income inequalities and lack of political rights. Nonetheless, Cuba was not like Guatemala or Bolivia. Instead it had one of the highest standards of living in Latin America in the 1950s, behind Argentina and Uruguay. Women had been voting since the 1930s, not long after US women won suffrage, and Havana had hosted more than one Pan-American conference promoting women’s rights. Cuba’s universities were some of the oldest and most prestigious in the Americas, and its capital city of Havana was a major cosmopolitan center that attracted mainstream tourists, intellectuals, and artists, as well as those seeking disreputable

entertainment. What made Cuba ripe for revolution was the combination of these factors. Income distribution was grossly uneven, especially between urban and rural areas. Many educated and sophisticated Cubans were forced to endure humiliating treatment at the hands of international visitors and institutions that excluded them. The country was rich, and many Cubans prospered; however, the political structure was riddled with corruption, favoritism, and privileges for foreigners and their companies.

Castro's famous speech captured that combination of grievances, noting that the government served merely to deliver Cuba's wealth abroad; for example, 85 percent of Cuba's small farmers paid rent to foreign-owned corporations, including the infamous United Fruit Company and the West India Company. Most of the land remained uncultivated, and the small number of factories engaged in processing food, tobacco, textiles, lumber, and sugar sent those goods abroad, forcing Cuba to import even many basic foodstuffs. Particularly humiliating was the fact that Cuba did not control fishing rights off its shores, nor possess the ability to use the sea for its own national benefit. As a result, many in the island nation went hungry because the wealth of the sea was strictly in the hands of foreign-owned pleasure boat and fishing companies. The people who toiled to produce Cuba's wealth lacked basic human services; many children died of preventable maladies such as tapeworms, parasites, influenza, and dysentery. Castro called for improvements in education, especially the establishment of schools to train technicians, engineers, and scientists and thus break the nation's dependence on foreign expertise. He noted that in the rural areas illiteracy, isolation, and ignorance undermined national unity and any chance that the majority of Cubans could participate as full citizens.

In addition to the exhaustive list of failings, Castro outlined his own inspiration for launching a political movement. He referred to the North American Revolution against England, to the French Revolution, and to other movements for reform and revolution that had united and inspired people abroad. Indicative of his years of education in Jesuit academies and universities, Castro invoked the Enlightenment thinkers, major philosophical trends, and the

right of individuals to seek redress for their grievances. Repeatedly he came back to José Martí, the framers of the liberal Constitution of 1940, and other democratic ideals. There was in the speech no indication that he was influenced by Marxism; indeed, as a student Castro had shunned the communists, although his brother, Raúl Castro Ruz (b. 1931), joined the Communist Party. “History will absolve me” looked to Martí, not Marx or Lenin, for its political inspiration. Its genius, and resultant popularity, rested in the breadth of its perspective: it addressed the grievances of middle-class intellectuals, entrepreneurs, and professionals, along with those of seasonal sugar-cane cutters, illiterate peasants, and urban factory workers. There has been much debate as to whether Castro was hiding his leftist agenda in the early stage of the Revolution or whether he was simply a political novice. Nonetheless, his opening salvo, contained in his most important speech, offered hope to every honest Cuban patriot in the new society.

### **The Revolutionary War**

Regrouping in Mexico after a general amnesty reduced his prison term to 18 months, Castro and the 26th of July Movement encountered a more sophisticated group of revolutionaries, including Argentine Ernesto “Che” Guevara and exiles from the Spanish Civil War who had received asylum in Mexico after the defeat of the Republican cause in 1939. Armed with both political and military strategy, the group re-entered Cuba in late 1956, and, after a rocky start, eventually launched a concerted struggle that linked guerrilla camps in the mountains with organizations operating in the cities, especially among the trade unions. Frank País (1934–57) mobilized a series of daring demonstrations in Santiago de Cuba and built an organization that linked up the underground network in many cities and towns. Killed on the streets of Santiago before the Revolution’s victory, País’s skillful work was instrumental in bringing news of the guerrilla movement to urban areas, creating constant disruptions that distracted Batista’s army, and apprehending arms and supplies that were then distributed to the guerrilla camps in the mountains and throughout the island.

In early 1957 Herbert Matthews (1900–77) interviewed Fidel Castro in the latter's camp high in the Sierra Maestra mountains for a series of stories that appeared in the *New York Times*. Much of the world became familiar with Castro because of Matthews' sympathetic portrayal of the charismatic leader and his band of idealistic and resourceful young combatants. Combined with the failure of Batista's counter-insurgency methods and the apparent unpopularity of the corrupt regime, the US began to distance itself from overt support for the dictatorship. On New Year's morning of 1959 the dictator, his family, and close associates fled the country, along with much of the moneyed Cuban elite, and foreign members of the entertainment, investment, and business communities, as well as many hundreds of foreign tourists. The hasty exodus of the wealthy and the corrupt stood in dramatic contrast with the cheering populace that lined the streets from Santa Clara to Havana to greet the guerrillas' triumphant entry into Havana a week later.

Although the fighting had at times been intense, the revolutionary war was not the proving ground for the new society; that would unfold over the subsequent years. In recognition of the unpopularity of Batista's government and in hopes of maneuvering to bring the young regime under its wing, Washington immediately recognized the new government. But within two years the relationship between the two countries had deteriorated completely. Similar to events in Guatemala and Bolivia earlier in the decade, and in Mexico at the zenith of its revolution, the main areas of contention with the United States developed when the revolutionary government instituted a land reform, including expropriation of estates and US-owned properties. In response to pressure from the sugar trusts, as well as in retaliation against the requirement that US-owned oil refineries in Cuba agree to process all crude oil in the country – whether bought from US companies or not – President Eisenhower broke off diplomatic relations in the last days of his administration. It was, however, under the presidency of John F. Kennedy (1917–63) that the most acute tensions emerged between the two nations. The downward slide began with the bungled US invasion on April 17, 1961 at

Playa Girón (Bay of Pigs) and culminated a year and a half later during what came to be known as the “Cuban Missile Crisis.”

A joint effort between the CIA (many of whom were veterans of the 1954 Guatemalan coup) and anti-Castro Cuban exiles, the Bay of Pigs invasion was from start to finish a poorly conceived operation. It proved embarrassing to the US, only serving to validate Cuba’s claim that the country was the victim of latter-day “Big Stick diplomacy” and, most importantly, it forced Cuba to turn to the Soviet Union for protection. Already in the works under Eisenhower, the invasion was founded on the faulty premise that the Cuban populace would rise up to greet the invaders. In fact, quite the opposite occurred and the populace of the small island nation rallied to the government’s defense – especially when Castro was able to parade captured military officers from Batista’s army before the Cuban public. The disastrous 1961 Bay of Pigs invasion was only the most widely known failure among many attempts to bring down the Cuban regime, ranging from other, less high-profile, invasions; botched schemes to assassinate Fidel Castro (including explosive cigars, food poisonings, etc.); sabotage against crops, especially the delicate tobacco plants; to the longstanding embargo that has limited both trade with and travel to Cuba. (Figure 11.1)

None of these efforts succeeded in deposing the Cuban government – and many might argue that they have been counter-productive, serving to bolster Castro’s reputation among other Latin American nations and radical youth; isolating and demoralizing some reformers within Cuba; and probably intensifying Castro’s popularity among hardliners resistant to broader democracy. Thus the Cuban government has been able to use the David versus Goliath scenario to its advantage, refusing to discuss persistent criticisms in the area of human rights. The blatant aggression of the Bay of Pigs invasion provided an entrée for Cuba to turn more decidedly toward the Soviet camp. Castro declared Cuba a Marxist-Leninist state, and the centrist, bourgeois phase of the revolution ended. In October 1962 Cuba’s decision to install Soviet nuclear-powered missiles – ostensibly to defend itself from further US attacks – precipitated one of the most intense crises of the Cold War. For 13 days in October the world

stood at the brink of nuclear war between the reigning superpowers, as the two sides attempted to defuse the tension without losing face. Ultimately the standoff was ended in an agreement between Soviet Premier Nikita Khrushchev (1894–1971) and President Kennedy; Castro was relegated to the sidelines. The US promised never again to invade Cuba, and to withdraw missiles from Turkey aimed at Moscow, while the Soviets withdrew the missiles from Cuba. Although a key moment in Cuban history, the October 1962 crisis is actually most memorable as the event that solidified the world into the two superpowers' spheres of influence. For years afterward, the US proffered only rhetorical opposition to Soviet repression in Eastern Europe, while the Soviets extended heated condemnation of US policies, but tepid concrete assistance to Latin American struggles for self-determination. The exception was Cuba, which after the early 1960s entered fully into the orbit of the communist bloc, became a key trading partner with the USSR and Eastern Europe, and depended on the Soviets for millions of dollars in economic aid. In return, Cuba became one of the Soviet Union's most reliable allies in the subsequent Cold War battles.

### **Ernesto “Che” Guevara**

The best-known face of the 26th of July Movement was not a Cuban at all, but a young, bearded Argentine: Ernesto “Che” Guevara. His image, made famous in a photograph snapped by Alberto Díaz Gutiérrez, known as Alberto Korda (see Box 11.1), or simply “Korda” (1928–2001), has come to personify the romantic revolutionary icon (Figure 11.2). It graces the walls of college dorms, the stages of rock and roll bands and Broadway musicals, is a ubiquitous presence at political rallies across the globe, crops up in cartoons and television shows, adorns T-shirts, and enjoys a status accorded to few other symbols of popular culture. Art critics have labeled it the “most famous photograph in the world and a symbol of the twentieth century” (Maryland Institute College of Art).

Che Guevara joined up with Fidel Castro and the other members of the 26th of July Movement in Mexico several years after leaving his native Argentina. Already embracing

socialism, and more radical than Castro in his strategy for bringing about revolutionary change, Che had witnessed the overthrow of Jacobo Arbenz in Guatemala in 1954. He developed the idea of the “new man and woman” (originally it was only “the new man”) and called for a profound cultural transformation from the individualist Enlightenment-based principles Castro invoked in his “History will absolve me” speech, to those of mutual giving and sharing in a society motivated by moral incentives rather than material rewards. As with Mao Zedong’s Cultural Revolution in China, the idealism proved unworkable in Cuba, although it did not result in the widespread starvation or political purges that occurred in China. Cuba abandoned strict moral incentives in all but rhetoric by the late 1960s, at a time that coincided with Guevara’s departure from Cuba (a coincidence that has led to widespread speculation, but no real proof, that there was a falling out between the two main figures of the Revolution).

Box 11.1 Alberto Korda and the photo that launched an international icon

On March 5, 1960, at a commemoration for the death of 80–100 people who were killed when a French freighter, *La Coubre*, exploded in Havana harbor (allegedly due to CIA sabotage), a Cuban fashion photographer turned journalist of the Revolution, Alberto Korda, snapped a single photograph of Che Guevara as the young guerrilla joined a line of other leaders of the Revolution flanking Fidel Castro on a platform at the cemetery. Korda’s photo, taken with a Leica camera using Kodak Plus-X film, captured a single image of Che staring into the distance, framed by his long hair and wearing a beret studded with a single star. Although Korda kept a small cropped print for himself, he did not publish it, possibly because on the same roll were photos of Jean-Paul Sartre and Simone de Beauvoir, and it was the famous French philosophers in attendance at the service whose images appeared in the news accounts of the event.

The photo of Guevara remained unpublished and in Korda’s possession, tacked to the wall of his apartment for the next seven years. At the time of Che Guevara’s death in Bolivia on

October 9, 1967, an Italian poster publisher, Giangiacomo Feltrinelli, obtained the original landscape-format negative, cropped Che's Cuban compatriots from either side of him, and published it on a poster. Korda's image of the Argentine-born martyr rapidly became a symbol for the emerging worldwide student revolt. In 1968 Irish artist Jim Fitzpatrick produced and distributed a high-contrast print of a drawing that slightly modified the original image, so that Che's eyes are gazing toward the distant horizon, conveying a heroic impression of a man looking upward and toward the future.

Korda never asked for royalties on the photo and only once intervened to prevent its use – in 2000 when Smirnoff Vodka attempted to print it on an advertisement. A lifelong communist, Korda maintained that “as a supporter of the ideals for which Che Guevara died, I am not averse to its reproduction by those who wish to propagate his memory and the cause of social justice throughout the world, but I am categorically against the exploitation of Che's image for the promotion of products such as alcohol, or for any purpose that denigrates the reputation of Che.” Korda won an out-of-court settlement of about \$50,000, which he donated to the Cuban medical system. Since Korda's death in 2001, there has been no one to object to any use of the Che image, capitalist, socialist, or otherwise. Nonetheless, despite its widespread reproduction on every product imaginable, Che's face yet persists as one of the most famous international revolutionary icons.

*El Che*, as he was known, set out to reproduce the guerrilla movements' triumph, first in the African Congo and later in the mountains of Bolivia. Drawing on French philosopher Régis Debray's (b. 1941) guerrilla warfare strategy, which he termed *focoismo*, Che argued that the Latin American hemisphere was ripe for socialist revolution, that the conditions for a socialist insurrection could be accelerated by a small band of armed militants drawn tightly together under disciplined leadership. Instead of opting for the clandestine armed struggle as a last resort, when conditions prohibited an above-ground movement, the *foco* formula envisioned the opposite: the emergence and proliferation of mass organizations *as a result of*

armed actions by a covert revolutionary cadre. In this regard Che's view broke decisively with – rather than simply ignoring, as had been the strategy of Cuba's 26th of July Movement – the Moscow-oriented Latin American communist parties and with the conventional wisdom of Marxist-Leninist theory.

Guevara chose the Bolivian Altiplano to test this theory, bringing together a tightly knit group of Cubans, an East German woman with the code name Tania, and a few urban-based Bolivian and Peruvian communists. The plan failed miserably. In 1967 Bolivian rangers, trained and supplied by the US Special Forces, captured, executed, and buried Guevara in an unknown grave, after sending to the press a photo of his tortured and emaciated body. When news of his death reached radicals and social activists in Latin America, and the student movement abroad, Che was elevated to hero status, regardless of the failure of his ill-conceived plan or that the very peasants they hoped to incite betrayed the rag-tag outsiders to the Bolivian army. As noted earlier in this chapter, Che and his followers did not speak the native Quechua language and thus could not communicate their aims, nor did they understand that the peasantry had recently won an important reform during the 1952 Bolivian Revolution. Moreover, it was Bolivia's miners, with whom Che had no contact, who were actually the most revolutionary stratum of the highland proletariat. Nevertheless, youthful groups of revolutionaries throughout Latin America and in the developed and developing world read his works, adopted his strategy, and attempted to reproduce the success of Cuba, rather than the failure of Bolivia, in their own homelands.

### **What Difference Did the Revolution Make?**

Undeniably, the Revolution's accomplishments were impressive, especially in the early years. On a continent where democratic experiments have been short-lived until the very late twentieth century, precariously balanced between military coups and rule by local strongmen, the most undemocratic feature has been grinding poverty, malnutrition, illiteracy, disease, crime, and corruption. In sharp contrast, Cuba has ensured basic health and wellbeing for

every citizen: education through the university level, medical care, complete freedom of choice in abortion and birth control, social security, child care, maternity leave, and many free, or nearly free, social services have been made available to everyone.

Women were mobilized from the earliest days of the Revolution and obtained rights unparalleled in Latin America – or most of the world – such as the 1975 Cuban Family Code, whereby discrimination against women and girls, even within the family structure, was outlawed. During periods of hardship and contraction, such as the early 1990s, when subsidies from the Soviet Union ended, the maintenance of social services often fell back on women as mothers, wives, and caregivers, indicative that Cuba had not fully equalized gender responsibilities. Yet it must be noted that only a few northern European democracies have even attempted to enforce such strict gender equality. Through the Federation of Cuban Women (FMC), one of the foremost mass organizations established after the Revolution's triumph, the government has been able to closely monitor women's progress and ensure oversight. Women have achieved impressive parity in university education, pay scales, and local government positions; however, they hold only one-quarter of high-level administrative positions in government.

This persistence of women's inequality in the political arena was apparent in the speculation over who was to succeed Fidel Castro as head of state, when he became ill in 2006. Of the 12 to 15 names mentioned, which included the inner circles of Cuba's leadership, not one was a woman. The most prominent woman in the government was FMC founder Vilma Espín (1930–2007), a member of the Central Committee of the Communist Party and the party's Political Bureau. Although capable, her appointment could not have been hurt by the fact that she was married to Raúl Castro, Fidel's brother. A chemical engineer with a degree from MIT, Espín left a life of comfort as the daughter of a lawyer for Bacardi, Ltd (the largest privately held alcohol company in the world) to work with Frank País in Santiago in the early days of the guerrilla movement, demonstrating her independent leadership credentials. Feminist critics in Cuba have argued that she was reluctant to demarcate a path of

women's autonomy separate from the prevailing view of the Party. Essentially, it is difficult to say what motivated Espín or any other leader, since one of the main problems of the Cuban system is lack of transparency.

Officially Cuba banned racial prejudice and, again, in comparison with other countries of the Americas, made tremendous strides. Official segregation had restricted Afro-Cubans to the most menial jobs, income, and social levels of society. Left illiterate, confined to the countryside, banned from neighborhoods, and association with whiter and elite sectors of society, black and mulatto Cubans entered the revolutionary society at a marked disadvantage. In the years since 1959 much has changed and blacks hold positions of leadership in many areas of society, except the highest political ranks. The highest ranks of political apparatus, including the Communist Party, remain largely white.

Finally, this small Caribbean island offered hope to young radicals in many parts of Latin America and throughout the world. Not only had it overthrown an entrenched dictatorship, it had succeeded in the very shadow of the US itself. Moreover, Cuba was willing to provide advice, assistance, safe haven, and refuge, even rest and relaxation, to revolutionaries struggling to bring about social change or to overthrow their own repressive governments. Castañeda, in his admired and vilified book, *Utopia Unarmed: The Latin American Left after the Cold War*, attributes the respect Cuba earned to the vision of Fidel Castro and the genius of his longtime friend and head of internal security, Manuel Piñero Losada (1934–98). Piñero trained the young men, his “*muchachos*,” as he called them, who infiltrated abroad and schooled at home a whole generation of revolutionary recruits for the Latin American guerrilla movement. Piñero, a contemporary of Fidel's from a prominent Havana family, attended Columbia University in New York, where it was assumed he would study business and make the connections to follow in his father's footsteps as an executive with Bacardi Rum. Rejecting his roots and opting for the revolution, the charismatic, beguiling, and attractive red-bearded Piñero is credited with building an impenetrable security structure in Cuba and directing insurgencies throughout the hemisphere in what Castañeda calls “the most heroic

chapter in its history.” Castañeda, a critic of the guerrilla strategy, an advisor to conservative Mexican president Vicente Fox, and a man who has ruffled many feathers with his argument that Fidelismo was ultimately neither productive nor in the best interest of social change in Latin America, nonetheless admired the project Cuba attempted. Castañeda’s conclusions, despite hints of paternalistic sentimentality, are worth pondering:

Piñero and the Revolution’s attempts to fan the fires of revolt across Latin America began as the most heroic chapter in its history. From the earliest guerrilla landings in Venezuela and the Dominican Republic to Che’s sacrifice in Bolivia, not to mention the countless Cubans who fought, or helped others fight, in guerrilla wars extending over three decades, Fidel’s vision of a revolution that had to be exported included some of its finest hours: generous, idealistic, unselfish. In the brief moments of victory or success, and during the long years of defeat and retribution, the Cubans stood by their friends, cared for the widows, orphans, and maimed who survived the hemisphere’s Thirty Years Wars. They opened their doors to many who had nowhere else to go and gave much of the best of themselves and their experience to bringing change in Latin America. One may disagree with the tactics, or even with the goals, but they pursued both with perseverance and dignity.<sup>3</sup>

Under pressure from the United States, the OAS (Organization of American States) expelled Cuba, one of the body’s founding members, in January 1962. Organized in 1948 the OAS has its headquarters on the Mall in Washington DC, alongside the Museum of American History and the National Archives, thus graphically demonstrating that the OAS was not an institution that symbolically or realistically stood for national sovereignty. More importantly, every other state of the Americas was required for the next 30 years to break diplomatic ties with Cuba or risk expulsion as well. With the single exception of Mexico, no country in the OAS that wanted to stay on good terms with the US could also be friendly with Cuba throughout the Cold War, while the mere mention of Fidel Castro in the inner circles of a

Latin American government was rumored to be enough to bring in the CIA and initiate a covert action against a leader. To paraphrase the English historian Eric Hobsbawm, as the “iron grille of the Cold War was clamped across the globe” nearly every state in the world was required to join one or the other system of alliances. A decade before century’s end, the grille lifted.

### **The Special Period in Peacetime**

When the Soviet Union dissolved in the early 1990s, Cuba overnight lost access to 75 percent of its imports, over 90 percent of its external market, untold millions in financial assistance, and, most importantly, more than 90 percent of the crude oil it had exchanged for sugar at a highly favorable rate. From 1991 until 1996 Cuba’s standard of living plummeted, food shortages were widespread, the highly mechanized agricultural system stood paralyzed, and the absence of pharmaceuticals and vaccines threatened the nation’s health. Nonetheless, Cuba weathered this era, called the “special period in time of peace,” with little discernible fall in health, literacy, and life expectancy statistics. Indicative of the island’s income equality, everyone lost about 20 pounds of weight, regardless of occupation, status, or relationship to the center of power and wealth. By century’s end, economic growth was returning, based on an aggressive campaign to attract European and Canadian tourism, a turn toward sustainable, pesticide-free, organic farming learned from Australian agronomists, an oil-for-sugar exchange with Venezuela promoted by socialist ally Hugo Chávez (1954-2013) and his successor, Nicolás Maduro (b. 1962), a healthy influx of investment from European Union nations, and a remarkable level of ingenuity and perseverance on the part of the Cuban people.

The economic and social transformation since the 1990s has taken a toll on socialist principles. Attracting tourists has meant pouring money into luxury hotels and foreigners-only resorts, forcing decision makers to devote a larger proportion of Cuban resources to serve tourists and foreign enterprise. Prostitution re-emerged after having all but disappeared after 1959, highly educated professionals gave up jobs in medicine or academia to work in the more

lucrative tourist trade, and many critics argue that Cuba began reverting to the bawdy pre-revolution days. The effect of full diplomatic relations between the US and Cuba as regards Cuba's socialist economy is unclear. If, as President Obama announced on December 17, 2014, Cuba and the US establish stronger economic ties, the influx of powerful US investment will have a tremendous effect on the nascent free market relations already in place on the island.

### **Democratic Shortcomings**

Fidel Castro was head of the revolutionary government for its first 47 years, until 2006, when his brother Raúl assumed power after the elder Castro underwent intestinal surgery. In February 2008 Fidel Castro surrendered his position and Raúl was elected president the following week. This lack of substantive change in leadership exacted a toll, even if apologists for the system argued that the Castros are enormously popular with the majority of Cubans. Opposition to one-party rule has erupted periodically, as it did in Mexico and other countries of Latin America under single party or authoritarian regimes; however, the ability of Cuban dissidents to obtain a comfortable refugee status in the US served to mitigate against internal opposition.

[INSERT FIGURE 11.3: President Dilma Rousseff greeting Cuban President Raúl Castro in Rio de Janeiro, Brazil in June 2012 (Roberto Stuckert Filho photo).]

Despite the many social reforms since the Revolution, the Cuban government has never allowed widespread democratic freedoms, including freedom of the press, of assembly, and the right to mobilize opposition to government policies. Curbs on freedom of expression have driven many in the artistic, literary, and academic community to abandon Cuba. The most celebrated case was that of Reinaldo Arenas (1943–90), a talented writer, poet, and playwright, who suffered persecution for refusing to submit to self-censorship in what he wrote and to curb his openly homosexual lifestyle. Arenas's 1992 autobiography, *Before Night*

*Falls* (which was later made into a movie after the author's death from AIDS in New York), graphically recounts the physical and mental repression he suffered at the hands of the Cuban authorities. However, Arenas might find Cuba much altered today. Mariela Castro Espín (b. 1962), daughter of Raúl Castro and Vilma Espín, leads the Cuban National Center for Sex Education, an organization devoted to promoting acceptance of Cuba's LGBT (lesbian/gay/bisexual/transgender) community. As a result of the center's work and other initiatives, tolerance for same-sex relationships and the openly gay lifestyle has changed dramatically, to the point that gay-oriented travel guides list Havana as one of the world's gay-friendly cities.

One of the issues on the negotiating table concerns opening Cuba's media to international scrutiny. While many countries have official, government-sponsored, news agencies, Cuba's media has been controlled and censored, including television and radio stations, newspapers, and access to the internet. The State Security police have been known to harass independent journalists who criticized the government. Yaoni Sanchez (b. 1975) developed a reputation outside Cuba as an outspoken, media savvy blogger. Since 2007 Sanchez has been publishing a number of blogs and digital magazines, including *Consenso* (later *Contudos*), *Voces Cubanos*, *14ymedio*, and others, as well as contributing to international blogs and forums such as *Huffington Post*, *Die Zeit*, and articles in the print media. She first traveled outside Cuba in 2002, later returned, and since January 2013 when Cubans were able to obtain passports blogged from both in and out of Cuba. On December 17, in response to the historic changes opening relations between Cuba and US, she tweeted: "One era is ending and I hope that in this new one the protagonist will be civil society."

Since the early 1960s Cubans have crossed the dangerous 90-mile ocean passage to land on US shores, where they enjoy special privileges accorded no other refugees: instant citizenship, welfare, and social benefits. Highly prized baseball players such as José Canseco and Liván and Orlando Hernández have defected to sign for multi-million dollar contracts with the Major Leagues. In 1980 thousands of Cubans left in a series of boatlifts out of the

port of Mariel destined for South Florida. The exodus grew out of a series of events beginning in 1979 when the Carter Administration opened access for Cuban-Americans to visit the island. The exiles flooded the island bringing presents, money, and verbal enticements to their relatives in Cuba. As a result, many of the “Marielitos,” as they were called, jumped at the opportunity to join family members already in the US, while others were attracted by the easy refugee policy and promise of a more materially rewarding life. In retaliation for the embarrassing exodus, Castro allowed prisoners and people with mental disabilities to leave, much to the consternation of the US customs agents.

The Mariel Boatlift from April to October 1980 proved that Cuba was not an island paradise and that many people wanted to emigrate. Yet if the US borders were opened to the people from any country of Latin America, or the developing world, allowing everyone to enter the US freely, receive a generous package of social welfare benefits not available to even US citizens, much less immigrants, and the right to apply for instant naturalization, many hundreds of thousands would do so. The appeal of a better life in a rich country has always been a powerful magnet. Ironically, the fanatical wing of the Cuban exile community has never had much interest in supporting freedom for dissenting views among its own ranks. In the past attempts by cultural and political groups to normalize relations with Cuba have met with vociferous, even violent, opposition from hardliners; although that sector has diminished, as a result of changes on the island, softening views toward Cuba among the generations born in the US, and the advancing age of those who came to the US in the first decades after the Revolution.

Historically Cuban officials have blamed the US embargo and the persistence of Cuban exile counter-insurgency tactics for the lack of freedom, stating that the need to repel invasions from the outside prevented the government from lifting the surveillance of its own people. That has been true in some regard. Alan Gross, the USAID official whose release in December 2014, in exchange for Cubans Gerardo Hernandez and Antonio Guerrero, was

apprehended in 2009 as he was using USAID cover to smuggle satellite equipment to opponents of the regime. As Larry Birns, Director of the Council on Hemispheric Affairs noted, “Given decades of U.S. deployment of psyc-ops and other subversive activity against the Cuban regime, it is not implausible to believe that Gross was a player (intentional or not) in a CIA-USAID plot to weaken Castro’s rule under cover of a human rights project.”<sup>1</sup> The CIA used young USAID workers to recruit disaffected Cubans into a US spy network in 2013 and 2014. On the other hand, the “Cuban Five” who were arrested in Miami in 1998 were working as spies in the US, infiltrating anti-Castro exile groups engaged in sabotage. If anything the years of tit-for-tat were an abysmal waste of time, money and resources. For its part, in response to US invasions and covert actions against the Revolution Cuba evolved its own “culture of censorship” that for the last 60 years undermined efforts to root out favoritism, inefficiency, and graft. The US has been a powerful enemy, no one can doubt, but Cuban officials have also used that enmity to enforce allegiance and conformity, often at a high cost to the intellectual, cultural, and social life of its people.

### **Cuba and the World**

When the thaw began in 2014 the US was standing virtually alone in the world in refusing to recognize Cuba. In October 2013 the United Nations General Assembly voted 188-2 in its yearly non-binding resolution to end the commercial embargo of Cuba, with only Israel and the US opposed (Micronesia, Palau and the Marshall Islands abstained.) According to CBS news, “Cuba enjoyed its 22<sup>nd</sup> annual slam dunk at the U.N.,” in a resolution that accused the US of inflicting “over \$1.126 trillion in damages as a result of over 50 years of trade sanctions.”<sup>2</sup> The yearly UN vote, a Cold War leftover, was a way for many countries to demonstrate to the US a dramatically different view of current world relations. Obama’s removal of Cuba from a list of countries the US considered as sponsors of “state terrorism” was particularly welcomed throughout the world, even if most thought it was absurd that the

island that had suffered so much at the hands of US policy was ever placed on the list in the first place. Speaking of Cuba in its heyday during the 1970s, Jorge Castañeda noted that the more the United States sabotaged, opposed, undermined, and isolated the small Caribbean nation, the more other nations openly or begrudgingly admired it: “Cuba’s activities abroad made the humiliated isle of the Platt Amendment and the whorehouses of Havana a player on the world stage. It was reviled by Washington, resented by Moscow, but respected, indeed admired and revered, throughout the Third World.”<sup>2</sup>

Moreover, while the US relied on Israel’s support at the UN, Cuba’s relations with Israel have not been strictly oppositional. In 1973 at the time of the Yom Kippur War, the two nations severed diplomatic ties when Cuba sided with Palestine and offered safe haven for Palestinian combatants. When Cuba broke relations with Israel, many Israelis recalled that in 1963 Algerian Premier Ahmed Ben Bella reprimanded President Castro for having declared three days of mourning at the death of Israel’s President Itzhak Ben Zvi. More recently, Castro made waves in his 2010 interview in *The Atlantic* with Jeffrey Goldberg, when the Cuban leader criticized the Iranian president Mahmoud Ahmadinejad for “questioning” the Holocaust and the Cuban leader asserted Israel’s right to exist. It bears remembering that Castro’s statement was not without risk. In 2005 Iran had opened a €20 million line of credit to the exceedingly cash-strapped Cuba. According to Global Jewish News Source, Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu even sent Castro a letter of appreciation on behalf of “World Jewry,” although he stopped short of offering any type of financial assistance as had Iran. For decades there have been private tours of Cuban Jews to Israel, as well as excursions to Cuba sponsored by Jewish-American organizations.

When in December 2014 President Obama and Raul Castro revealed the terms of a prisoner swap, partially arranged in a 45-minute phone conversation between the two leaders, much of the world voiced surprise. However, there have been many negotiations between top officials, if not the heads of state, over the years. In a 2014 book William LeoGrande and

Peter Kornbluh narrate a fifty-year record of dialogue and negotiations, from Kennedy's overtures to begin talks after the 1962 missile crisis to behind the scenes maneuvering through every administration, Republican and Democrat, until the breakthrough under Obama. This peculiar diplomatic relationship parallels the contradictory stance of many US citizens and government policy toward Cuba. An estimated two million international tourists travel to Cuba yearly, at least 100,000 of whom are US citizens who visited the island in defiance of the embargo. Since 1999, governors, senators, and members of Congress from at least 30 states traveled to Cuba. The largest source of non-governmental "foreign aid" to Cuba came out of South Florida, in the form of dollars sent clandestinely, and now legally, by Cuban-Americans to their relatives in the homeland. In 2009 President Barack Obama lifted the Bush-era ban and allowed Cuban-Americans to travel to the island, an important precursor to full diplomatic relations.

Despite the embargo, the United States has been one of Cuba's top ten trading partners after the demise of the Soviet Union. Cuba purchased over \$3.5 billion in agricultural goods, including chicken, pork, wheat, corn, rice, and soybeans, from the United States, sent under a special provision that allows food sales. The trade reached a peak in 2008 and then declined, falling by as much as 50 percent in 2012 because of financial problems that priced US goods too high for the Cuban market. Canada, Brazil, Vietnam, Russia and France, much to the chagrin of some US exporters, then negotiated better terms, a factor that may have figured into the US desire to open economic relations. One sticking point that the 2014 initiative particularly sought to eliminate was the ban on currency exchanges, with Obama emphasizing that Americans would be able to use their credit and debit cards to make purchases in Cuba. Over the past years members of the US Congress, including a fair number of conservative Republicans from the Midwest agricultural heartland, traveled to Cuba to promote bilateral trade. When made aware that US currency restrictions were forcing Cubans to deal with other countries, especially China, representatives for US farmers lobbied for change. In his December 2014 speech, Raul Castro welcomed the thaw and called on the US government to

remove the obstacles hindering or restricting ties between peoples, families, and citizens of both countries, particularly restrictions on traveling, direct post services, and telecommunications.

A significant area of ongoing relations between Cuba and the US, highlighted in Obama's speech, was cooperation among medical personnel in Africa fighting Ebola. This is not surprising since for decades Cuban medical teams have been working in all corners of the world. Cuba has pioneered excellent, preventative health care, tailor made for developing societies, and has sent competent practitioners to the front lines of the world's medical hotspots. In 2013 Foreign Trade Minister Rodrigo Malmierca announced that Cuba's leading source of hard-currency income—between \$3 and \$8 billion yearly—derived from the export of professional medical services abroad. An estimated 40,000 Cuban doctors have been working on contracts in 66 countries in Asia, Africa and Latin America. One of the largest clients is Brazil, which may have as many as 6,000 Cuban doctors to help cover its health care staff shortage. Although already planned, the influx of Cuban medical personnel was speeded up in response to protests over Brazilian health care that led up to the 2014 World Cup. Doctors are paid much more abroad than they would earn in Cuba; however, the government retains the lion's share of the money paid for medical services, charging countries on a "sliding scale" according to their ability to pay.

## **Conclusion**

The 1959 overthrow of Cuba's Fulgencio Batista, one of Washington's closest allies in the region, shocked diplomatic circles on both sides of the Caribbean. Although Trujillo's machinations in the Dominican Republic might have been an occasional thorn in Washington's side, up to that point the US had been able to manage the embarrassing and potentially unfavorable press resulting from its relationship with one or another authoritarian regime. That all changed when Fidel Castro's bearded guerrilla army marched into Havana on

January 1, 1959, unleashing a series of revolutionary or reform movements in several countries.

Cuba's successful revolution had a dramatic effect on the rest of the hemisphere. Populations that had waited patiently (or not so patiently) to no avail for a share in their nations' wealth, drew renewed inspiration from the band of young men and women who toppled an entrenched dictatorship the US had long supported. The years since the euphoric victory of the young rebels proved arduous, pitting the small nation against the powerful opposition of the United States, forcing it under the wing of the Soviet Union, struggling to survive as the Cold War came to an end, and emerging to win diplomatic recognition from its powerful neighbor. In some ways the 50 years of tension between the US and Cuba, ending in cautious reconciliation, is the story of the Cold War. That Cuba was the real estate in play for the world's closest brush with nuclear war seems inconceivable to most anyone born after that time; however for many nations large and small, the twentieth century search for sovereignty was integrally tied up with Cuba, reminding us once again of the outsize importance of this small island in the history of Latin America.

### **Topics and Questions for Discussion**

1. Fidel Castro's speech, "History Will Absolve Me" detailed many of the problems in Cuban society that led to widespread discontent with the Batista dictatorship. What were the problems?
2. How did the 26<sup>th</sup> of July Movement succeed in drawing together a wide coalition of forces to overthrow the government of Fulgencio Batista dictatorship in 1959? Discuss the strategy and tactics of the revolution that led to its success.

3. Over the years, how has the revolutionary government in Cuba attempted to transform the economy, society, and culture? What were its successes? What were its failures?
4. Several of the most dramatic crises of the Cold War came about as a result of the hostility between Cuba and the US. What were they and what were the outcomes?
5. What has been the effect of the US embargo against trade with Cuba? Was it a significant factor in undermining democracy in Cuba? Did it lead to the destruction of the Cuban revolution?
6. Pretend your roommate has a poster of Ernesto “Che” Guevara on his wall, but because he has only a vague notion of who Che was, he asks you to enlighten him. What would you tell him? Why would a person put a poster of Che on his wall, or wear a T-shirt with his image, but not know who Che is?
7. Discuss the changes in Cuban society since President Obama reestablished diplomatic relations in December 2014.

**Figure 11.1** Near the Plaza de la Revolución. The billboard marking the 44th anniversary of the Revolution features Fidel Castro and Camilo Cienfuegos, heroes of the revolutionary war. Camilo died in a plane crash in October 1959 Fidel went on to lead the country. The billboard depicts the mass of Cubans as patriotic, hardworking, and peace loving, cheering amidst a sea of flags, machetes, and doves. On the street in front of the billboard, a pre-1959 US automobile in remarkably pristine condition stands as an ironic symbol of revolutionary Cuba's conflicted relationship with the United States. (Martin Benjamin photo)

**Figure 11.2** Ernesto "Che" Guevara. (Alberto Korda photo)

**Figure 11.3** President Dilma Rousseff greeting Cuban President Raúl Castro in Rio de Janeiro, Brazil in June 2012 (Roberto Stuckert Filho photo).]

---

<sup>1</sup> Larry Birns, "ALAN GROSS RELEASED: TOWARDS A TURN IN U.S. – CUBA RELATIONS" (Dec 17, 2014), [www.coha.org](http://www.coha.org)

<sup>2</sup> CBS News, October 29, 2013.