

CIGAR & SPIRITS

THE GENTLEMAN'S LIFESTYLE MAGAZINE

JANUARY/FEBRUARY 2017



FIDEL CASTRO

DEATH OF A
DICTATOR

TOP HAT MEDIA GROUP CIGARANDSPIRITS.COM

\$5.99US \$5.99CAN 01>



BEHIND THE LEAF: VENTURA CIGAR COMPANY



BLOOD, SMOKE, AND REVOLUTION- A LOOK AT CUBA'S MOST INFAMOUS LEADER

By: *Elisa Jordan*

Last fall, President Barack Obama lifted a 50-year-old embargo on Cuban cigars and rum. For fans of the long-forbidden and nearly impossible to attainable items, it was a time for celebration. Under the new policy, travelers could legally purchase rum and cigars in any country where they are sold if they are for personal use. The beginnings of the lifted policy dates to 2014 when President Obama and Cuba's President Raul Castro agreed to start normalizing relations between the two countries.

Raul Castro, who had taken over rule of Cuba after older brother Fidel was stricken with intestinal health problems, has taken several steps in recent years to improve relations with other countries. It was a clear sign that things were changing in Cuba, the country long isolated by embargos. When it was announced that the older Fidel Castro had died, it raised further questions as to what changes were coming for the island nation.

Fidel Castro's rule has been the subject of much discussion, debate and ire over the last several decades. Revolutionaries can be romanticized, seen as rebels standing up for the common man. Other times the reality is more complicated and darker. In the case of Cuba, Fidel Castro brought free education and universal health care to the citizens of Cuba. But they paid for those improvements with firing squads, separated families, arbitrary imprisonment, human rights abuses and a dismal economy.

CUBA'S ORIGINS

The Caribbean's largest island, Cuba was originally inhabited by Amerindian tribes. Spain colonized Cuba in the fifteenth century and soon the island became an uneasy mix of natives, Spaniards and African slaves. The discomfort frequently spilled over into violence, a practice that remained commonplace for centuries.

Cuba remained a Spanish colony until 1898, when the United States won control after the Spanish-American war. The United States also won Guam, the Philippines and Puerto Rico in the war's resolution. Cuba's freedom was only slightly improved under the US, however.

Cuba gained a more formal independence in 1902, but the United States still retained the right to intervene in Cuba's affairs. As the island tried to rebuild its fragile democratic system, the unrest and instability of generations past only continued. The result was the election of President Fulgencio Batista, who was initially elected in 1940 but seized total power as dictator by 1952.

Batista suspended Cuba's Constitution and negotiated lucrative deals with the American mafia to allow gambling in Havana. During his reign, approximately 70 percent of Cuba's arable land was owned by foreigners and his administration grew increasingly corrupt. Angry citizens demanded change, often with violence. It is this environment into which Fidel Castro was born, raised and came to power.



THE ORIGINS OF FIDEL CASTRO

Fidel Castro was born on August 13, 1926, the third child of a wealthy Spanish landowner and farmer and housemaid mother. He grew up attending private schools, where despite interests in history, debate and geography, proved to be an average student. Instead, young Fidel focused his energies on sports.



The roots of Castro's future can trace back to those early childhood years. From a young age, Castro felt a strong connection to Cuba's past and struggle for freedom. In addition to the close proximity of his father's laborers, he grew up close to the battlefield where Cuban independence fighter and hero Jose Marti was in battle against the Spanish in 1895. Marti, often seen as a symbol of Cuban hope, in life warned against America's political interest in Cuba. To a young Fidel Castro, he served as an inspiration and shaped his vision as an adult.

In 1945, Castro enrolled at the University of Havana with the intention of studying law. At the time, the university was boiling over with radical students calling for political reform and an end to corruption. When Castro started college, he later said that he was a "political illiterate" who one day dreamed of getting a line in a Cuban history book. Once here, he flourished. On campus he threw himself into politics and made a name for himself giving lectures, participating in violent protests, clashes with police and involvement with the gangsterismo culture.

In 1947, he joined what was called the Orthodox Party, a reformist party devoted to freeing countries from US-backed dictators. The following year, he fought in Bogotá, Colombia, after leftist leader Jorge Eliecer Gaitan was assassinated. That wasn't the only change in his life that year. Castro married Mirta Diaz-Balart, a student of philosophy at the University of Havana. Neither family approved of the marriage, but Mirta's wealthy father still provided money for a honeymoon in the United States. Castro's new father-in-law was a member of Cuba's wealthy elite class and a supporter of rightwing President Batista. The young couple soon had a son, also named Fidel, though called Fidelito.



BECAUSE CUBA'S MEDIA WAS CENSORED, CASTRO TURNED TO FOREIGN MEDIA OUTLETS FOR COVERAGE. THE IMAGE HE WAS CRAFTING WAS THAT OF A REVOLUTIONARY FIGHTING TYRANNY. IT'S UNCLEAR, BUT IT IS ALSO HIGHLY POSSIBLE THAT HE WAS MISLEADING THE MEDIA AS TO HOW MANY REBELS HAD JOINED HIM.



*A Tradition
you can count on
for a long time to come.*

LA PALINA
EST. 1896

La Palina introduces the following products to our family of fine cigars: LP Nicaragua, El Año, and Illumination. In the meantime, we have no idea who the guy in the ad is.

lapalinacigars.com

LP Nicaragua

El Año

Illumination



MOVING FORWARD WITH THE CAUSE

Now a lawyer, in 1950 Castro co-founded a law practice devoted to helping Cuba's poor. It was a financial disaster but he cared little for financial security or material comforts. The Castros' belongings, such as furniture, were often repossessed, much to Mirta Castro's distress. Meanwhile, Castro's beliefs were becoming increasingly radical and he was starting to dream of entering politics.

On July 26, 1953, Castro gathered 111 rebels, including his younger brother Raul, in an effort to attack Moncada army barracks in Santiago de Cuba. Many of the rebels were killed and the Castro brothers were captured. Although the attack itself failed, Castro's legal defense during his trial proved a huge success. Representing himself, Castro managed to turn the courtroom into a stage for a well-crafted manifesto. Castro spoke of Cuba's history of oppression, condemned President Batista and spoke of childhood influence, Jose Marti, the great hero of independence. Although he was still jailed, he managed to win the confidence of Cuba's peasants. Castro further proclaimed that he did not fear imprisonment and, indeed, he had no need to. The jail in which he served time was quite comfortable and he spent much of his time reading.

The Castro brothers were released from jail about two years later and promptly went into exile in Mexico. There they met Che Guevara, an Argentinean doctor steeped in Marxism and radical politics. Like the Castro brothers, Guevara blamed much of the poverty in South America not on local corruption but on the United States' exploitation. While Raul Castro openly embraced Marxism, older brother Fidel Castro continued to deny that the philosophy had influenced him. That was beginning to change, but he would not admit to a communist influence until years later.

Back in Cuba, President Batista did nothing to assuage the fears of peasants. His crackdowns of those he disagreed with grew increasingly violent. Dissidents were frustrated by his close ties to the United States and a faltering economy.

Quietly, Castro began collecting money from supporters—including those in the US—to support his movement, called the 26th of July Movement. With \$20,000, he purchased a leaky boat called Granma and set sail on November 25, 1956, for Cuba. Of the 82 armed rebels who landed in Oriente, only the Castros, Guevara and a handful of others made it to Sierra Maestra after repeated attacks by Batista's troops.

The survivors set up camp and began launching attacks on small army posts, which allowed them to steal weapons. In January 1957, Castro's followers raided the La Plata post and executed the mayor, Chicho Osorio, a move that won the trust of local peasants. While some locals remained suspicious of Castro and his tactics, others joined the regime. Still more potential troops came from other areas, bringing the total up to about 200 rebels. The group was now large enough to divide into three groups to cover more ground. Each Castro led a group; the third was headed by Guevara.



**FIDEL CASTRO BROUGHT
FREE EDUCATION AND
UNIVERSAL HEALTH CARE
TO THE CITIZENS OF CUBA.
BUT THEY PAID FOR THOSE
IMPROVEMENTS WITH
FIRING SQUADS, SEPARATED
FAMILIES, ARBITRARY
IMPRISONMENT, HUMAN
RIGHTS ABUSES AND A
DISMAL ECONOMY.**

Because Cuba's media was censored, Castro turned to foreign media outlets for coverage. The image he was crafting was that of a revolutionary fighting tyranny. It's unclear, but it is also highly possible that he was misleading the media as to how many rebels had joined him.

The negative publicity and Castro's guerilla attacks were taking their toll on Batista's army. On January 1, 1959, President Batista was finally forced to flee Cuba. Castro traveled to Havana to declare victory and on January 8 assumed absolute power of Cuba. Soon after Che Guevara was given the position of Governor of the Central Bank. (Later he would serve as Minister of Industry.)



A painting of Fidel Castro in National Museum in Havana, Cuba. Photo by: gary yim / Shutterstock.com

CASTRO'S CUBA

United States President Dwight D. Eisenhower and his administration quickly welcomed the new Cuban government. Castro rebuffed the gesture and warned of “an invincible resistance to any US interference.”

Immediately after assuming control, Castro set about implementing educational programs, universal health care and rebuilding Cuba's infrastructure. Castro also promptly seized large land grants and divided them among peasants. Property owned by foreigners was taken, a move that included American writer Ernest Hemingway's house.

A campaign to remove Batista's “henchmen” began, but what exactly Castro meant by that was unclear. At times this meant Batista supporters or police officers; other times those who disagreed with Castro's policies were a target. The result was arbitrary imprisonment and executions by firing squad. Those sentenced to jail time or death were not given due process or the opportunity to plead their cases.

Che Guevara, who personally participated in at least 100 firing squads, said, “To send men to the firing squad, judicial proof is unnecessary. These procedures are an archaic bourgeois detail. This is a revolution. And a revolutionary must become a cold killing machine motivated by pure hate.”

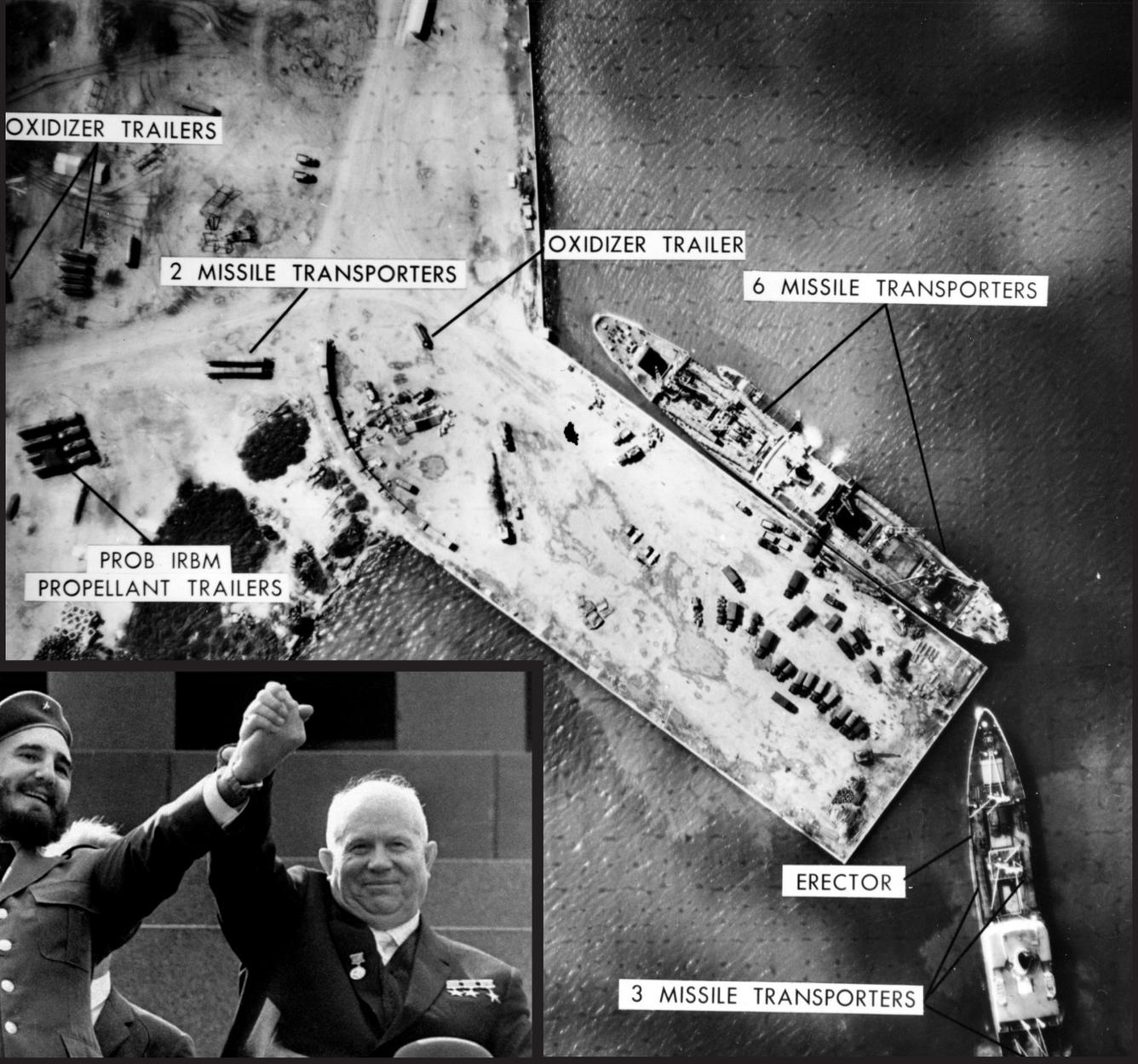
The United States grew increasingly concerned about Castro's new rule. A back and forth between Cuba and the US resulted in moves designed to hurt the other. Castro nationalized Cuba's oil refineries, then controlled by American companies Shell, Standard Oil and Esso. The US responded with an embargo against sugar and exports to Cuba, food and medicine excepted. (Another embargo in 1962 under the Kennedy administration banned nearly everything.) Finally, Castro turned to Nikita Khrushchev and aligned himself with America's adversary the USSR, which held similar Marxist-Leninist beliefs.



BAY OF PIGS

Fearing the worst, President Eisenhower began quietly working with the CIA to overthrow Fidel Castro. The plan continued under John F. Kennedy when he took office in 1961. But it shouldn't have. At least not in its current state. The misguided plot included 1400 Cuban exiles invading their homeland. On April 17, 1961, the exiles landed at the Bay of Pigs and within a few days 1200 of them were captured. Another 100 were dead. The disaster was a huge embarrassment for the United States and the new American president.

For Castro, it was an easy excuse to further paint the US in a negative light. He was now emboldened enough to approach Khrushchev about placing Soviet missiles on Cuba—just 90 miles away from Florida. The offer was tempting. Bay of Pigs led Khrushchev to believe that Kennedy was a weak president—too young and too indecisive. This only deepened when Kennedy appeared soft during the Berlin crisis of 1961, especially when the Berlin Wall was erected. He said, “I know for certain that Kennedy doesn't have a strong background, nor, generally speaking, does he have the courage to stand up to a serious challenge.”



THE CUBAN MISSILE CRISIS

By 1962, in response to the US deploying missiles in strategic areas, the USSR worried that the Americans had a “first strike” advantage should war between the two countries break out, which was a distinct possibility. Soviet missiles in Cuba would narrow that advantage.

There was a second reason. Khrushchev wanted to bring democratic West Berlin into the communist fold. He was convinced he might also bargain to remove missiles in exchange for West Berlin. “The advantage is,” Kennedy said, “from Khrushchev’s point of view, he takes a great chance but there are quite some rewards to it.

October 15, 1962: The CIA confirmed with photographic evidence that Soviet missiles were located on the island of Cuba. President Kennedy was informed the next day and from October 16-28, America entered into a tense 13 days of negotiations with the Soviet Union now known as the Cuban Missile Crisis. As the United States and USSR teetered on the brink of nuclear war, Castro continued to urge Khrushchev to not back down.

When Kennedy and Khrushchev finally reached an agreement, it was decided that the Soviets would indeed remove their missiles from Cuba. The US agreed never to invade Cuba again (unless provoked). Secretly, the US also agreed to remove missiles from Italy and Turkey. Castro was livid with the outcome. His erratic behavior during the crisis, though, was part of what helped Khrushchev decide that removing missiles from Cuba would be a good idea. Castro had disturbed not just America during the crisis, but also his ally.

THE “GOLDEN” YEARS

Removing missiles from Cuba wasn’t the end of the Soviet’s association with the island. The 1960s and 1970s were to be a “golden” era of sorts for Cuba. While Castro publicly proclaimed that capitalism was the source of the world’s ills, many of Cuba’s advances and economic strides were financed by the USSR. Health care and schooling were indeed provided. Castro led everyone to believe that Cuba was experiencing huge success, but part of his success was neutralizing those who disagreed with his policies.

Beginning in the 1960s, Castro set up labor camps called Military Units in Aid of Production, better known by the Spanish acronym UMAP. People could be placed here for any number of offenses, such as refusing to volunteer for the revolution, being gay, being a Jehovah's Witness or Seventh Day Adventist, being a "deadbeat," or refusing collectivization. Even some members of the Catholic clergy were sent to the UMAP camps. Here, internees were forced into hard labor. Beatings, malnourishment and death were commonplace. The Interamerican Commission for Human Rights of the Organization of American States estimated that 30,000 Cubans were imprisoned in UMAP camps at one point.

Castro's structure for Cuba provided health care and education but did not take long-term results into account. Despite generous financial assistance from the USSR (reports vary from \$17 to \$40 billion between 1961-1979), Cuba was unable to establish an economy that could support itself. Cut off from the rest of the world, Cuba's economy suffered. Cuban citizens continued trying to escape the country, risking their lives and willing to split up families to sail to Florida. By 1980, so many people wanted to leave that Castro allowed 150,000 people to leave. Never one to resolve a problem or change, Castro simply tightened his grip and relieved himself of dissidents—by letting them leave, by jail or by firing squad.

THE DOWNWARD SPIRAL

Castro's revolution was sputtering. Marxist revolutions, such as in Nicaragua, were crushed. In Angola, 30,000 people were jailed for refusing to fight. Cuba had aided in both fights, but the rest of the world was tiring of bloody revolutions and had little patience.

With the downfall of the Soviet Union in the 1980s, Castro was without his biggest ally and supporter. Raul Castro urged his brother to consider some reforms, but Castro's resolve only hardened. Finally, Castro was forced to allow some foreign investing in tourism but the move only received criticism. Tourists were treated to luxury accommodations, critics pointed out, while the people Castro swore to provide for continued to live dismally.

British writer and historian Hugh Thomas said of Cuba in 1984, "the emphasis on war and weapons, on the importance of fighting, borders on the psychopathic." Thomas was correct. Castro's human rights record only continued to decline. In 1994, 72 Cubans boarded a tugboat with the intention of escaping to freedom. Within minutes, the tugboat was under attack by the state. Forty-one died in the incident, including 10 children.

In 1996, Castro authorized shooting down two unarmed civilian airplanes over international waters, killing four. In 1997, Castro began restricting the movements of Cuban

citizens in Cuba. The law was enacted, the government said, to prevent overpopulation in cities like Havana. This made it nearly impossible to work in Havana if one had an address outside the city, leaving citizens without a way to get to their jobs.



THE END

On July 31, 2006, Fidel Castro handed provisional leadership over to his brother Raul. He became permanent after elected unanimously. In 2008, the younger Castro lifted some of the restrictions that his brother firmly clung to by allowing DVD players, computers and microwaves. That same year, Raul Castro announced, "The American people are our closest neighbors. We should respect each other. We have never held anything against the American people. Good relations would be mutually advantageous. Perhaps we cannot solve all of our problems, but we can solve a good many of them."

Cuba and the United States officially resumed diplomatic relations in 2015. In March 2016, President Obama traveled to Cuba to meet with Raul Castro—the first time a sitting United States president had visited Cuba in 88 years.

Now with Fidel Castro gone and Raul Castro at 85 years of age, it is unclear who will preside over the island nation next. Cuba's future can take many turns. The ghost of Fidel Castro is sure to cast a long shadow.

Castro, the man who was so confident that "history will absolve me," now belongs to the history books. It remains to be seen how history will view Fidel Castro, but President Obama's statement is probably closer to the truth than Castro's: "History will record and judge..." Fidel Castro. ●