

President Castro's Council of Ministers, 1961

History of the Current Situation

Cuba joined the United Nations on October 24, 1945 with its first elected President under the new 1940 Constitution, Fulgencio Batista. Batista was not elected for another term in 1944 so he left Cuba and moved to Florida. Corruption ran rampant in Cuba for years following his exile, so Batista returned to Cuba to run for President in 1952. He only came third in the election polls, so on March 10, 1952, Batista seized control of the government in a coup d'état, taking by force what he was denied by the voters.

Seeking to win the favor of the Cuban upper classes, President Batista tried to amass as much of a fortune as he could. President Batista opened the city of Havana to large scale gambling, along with announcing that Cuba would match, dollar for dollar, any hotel investment over \$1 million, which would include a casino license.¹ This attracted not only American tourists, but American criminals, and in particular, the mafia. The gambling operation was run by Meyer Lansky, a famous mobster. Drugs, corruption, and American investments flowed through Cuba. The Italian and Jewish mafias in particular held huge amounts of influence in Cuba, and under President Batista were left unchecked in their crimes, as they could do whatever they wanted in Cuba.² The gap between rich and poor widened in Cuba, and there was an increase in uprisings against President Batista and his policies. Yet, the United States supported President Batista because of business investments. President Batista installed an anti-communist secret police, and began, "silencing" his opposition through intimidation, murder, and media censorship. It is estimated that there were between 10,000 to 20,000 Cubans murdered under the Batista regime with financial and military support from the Washington.



Revolution in Cuba

Amongst those who disapproved of President Batista's seizure of power in 1952 was a young lawyer and activist named Fidel Castro. Castro petitioned the Cuban courts to overthrow President Batista due to alleged tyranny and corruption. This was unsuccessful, leaving Castro to resort to an armed revolution. Joined by around seventy other men, the first attack was to be against the Moncada Barracks in Santiago, becoming known as the July 26 Movement. The revolutionaries were swiftly

¹ "Fulgencio Batista (1901-1973)." *Public Broadcasting Service* www.pbs.org/wgbh/americanexperience/features/castro-fulgencio-batista-1901-1973/.

² "Cuba Pre-1959: The Rise and Fall of a U.S. Backed Dictator with Links to the Mob." *Global Research*, www.globalresearch.ca/cuba-pre-1959-the-rise-and-fall-of-a-u-s-backed-dictator-with-links-to-the-mob/5464738.

defeated by President Batista's forces and they sought refuge in the mountains. Many of these revolutionaries were captured soon after. Fidel Castro and his brother Raúl were imprisoned but then released in a political amnesty in 1955, and they went to Mexico to continue their campaign against the Batista regime. Around eighty men, including the Castro brothers and Che Guevara, departed Mexico for Cuba on the yacht *Granma* on November 25, 1956. They landed in Cuba and began making their way through the Sierra Maestra mountains, only to be met by President Batista's forces. Within several days, most of those who were aboard the *Granma* were killed, leaving less than twenty surviving revolutionaries. In response, Castro and his men waged guerilla war on President Batista's forces. Severing months later, the United States began giving minimal funding to the July 26 Movement in an effort to invoke sympathies to the United States if they succeeded in overthrowing President Batista.



Facing a popular insurgency and calls to end their influence, the United States ended its support of President Batista, stopped supplying him with arms, and placed a trade embargo on Cuba in 1958. On January 1st, 1959, Cuban forces entered Havana with no resistance from President Batista's defeated forces. Fidel Castro himself entered Havana several days later on January 8th, 1959 with a victory march. President Batista had fled to Spain. This was the start of a new chapter for Cuba, but for the United States, it was the beginning of a political and economic conflict against the Cuban government. Castro was immensely popular with the Cuban people due to his calls to end corruption and brutality in the Cuban government. Castro also claimed to be restoring the 1940 constitution and returning power to the Cuban people. Castro, however, alarmed the United State because he was anti-American and had very radical rhetoric.³

Cuba under Prime Minister Fidel Castro

When Fidel Castro was instated as Cuba's leader, he began to pursue new radical policies. Cuba's private commerce and industry were nationalized, sweeping land reforms were instituted, and American businesses and agricultural estates were expropriated. The United States, fearing the start of a communist state, began to sever relations with Cuba. In the early 1960s President Eisenhower authorized the CIA to recruit 1,400 Cuban exiles living in Miami, Florida and begin training them to overthrow Prime Minister Castro.⁴ Under the Castro administration, the government abolished legal discrimination, brought electricity to the countryside, provided for full employment and advanced education and health care.⁵ Yet Prime Minister Castro also closed down opposition newspapers, jailed

³ "Fidel Castro." *Encyclopedia Britannica*. www.britannica.com/biography/Fidel-Castro.

⁴ "Bay of Pigs Invasion." *History.com*. www.history.com/topics/cold-war/bay-of-pigs-invasion.

⁵ "Fidel Castro." *History.com*. www.history.com/topics/cold-war/fidel-castro.

thousands of political opponents and made no move towards democratic elections. Furthermore, Prime Minister Castro limited the amount of land a person could own and began abolishing private business. With political and economic options so limited, hundreds of thousands of Cubans, including professionals and technicians, left Cuba, many traveling to the United States. In 1961, the United States severed all diplomatic relations with Cuba and implemented a trade embargo.

The Breakdown of U.S. Relations

Since the Cuban Revolution, the United States has been very suspicious and nervous of the Castro Government. The vast amount of investments made by American businesses and Mobsters put pressure on the U.S. government to support Batista despite his authoritarian cruelty. Chief among the American concerns for Cuba included: President Batista, business, and the Cold War.

President Batista

The United States, during the course of the Cold War, supported many authoritarian rulers that were anti-communist, such as the Shah in Iran. The police actions implemented by President Batista to root out communists were brutal but got support from some U.S. officials. Given that President Batista did not have communist sympathies, Cuba was able to be co-opted into the United States' sphere of influence. President Batista's friendly and open relations with the United States solidified the support for Batista, and the lack of support thereof for Fidel Castro in the United States.



Business

Many Americans traveled to Cuba, not just for vacation, but business as well. In the 1950s, between 200,000 and 250,000 American tourists visited Cuba annually. Mobsters, as explained above, had nearly unlimited power in Cuba. They trafficked drugs, arms, and other illegal products. Most astonishingly was the amount of investments and enterprises owned by Americans in Cuba. Industries such as rice, wheat, and many other products were not privately owned by many Cubans, but American businesses. After Castro came to power, he nationalized many businesses in Cuba. Not only was this one more step towards a communist state, but this angered many businessmen in America. Through lobbying and other persuasive actions, U.S. officials encouraged President Kennedy to intervene in Cuba to protect the interests of capitalism and business.

The Cold War

The 1950s era of the United States was one of fear, mistrust, and confusion. The Red Scare was in full bloom, with the witch-trail hunts for communists under Senator McCarthy and the beginnings of the arms race between the U.S. and U.S.S.R. created an atmosphere in which everyone was suspect, and everyone was scared. After the implementation of the Truman Doctrine which established that the

United States would provide political, military and economic assistance to all democratic nations under threat from external or internal authoritarian forces; the divide between the once allies was clear.⁶ The United States would stop at nothing to contain and prevent the spread of communism. Supporting Batista was one of these ends. When Castro came to power the U.S. was very nervous as to his policies and his vision for Cuba. Cuba was still a capitalist state but under Castro there was much nationalization of business and increasingly brutal tactics implemented to deal with opposition. The United States feared that Prime Minister Castro would make Cuba into a communist country. American fears were ignited in May of 1960 when Prime Minister Castro established diplomatic relations with the U.S.S.R., and the United States responded by prohibiting the importation of Cuban sugar, a major export. The U.S.S.R., however, started to buy the Cuban sugar, further strengthening their relations.

Relations with the U.S.S.R.

Prime Minister Castro's courtship of the Soviet Union began very shortly after he seized power with a state visit by Soviet Vice Premier Anastas Mikoyan. As Prime Minister Castro took on the United States, he knew he needed Soviet protection in order to survive. The Soviets couldn't pass up on an opportunity to gain an ally in the western hemisphere, and it was especially sweet to have an ally so close to their greatest threat, ninety miles from the United States. At the end of Mikoyan's visit, the Soviets agreed to buy Cuban sugar in exchange for Soviet oil. The United States asked U.S. companies in Cuba not to refine the Soviet crude oil. Castro's trust in the U.S.S.R. came partially out of fear of an American attack, as he believed that only the protective umbrella of the Soviet Union could defend him against possible United States pressures or attack. It was a very, enemy of my enemy is my friend, type of situation.



Ideologically, Fidel Castro was far from being a Marxist. Although strongly influenced by fascist ideas while he was high school student and by Marxist ideas while he attended the University of Havana, Castro embraced none of these ideologies perfectly and was more moderate in his approach to authoritarianism and control. While he did nationalize many industries, Prime Minister Castro was no pure-blooded communist, and this separated him from the U.S.S.R. who were more about control and expansion. Conversely, Prime Minister Castro was more so interested in staving off foreign influence while controlling Cuba. This would change, however, as increasingly sour relations with the United States increasingly radicalized Prime Minister Castro and his peers. Prime Minister Castro shows an increasing interest in a partnership with the Soviets.⁷

The Cuban People

⁶ "The Truman Doctrine, 1947." *United States Department of State*. <https://history.state.gov/milestones/1945-1952/truman-doctrine>.

⁷ "Castro and the Cold War." *Public Broadcasting Service*. www.pbs.org/wgbh/americanexperience/features/comandante-cold-war/.

Prime Minister Castro focused largely on medical and educational reforms that made him popular with the lower classes whom were spurred by former President Batista. Prime Minister Castro has supported many anti-imperialist and nationalistic groups that keep up the image of him as a breaker of chains who restored the Cuban people to power and will help others abroad fight their oppressors. Yet, Prime Minister Castro is ruthless and has detained and “silenced” those who speak out against him. There do exist rebel groups and small bands of fighters seeking to one day oust Prime Minister Castro, but such groups are often squashed, and their villages and towns burned to the ground. Many do not speak out against Prime Minister Castro for fear of sharing this very fate. Many Cubans have chosen to flee to Florida and seek American asylum. Prime Minister Castro does have his supporters, including his strongest that serve on his Council of Ministers. Those in Cuba who suffered greatly under President Batista prefer the Castro administration as least they don’t work for or support foreigners, spurring a new sense of Cuban nationalism.

The Cuban Military

Prime Minister Castro won his revolution with a large band of freedom fighters, not a well-organized army. What little machinery remained after the fighting was not useful for any long-standing conflict. There were tanks and small military vehicles, but the Cuban air force consisted of only a small handful of jets and the only handheld weapons Cuba had were machine guns, pistols and other small weapons⁸. supplied by the U.S.S.R. Many soldiers are familiar with guerilla warfare, but not open battles. Cuba lacked many resources to create a large military institution, but it was fiercely loyal and had high morale after the Cuban Revolution. Currently, the only role for the military is to



suppress any rebels or critics of Prime Minister Castro.

⁸ “Military.” *Cuba - Soviet Relations*, www.globalsecurity.org/military/world/cuba/forrel-su.htm.