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# Fidel Castro's Road to Power, 1952–1959



Fidel Castro's successful insurrection against Cuban dictator Fulgencio Batista made Castro and his bearded followers heroes to millions of Latin Americans and inspired scores of attempts to replicate their feat. Especially during the nearly nine years between Fidel's triumph and Che Guevara's death in Bolivia, rural guerrilla warfare was widely embraced as a means of toppling governments throughout Latin America. Fidel's coming to power engendered a mystique about guerrilla warfare, and Che's writings provided both inspiration and practical advice that made rural guerrilla warfare a popular undertaking. Thus the method of insurrection to which Fidel Castro attributed his victory was, in itself, a major reason for the influence of Cuba in Latin American politics after 1958.



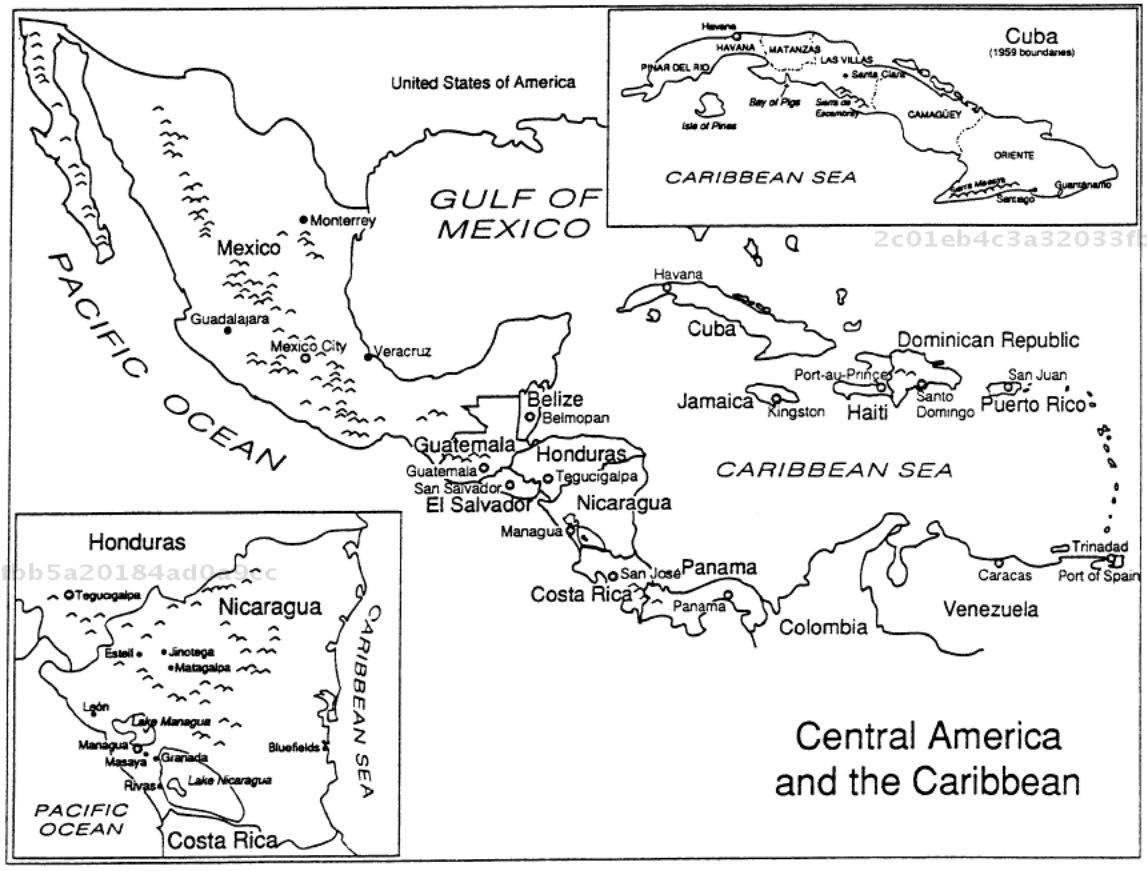
Castro's road to power, an unlikely odyssey filled with heroism, suffering, and improbable successes, was not the first time that a popular movement had overthrown an entrenched military dictatorship in Latin America. Such occurrences, in fact, were not uncommon in the region's political history. Yet Fidel's victory was different in that it ushered in the hemisphere's most radical revolution in Cuba and became a model for emulation by would-be revolutionaries throughout Latin America. This chapter examines the background to the overthrow of Batista and the armed struggle against his dictatorship to illuminate both the subsequent revolution in Cuba and the impact of the Cuban model of insurrection upon the rest of Latin America.

## BACKGROUND TO REVOLUTION: THE CONDITION OF CUBA

Most observers of Latin America were shocked that the most radical revolution in the Western Hemisphere should have taken place in Cuba. By most of the standard indicators, Cuba was near the upper end of the scale in development and modernization. In per capita gross national product, Cuba in the 1950s was fourth in Latin America; its literacy rate was within the top quarter. Cuba ranked third in medical doctors and hospital beds per capita, and it had Latin America's lowest infant mortality rate. Union membership was among the strongest in Latin America—approximately half the labor force—and Cuba ranked second in the proportion of the working population covered by social security. In two indices of consumerism, television sets and radios per capita, Cuba ranked first and second, respectively. While not particularly dynamic, Cuba's economy in the 1950s was relatively strong and was continuing a long trend of diversification. Finally, Cuba's government had the strong and explicit backing of the U.S. government and business sector. By the conventional wisdom that backwardness and poverty breed revolution, then, many Latin American countries seemed more susceptible than Cuba to radical change.

The post-1958 boom in Cuban studies yielded volumes on the question, Why Cuba? Researchers probed Cuban history and reexamined the island's economy, society, and political system to bare the roots of Castro's revolution. The picture that took shape was not a rosy one, but neither did it appear to have presaged a successful popular insurrection and a radical revolution. The elements that made Castro's revolution possible, not inevitable—the conditions that he was able to exploit in building the anti-Batista movement and, once in power, in conducting a sweeping revolution—can be set forth in four broad categories: strong and pervasive anti-U.S. sentiment; the deleterious effects of excessive dependence on sugar culture; fragmentation of Cuban society; and the disrepute in which Cuba's political system and institutions were held.

The endemic anti-Americanism that Fidel Castro was able to draw upon to build support for his anti-Batista crusade and later his revolution had its roots in the United States' historic and continuing dominance of Cuba. Beginning early in the nineteenth century, while Cuba was still a colony of Spain, expansionists looked to the island as a potential new state. This prospect was especially attractive to Southerners, who recognized the potential compatibility of another slave society. While internal U.S. politics worked to check the expansionists, American businessmen invested heavily in Spanish Cuba in the closing decades of the nineteenth century. With a growing geopolitical interest in the Caribbean and substantial investments to protect, the United States watched



closely when the second Cuban independence war broke out in 1895. When the sinking of the *Maine* in Havana harbor generated support for intervention, U.S. troops entered the fray in 1898 and easily defeated the Spanish, assuring the victory of the independence forces.

Cubans quickly learned the truth of what many had feared: Independence from Spain did not mean an independent Cuban nation. Although pledged to granting Cuba independence, the United States, entering a phase of expansionism in the Caribbean, could not resist conditioning the withdrawal of its troops on Cuba's adoption of a constitutional provision making the island a protectorate. The Platt Amendment denied Cuba the essence of nationhood—sovereignty—by granting the U.S. government "the right to intervene for the preservation of Cuban independence [and] the maintenance of a government adequate for the protection of life, property, and individual liberty."[1] These and other restrictions written into the 1901 Cuban constitution were a bitter pill for those patriots who had fought two wars for genuine independence. A result of American tutelage during the three-plus decades of the "Platt Amendment Republic," wrote Cuban intellectual Jorge Mañach, was "general civic indolence, a tepid indifference to national dangers."[2]

The United States exercised its right of military intervention by reoccupying the island between 1906 and 1909 and landing troops in 1912 and 1917. Equally debilitating to the development of an independent Cuba were the many instances of overt political intervention supported by the implicit or explicit threat of military action. General Enoch Crowder usurped most of the powers of President Alfredo Zayas (1921–1925), choosing his cabinet and ordering fiscal reforms that left U.S. banks in a dominant position. Perhaps the most significant political intervention was that of 1933, when ambassador-at-large Sumner Welles refused diplomatic recognition to the reform-oriented government of Ramón Grau San Martín which was installed following the overthrow of long-term dictator Gerardo Machado. Facing U.S. opposition, the fledgling government was unable to consolidate its power and was quickly replaced by the more conservative and subservient military regime of Fulgencio Batista. Many Cubans look back to 1933 as a critical turning point—a lost opportunity to address Cuba's mounting economic, social, and political problems while moderate solutions were still possible.

U.S. control over Cuba changed complexion but not substance after 1934, when Franklin D. Roosevelt agreed to the abrogation of the Platt Amendment as part of his Good Neighbor Policy toward Latin America. The United States honored its renunciation of military intervention, but, as before, American economic and geopolitical interests dictated constant oversight and close political control over the island. By 1927 American direct investment in Cuba had ballooned to over a billion dollars, the

largest amount invested in any Latin American country, and American capital dominated the major sectors of the economy, including sugar, transportation, banking, and utilities. U.S. investment declined subsequently through the 1940s, reaching the billion-dollar level again in the late 1950s; as the U.S. presence shrank, Cubans gained the dominant position in sugar and banking, while the later influx of American capital went into newer sectors such as mining, petroleum, manufacturing, and tourism.

Cuba's dependence on the U.S. market, on the other hand, remained strong. While the proportion of Cuba's sugar going to the United States fell from some 80 percent in the 1920s to less than 55 percent in the 1950s, Cuba still placed approximately two-thirds of all its exports in the traditional American market. In the 1930s sugar imports were put on a quota basis, subject to annual congressional review and approval. This economic control with its accompanying leverage over Cuban politics kept Cuba in a dependent position long after the Platt Amendment disappeared. The pervasive U.S. economic presence combined with the highly visible political constraints on Cuba's freedom of action continued to engender resentment of U.S. power over the island.

In addition to making Cuba economically subservient to the United States, the heavy reliance on sugar cultivation and export posed both economic and social problems for Cuba. As a primary commodity, sugar was and is subject to the vagaries of climate and the world market. Sugar constituted approximately 85 percent of Cuba's export earnings in the 1950s and over a third of its gross national product; thus even minor price fluctuations had far-reaching effects on the sugar labor force and on the island's economic stability. Tariff agreements and quotas giving Cuban sugar preferential treatment in the American market, moreover, were based on reciprocity. The favored status of U.S. manufactured goods in the Cuban market limited the possibilities for Cuba's economic diversification and development.

Reliance on sugar had important social ramifications as well. As sugar planting expanded through the 1920s, sugar came to dominate the prime agricultural lands, pushing out peasant farmers and creating a huge rural proletariat which in the 1950s numbered some 600,000. These landless rural workers outnumbered the poor peasant farmers by more than three to one and constituted nearly a third of the country's labor force. The majority of the rural proletariat worked the cycle imposed by cane cultivation and harvesting, finding regular employment only four or five months per year. Government road maintenance and public works jobs, scheduled during the dead seasons, ameliorated conditions for some but did not substantially alter the poverty and chronic underemployment that prevailed in rural Cuba. The sugar proletariat had demonstrated its potential for radical action during the 1933 upris-

ing when workers seized sugar mills and established soviet councils in several parts of the island.

Along with the social cleavages typified by the contrast between wealthy sugar planters and their proletariat, two other pronounced divisions impaired the cohesiveness of Cuban society. To sustain the institution of slavery which it preserved until 1886, Spanish Cuba imported large numbers of Africans through 1850. The result was a racially divided population which, despite steady Spanish immigration over the next century, was still officially 27 percent black or mulatto in the 1950s. The descendants of slaves suffered economic and social discrimination in various forms, including some formal segregation patterned after the U.S. South. Although the racial division was mitigated somewhat by easier social relations than those found in the United States, it occasionally broke into the open as it had in the 1912 ''Race War of Oriente.''

Another notable fissure in Cuban society was the widely perceived generation gap. Each ''generation'' of Cuban youth in the twentieth century tended to deprecate the failed efforts of the preceding generation to rectify Cuba's problems. Thus the generation of 1930 blamed that of 1895 for failing to win true independence; and Fidel's generation, that of 1953, blamed the 1930 group for the failure to consolidate reform. The wholesale dismissal of the efforts and values of preceding groups of national leaders left young Cubans with few models and traditions, predisposing them to radical and bold approaches to solving Cuba's national problems.

Rounding out the ''condition of Cuba'' was the widespread disenchantment with Cuba's politicians and its public institutions. From its inception, Cuban government had been too weak and too subject to foreign manipulation to command the respect of its citizens. Added to the anti-national, *vendepatria* (selling out of the homeland) reputation of leaders, parties, and government were the open, massive corruption and the partisan violence that pervaded even the progressive Auténtico Party administrations of Ramón Grau San Martín (1944–1948) and Carlos Prío Socarrás (1948–1952). Nonetheless, many still entertained the hope that better government could be achieved through elections until Fulgencio Batista's 1952 coup d'état.

Batista overthrew the elected Prío Socarrás government in March 1952, two months prior to scheduled national elections. Batista was a well-known and widely disliked figure in Cuban politics. As a sergeant, he had led the 1933 revolt that put the reformist government of Grau San Martín in power; four months later, with strong U.S. backing, he engineered the overthrow of Grau. As leader of the military, Batista had exercised considerable influence over the governments of the 1930s and had served a presidential term from 1940 to 1944. Although his administration proved more progressive than most observers expected, Batista

never escaped his identity as the United States' instrument for thwarting reform in 1933–1934.

As Cuba was not experiencing economic or political crisis in 1952, Batista's seizure of power was commonly viewed as an act of naked self-interest. As a result, Batista's government was widely resented and resisted from its inception, and the dictator was unable to consolidate his regime and govern with any degree of normalcy. In order to retain power, he instituted a regime of repression characterized by states of siege, censorship, closings of universities, arbitrary arrests, and selective assassinations—all of which broadened the opposition. Batista periodically lifted the censorship, reopened universities, and freed political prisoners as conciliatory gestures, but despite these overtures, the opposition to his regime steadily expanded during his nearly seven years in office. Batista's dictatorship, then, left Cuba's political institutions in disarray and completed the erosion of the political system's legitimacy.



U.S. domination of Cuba, subjugation to a vulnerable sugar economy, strong cleavages in the social fabric, and the absence of legitimacy that characterized Cuba's political system gave Fidel Castro and other Batista opponents ample material with which to build a mass following. The poor, the dark, the nationalists, the disenchanted—among them, the majority of the Cuban population—were attracted by talk of change and improvements in their lives. Invoking nationalistic slogans and promising economic diversification, social justice, and full implementation of the progressive 1940 constitution, Castro and his counterparts found legions of willing followers and sympathizers. The generalized absence of allegiance to the government and its institutions further opened Cuba to radical change.



## FIDEL CASTRO: FROM THE MONCADA BARRACKS TO THE SIERRA MAESTRA

From the outset of his dictatorship, Batista faced an active and diverse opposition. The major progressive political parties, the leftist Ortodoxos and the more moderate Auténticos, followed a variety of approaches to ridding Cuba of Batista. The Ortodoxos quickly organized underground cells and mounted a campaign of propaganda, street demonstrations, strikes, and sabotage, while some of the Auténticos initially opted for participating in politics under Batista's rules but soon adopted a more militant stance. The Revolutionary Directorate (Directorio Revolucionario, DR), founded in 1955 by the University of Havana student federation, was a radical group that used both civil protest and armed struggle against the dictator. In addition, disaffected military officers attempted coups against Batista, exile groups mounted armed invasions, labor un-

ions struck, and resistance groups burned cane fields from time to time.

One of the early opposition leaders was Fidel Castro, a lawyer in his mid-twenties who had been an Ortodoxo candidate for a congressional seat in the aborted election. Castro was the son of a moderately wealthy sugar planter in Oriente province. He attended Jesuit schools, obtained a law degree from the University of Havana, and had extensive experience in university politics. Castro was one of the most active Ortodoxos, organizing cells and publishing an underground paper called *El Acusador*.

Castro first achieved prominence as a result of his attack on the Moncada Barracks on July 26, 1953, the date for which Castro would name his own movement after breaking with the Ortodoxos. This formative event continues to be central to the lore of the Cuban Revolution and provides the occasion for Castro's major annual speech. With some 165 followers, he set out to attack the 1,000 troops staffing Cuba's second largest army base in the eastern city of Santiago. The maximalist notion, typical of Castro's approach to taking power and carrying out revolution, was that a successful attack would produce such shock waves as to ignite popular insurrection and bring down the regime.

Predictably, Castro's approach failed, leaving half his followers dead and most of the survivors captured. Typical also of Fidel was the bungling of some basic preparations. He later admitted: ''Due to a most unfortunate error, half of our forces, and the better armed half at that, went astray at the entrance to the city and were not on hand to help us at the decisive moment.''[3] Defending himself in a military court-martial, Fidel presented a historical analysis of Cuba's ills and argued eloquently the duty of patriotic Cubans to take up arms against Batista. While he failed to persuade the military judges, who sentenced him to 15 years on the Isle of Pines, his arguments appeared in a clandestinely circulated pamphlet, *History Will Absolve Me*, which disseminated Castro's name and message throughout the republic.[4]

The story of Fidel Castro might have ended with his imprisonment had it not been for a general amnesty declared by Batista in May 1955 in an attempt to court the support of moderates. Castro immediately left Cuba for Mexico where, with his indefatigable energy and indomitable will, he raised funds, recruited fighters, and engaged in military training in preparation for another assault on Batista. Meanwhile in Cuba, Castro's followers organized and developed his new 26th of July Movement (Movimiento 26 de Julio, M-26-7), absorbing much of the Ortodoxo Party membership and developing cells nationwide. Before embarking on the second phase of his fight against Batista, Fidel developed relations with the major anti-Batista forces and signed the Mexico City Pact of September 1956 with the DR, agreeing to coordinate efforts, reject all compromise with Batista, and, after victory, establish a government based on a

nineteen-point program. And Castro announced that he would return to liberate Cuba before the end of 1956.

The plan of attack, developed in coordination with M-26-7 operatives in Cuba, was another maximalist attempt to defeat Batista by shock—to accomplish a seemingly impossible feat, expose the regime's weakness, and provoke a generalized uprising against the dictator. The target, even less plausible than the Moncada Barracks, was the entire city of Santiago, Cuba's second largest, which would be captured by a combination of marine assault from Mexico and a simultaneous uprising within the city on November 30. This time Fidel planned for the eventuality of defeat. He engaged Colonel Alberto Bayo, a republican veteran of the Spanish Civil War, to instruct his men in military skills and tactics that might enable survivors to continue the fight in the Sierra Maestra outside of Santiago. This precaution would serve Fidel well.



As in the Moncada case, the attack on Santiago was plagued by mistakes and miscalculations. The launch *Granma* departed from the Mexican port of Tuxpan on November 25 in a storm, an inauspicious start that the young Argentine medical doctor Ernesto ''Che'' Guevara recorded:

> We began a frenzied search for the anti-seasickness pills, which we did not find. We sang the Cuban national anthem and the ''Hymn of the 26th of July'' for perhaps five minutes and then the entire boat took on an aspect both ridiculous and tragic: men with anguished faces holding their stomachs, some with their heads in buckets, others lying in the strangest positions, immobile.[5]

Arriving two days late, Castro's 82 men landed in the wrong spot and after three days of wandering were discovered by army units. Had they arrived on the appointed day, their presence might have secured the victory of the urban insurgents who took control of Santiago for a few hours. Fifteen of Castro's contingent from the *Granma* were soon able to regroup and make their way into the Sierra Maestra; the rest were dispersed, captured, or killed.[6]



In the aftermath of his second defeat, the ever-ebullient Fidel, with his brother Raúl, Che Guevara, and the others, had to choose between abandoning the fight and falling back to a strategy that was clearly not the preferred one. Out of desperation rather than choice, then, was born the rural guerrilla war. The story of the Sierra Maestra is one of heroism, courage, and fanatical dedication to a cause and a method of struggle. The *barbudos*, or bearded ones, emerge from the accounts of their ordeal as larger-than-life characters. Fraught with incredible hardships, laced with tragedy and near-catastrophe, punctuated by dramatic turning points, and set against overwhelming odds, the odyssey of Fidel's seizure of power is a romantic episode that spawned legends and lent itself to the creation of powerful myths.

During 1957 and the first months of 1958, the cities continued to be the main theater of the war between Batista and the opposition. This offered Castro the great advantage of being virtually neglected while the government's security forces concentrated on beating back the urban-centered opposition. Batista's initial public response to Castro was to claim that he had been killed along with the other invaders from Mexico and to deny the existence of armed rebels in the mountains. His military response was to try to isolate Castro in the Sierra Maestra, where presumably he could do no harm, and to prevent reinforcements of men and supplies from reaching the guerrillas. Thus Batista's commanders strengthened military outposts on the perimeter of the Sierra Maestra, sent additional patrols into the mountains, and carried out sporadic aerial bombing, but did not mount large-scale offensive operations against the rebels.

Thus, left in relative peace, Castro's *foco*, or guerrilla band, evolved in seventeen months, from the humblest of beginnings with fifteen defeated men seeking refuge in the mountains, into a force capable of turning back the best offensive that Batista could mount against it. In the first days after the disastrous landing, the rag-tag band aspired to little more than day-by-day survival. Che described the early period in the Sierra Maestra as follows: ''In that period it was very difficult to enlarge our army; a few men came, but others left; the physical conditions of the struggle were very hard, but the spiritual conditions were even more so, and we lived with the feeling of being continually under siege.''[7] The immediate needs were sustenance and safety from army patrols. Both were obtained through the passive or active cooperation of the scattered peasantry of the Sierra Maestra, some of whom had been recruited in advance by M-26-7 operatives from Santiago. This peasant support, combined with the army's strategy of cordoning off the entire mountainous zone to contain the guerrillas, gave Castro's group the ability to scout the terrain and establish ever-expanding networks of trusted peasants. Free from concerted government pressure, the guerrillas were gradually able to establish a ''liberated zone''—an area in which they could operate with relative security from army attack—in the Sierra Maestra.

The guerrilla band was still tiny and virtually untested when *New York Times* senior editor Herbert Matthews introduced it to the world in February 1957. Desperately seeking the publicity that Batista's censorship denied him, Castro arranged for Matthews to cross army lines into the *sierra* and be taken to the rebel camp for an extensive interview and a look at the guerrilla operation. Fidel knew how to take advantage of such a providential opportunity. Although having only eighteen men at the time, he later admitted that he told Matthews his troops operated in ''groups of ten to forty'' and claimed that rebel victories had lowered army morale. Deeply impressed, the veteran correspondent wrote that

Castro "has mastery of the Sierra Maestra" and opined that "General Batista cannot possibly hope to suppress the Castro revolt."[8] Matthews' story appeared in the *Times* on February 24. Owing to a temporary lifting of press censorship, even Cubans were able to read about Castro for the first time.

The Matthews interview disproved Batista's claim that Fidel and his followers had been wiped out. The publicity helped recruiting, and the force grew substantially. At the time of its second military victory—an attack on a 53-man garrison at El Uvero on May 28, 1957—the guerrilla band boasted approximately 100 men. El Uvero, according to Che, was "the victory which marked our coming of age."[9]

The strategy at this stage was not to conquer and hold additional territory, but to engage the enemy in carefully prepared ambushes at the perimeter of the liberated zone, inflict casualties, and retreat to safety before reinforcements or air power could arrive. It was critical for the guerrillas to choose the engagements, avoiding confrontations with superior forces which could defeat them. The goals of this phase were to cause increasing numbers of troops to be committed to the perimeter of the Sierra Maestra and to score enough small victories to establish military credibility and demoralize the army. Following several months of successful small-scale offensive operations, Fidel took a major step in March 1958 by sending a column under the command of his brother Raúl to establish a second front in the mountains of northern Oriente province.



## CASTRO AND HIS COMPETITION

After retreating to the Sierra Maestra, Castro was still only one of several leaders competing for the prize of defeating the dictator and shaping post-Batista Cuba according to their own views. While Fidel worked to establish secure perimeters and cultivate peasant support, the urban resistance intensified its efforts during 1957. On March 13, DR carried out a bold strike on the presidential palace in an attempt to assassinate Batista; the attackers fought their way to Batista's third-floor headquarters, where the dictator narrowly escaped. The DR paid dearly for its failure; its founder, José Antonio Echevarría, was killed in the attack and the police quickly wiped out most of the remaining leadership. A second major action was a spontaneous uprising sparked by the July 30 police assassination in Santiago of popular M-26-7 leader Frank País, a potential rival of Castro for the movement's leadership. This uprising became a general strike that spread throughout the country, supported by all anti-Batista groups and the populace at large, but it fizzled after a week or two. On September 5, a naval revolt broke out in Cienfuegos, but it collapsed after a coordinated uprising in Havana was called off.

The success of any one of these 1957 actions might have preempted Castro's drive for power, but their failure smoothed his path. In response to these 1957 uprisings, Batista increased the repression on the urban underground and purged the military, severely weakening Castro's competition within the armed resistance. In fact, Batista's success in the cities drove several groups to emulate Castro and take up the struggle in what appeared to be a less dangerous setting. Beginning in mid-1957, the DR, the Auténticos, the Ortodoxos, and an independent group set up guerrilla operations in the Escambray Mountains of central Cuba.

Batista's success against the urban resistance was not achieved without cost, however. States of siege, mass arrests, and murders alienated growing segments of the population, broadening the nonarmed opposition to include moderate to conservative political and business leaders. The Auténticos stepped up their nonviolent activities, and by early 1958 the Catholic church hierarchy called for mediation of the conflict. Meanwhile, the country's major economic interest associations called for Batista's resignation. In February 1958 the Popular Socialist Party (Partido Socialista Popular, PSP, the Cuban communists) declared against Batista. The PSP had remained on the sidelines of the anti-Batista struggle owing to an arrangement by which the party enjoyed legal status and a central role in the labor movement in exchange for its tacit support of the dictator.[10] The PSP earlier had denounced Castro as a ''bourgeois adventurer,'' but the crumbling of Batista's support made the party's position untenable.

The beginnings of the unraveling of Batista's regime elicited serious concern in the United States. Sensing that Batista was no longer viable, the Eisenhower administration began seeking alternatives to him and early in 1958 embargoed arms for his army as a means of pressuring him to cooperate. As Fidel recognized, the United States was the final arbiter of Cuban politics: Regardless of the relative strengths or popularity of the opposition leaders, the leader or coalition that secured U.S. backing was likely to prevail in the rivalry to succeed Batista. With a range of safe, moderate contenders from whom to choose, Washington would certainly not tap the unpredictable and mercurial Castro to be its man in Havana. But the rivalries among parties and factions and Batista's refusal to resign prevented Washington and the Cuban elites from arranging a succession on their terms and made Batista's removal a military rather than a political matter.

Castro's final competititon for the prize of succeeding Batista came from within his own M-26-7. The power struggle between Fidel and the National Directorate, the formal governing body of M-26-7 which had been set up during Fidel's exile to run and expand the movement, soon came to be known by those involved as the *sierra* versus the *llanos*, or plains. It pitted Fidel and his tightly knit group of guerrillas versus the

movement's formal leadership based in the cities, primarily Santiago and Havana.

The struggle within M-26-7 is important because it casts light on the role of the rural guerrilla within the anti-Batista movement as well as on Fidel Castro. The major accounts of the 1957–1958 period are written from one vantage point or the other. Che's *Reminiscences of the Cuban Revolutionary War* quite naturally reflects the attitudes of Castro and the barbudos. Carlos Franqui's *Diary of the Cuban Revolution*, published much later, offers the perspective of the urban M-26-7 underground.[11] Despite differing interpretations, both sides agree on the issues that drove a deep wedge between the majority urban wing and the small guerrilla cadre of the movement.

At one level, the differences involved the strategy and tactics of the fight against Batista. Although M-26-7 had begun in the cities and although guerrilla warfare was clearly a fallback position for Fidel, Castro began to feel after a few months in the sierra that the guerrilla method was the correct approach, and he began to deprecate the efforts of his collaborators in the llanos. Fidel's attitude of guerrilla superiority was not without merit. Increasingly, urban efforts at propaganda, agitation, strikes, sabotage, and insurrection appeared insufficient to dislodge the dictator. The urban M-26-7 suffered a succession of defeats, losing their underground leader with the assassination of Frank País in July 1957; other important leaders, including Armando Hart, Carlos Franqui, and Javier Pazos, were constantly harassed by police and thus limited in their ability to function. Once on the defensive, the underground delivered far less in arms and recruits to the sierra than Fidel deemed adequate—a charge contested by the urban leaders. The failure of an April 1958 general strike in Havana, which Fidel had hoped would be the fatal blow to Batista, heightened Castro's disillusionment with the urban leadership.



Contrasted with the disappointing performance of the urban cadres, the record of the guerrillas appeared strong. They had gone in a year from defeat to having a secure liberated zone, some offensive capability, and by February 1958, the ability to broadcast to the country over Radio Rebelde. The guerrilla struggle thus appeared more successful than the campaign in the llano, especially if one overlooked the fact that Batista had focused on pounding the urban underground while leaving the Sierra Maestra to the barbudos in the belief that they could do little harm away from the population centers.

At another level, the sierra-llano rift can be seen as a power struggle for control of M-26-7 and for position in post-Batista Cuba. No one who has followed Fidel Castro's career can doubt that he has always wanted to be the man in charge, whether of a country or a cocktail party. On the other side, many leaders of the urban M-26-7 had worked diligently

and loyally for years, risking their lives daily while Fidel, failing in his 1953 and 1956 overthrow attempts, opted for what appeared to be a relatively safe method of struggle. As their uprisings failed and their comrades died, the urban leadership may have found Castro's airs—his glorification of the guerrilla, his appropriation of the mantle of maximum national hero José Martí, his tendency to ignore the official movement governing board when making decisions—annoying.

By the beginning of 1958, these misunderstandings blossomed into a behind-the-scenes power struggle. Fidel, Raúl, and Che indicated in internal correspondence their disdain for and growing distrust of the llano. Fidel wrote M-26-7 leaders in Santiago in January 1958: "I am at the point of asking the Movement not to bother about us any more and to abandon us to our fate and leave us on our own once and for all. I'm tired of having my feelings misinterpreted. I'm not meanly ambitious. All the honors and responsibilities don't mean a damn to me."[12] Following the failure of the April Havana general strike, which disrupted the M-26-7 underground and further discredited urban leaders, Fidel wrote: "No one will ever be able to make me trust the organization again."[13] He further complained that "the Movement has failed utterly in the job of supplying us," blaming "egotism, . . . incompetence, negligence, and even the disloyalty of some comrades."[14] An October 1958 report from Franqui to the M-26-7 Executive Committee revealed the feelings of the urban leadership: "I believe very strongly in the role of the leader of our Revolution. But I believe that his collaborators cannot be a group of extras who provide only the appearance of democracy, a chorus who praise his successes."[15]



## THE FALL OF BATISTA



While the internal power struggle within the resistance heated up, Batista finally turned his army loose on the guerrillas. Having been forced by the Matthews interview and corroborating evidence to admit the guerrilla presence, Batista had adopted the public posture that Castro's group was too insignificant to warrant a commitment of troops to root it out of the mountains. However, repeatedly stung by guerrilla ambushes and Fidel's inflated claims of rebel victory, and strengthened by his defeat of the Havana general strike, Batista decided to deal with the guerrillas head-on. With considerable fanfare and the appearance of complete confidence, the army in May 1958 launched what it announced would be a quick campaign to exterminate Castro's guerrillas. Unable to get its tanks, half-tracks, mortars, and even jeeps into the mountainous terrain, however, the army could only wait with its firepower on Castro's perimeter or send foot patrols into the Sierra Maestra in search of the rebels. This strategy played directly into Fidel's hands. His troops merely

taunted the massed army and then, controlling the terrain, freely ambushed the columns dispatched to find and finish them. After three months of frustration and substantial losses of men and equipment, Batista's commanders called off the campaign in August and returned to the strategy of sealing off the guerrillas. Having won his first major battle, Castro surged in prestige and power.

The failure of the offensive against Castro revealed that the 40,000-man Cuban army was far less capable than it appeared to be. Having fought no wars, officers and soldiers were inexperienced in combat. Like other armies schooled in conventional warfare, it was frustrated by the innovative guerrilla approach. As the pillars of Batista's support, army commanders were chosen first for their loyalty, secondly for their military abilities. Corruption was also rampant within the army, and Castro found it easy to bribe officers to permit personnel and supplies to slip through army lines into the sierra.

By the latter months of 1958, Batista's grip on power was slipping. Under renewed U.S. pressure to resign in time for a caretaker government to conduct elections, Batista instead held his own elections for congress and a president on November 3. With the exception of the dwindling number of Batista loyalists, most eligible voters boycotted, making the elections a farce and denying any possibility of legitimacy to the hand-picked government slated to succeed the dictator in February 1959. Rather than arresting the regime's collapse, the sham elections hastened it.

Even before the elections, the military tide had turned against Batista. Buoyed by the defeat of Batista's summer offensive, Castro expanded his military operations to central Cuba in late August when he dispatched a column of 150 fighters from the Sierra Maestra, under Che Guevara, to the mountains of Las Villas province. Its objectives were to cut communications between Havana and Santiago, take control of the DR and other guerrillas already operating in the Escambray Mountains, and strike a decisive blow that would bring down the regime. A second column under Camilo Cienfuegos, headed originally to Pinar del Río in the island's far west, also arrived in Las Villas after a seven-week march through army-held territory. When the final offensive was launched in early November, Castro's total guerrilla forces had reached roughly a thousand troops.

After capturing numerous villages and cutting the central highway and railroad, on December 29 Che's guerrillas attacked Santa Clara, Cuba's fourth largest city, with a population of some 80,000. The city fell after heavy fighting on January 1, 1959. News of the imminent fall of Santa Clara prompted Batista to abandon a New Year's eve party at his palace and take a waiting plane to the Dominican Republic and the fraternal embrace of dictator Rafael Trujillo. After a triumphant motorized

march through the heartland of Cuba, Fidel and his guerrillas from the Sierra Maestra, their ranks swollen by last-minute converts, rolled into Havana on January 8 to a hero's welcome. Total guerrilla strength at the fall of Batista did not exceeed 3,000.

## MYTHOGENESIS, OR THE MYTH OF THE HEROIC GUERRILLA

Even before Castro's seizure of power, the myth of the heroic guerrilla had begun to gain currency. The myth of the heroic guerrilla is the founding myth of the new Cuba; just as any new nation embellishes the heroic deeds and character traits of its founders in the process of forging national identity and institutional legitimacy, a society created by revolution creates its own founding myth by exaggerating the faults of the *ancien régime* and embellishing the feats and qualities of its revolutionary leaders. The founding myth of the Cuban Revolution, like other founding myths, is a selective recounting of history. It tells the story of the victory from the viewpoint of the victors.



Having struggled and suffered for 25 months in the Sierra Maestra against overwhelming odds and at great personal sacrifice, and having developed an attitude of superiority vis-à-vis the urban resistance for its repeated failures to dislodge Batista, Fidel and his cadre of guerrilla fighters quite understandably attributed to themselves the victory and the beginning of a new Cuba. In believing and in broadcasting that message, they were not wrong nor were they lying. However, they overlooked and, perhaps inadvertently, discredited the work and sacrifice of thousands of members of the urban resistance, including the great bulk of M-26-7. Some of these men and women had been in the front lines of resistance for four and a half years before Fidel and his 14 companions retreated to the Sierra Maestra to launch a new front in the war. Fidel acknowledged this distortion in a 1968 article written during a period of reassessment following the death of Che Guevara in his attempt to replicate the Cuban model in Bolivia:



> Almost all attention, almost all recognition, almost all the admiration, and almost all the history of the Revolution [have] centered on the guerrilla movement in the mountains. . . . This fact tended to play down the role of those who fought in the cities, the role of those who fought in the clandestine movement, and the extraordinary heroism of young persons who died fighting under very difficult conditions.[16]

The myth of the heroic guerrilla also omits the work of the urban resistance in tying down Batista's forces in the cities during all of 1957 and the first four months of 1958. Without the repeated demonstrations, strikes, assassination attempts, acts of sabotage, and uprisings carried

out by DR, M-26-7, students, parties, organized labor, and military dissidents, Batista almost certainly would not have neglected Castro, allowing his forces to grow and strengthen themselves without significant military pressure until the army finally launched its belated offensive in May 1958. The myth also downplays the role of the urban cadres of M-26-7 in supplying weapons and recruits to the Sierra Maestra and fails to credit the same group with proselytizing among the peasantry of the area prior to Castro's arrival—a matter of considerable importance in view of the universal peasant distrust of outsiders.

The myth of the heroic guerrilla, firmly anchored in the history of the guerrilla war, grew up as the result of several circumstances. Most fundamental were the undeniable heroism and the epic quality of the guerrilla phase of the struggle against Batista. When the charisma and commanding presence of Fidel and the colorful and engaging personality of Che Guevara are added, the figure of the guerrilla fighter assumes a larger-than-life quality. From the appearance of Herbert Matthews' story in February 1957, the international press found the guerrillas more appealing and newsworthy than the student protests, general strikes, and military revolts which were the standard stuff of Latin American politics. Fidel's highly developed sense for publicity further helped to focus news coverage on the guerrillas. After the victory, Fidel institutionalized the guerrilla struggle in the new regime by installing Sierra Maestra veterans in most important positions, thus making guerrilla khakis, boots, and beards the official attire as well as the symbol of the revolution. Finally, Che Guevara's *Guerrilla Warfare* and other writings gave the Cuban guerrilla war something of the status of a holy crusade, completing the formulation of the myth of the heroic guerrilla.

The guerrillas also attained their preeminence in the founding myth by default. In the power struggle over the succession to Batista, Fidel had swept aside numerous leaders of the urban resistance; in the authoritarian climate that Castro quickly imposed after taking power, there was no room for questioning the official version of the war. Thus the great majority of those involved in the anti-Batista movement had no one to tell their story until much later, after the heroic guerrilla was firmly established.

The founding myth of the heroic guerrilla was an important asset to Fidel Castro in legitimizing the revolution and in maintaining popular support during times of external threat and economic hardship. One of the myth's functions was to link the revolution to Cuban history, reassuring Cubans that however radical or unorthodox Fidel and his policies appeared, they were rooted in the national experience. Both his method—guerrilla warfare—and his goal—national independence—placed Castro squarely in the tradition of José Martí, Antonio Maceo, and Máximo Gómez, who had fought guerrilla wars for independence

from Spain. The suffering, sacrifice, perseverance, and indomitable will of the guerrilla also served as models for the behavior of citizens struggling to throw off Yankee imperialism and build a new Cuba at times when massive amounts of volunteer labor were needed and material rewards were scarce. In his speeches, Fidel frequently exhorted the people to sacrifice in the spirit of the Sierra Maestra, and generations of children were indoctrinated in the values of self-abnegation and struggle characteristic of the heroic guerrilla. In these and other ways, the myth of the heroic guerrilla became an explicit and central part of the political culture of Castro's Cuba.

The myth of the heroic guerrilla also became a major Cuban export. For those Latin Americans already committed to revolution, the example of Cuba's successful guerrilla war provided hope and a model. For the many more who had not been committed to radical politics before, the romantic version of the Cuban revolutionary war and its heroic guerrillas was a siren song that lured them to action. After Che Guevara published *Guerrilla Warfare* in 1960, Latin Americans had available a handbook on how to emulate Castro's victory. Unfortunately for the many who died trying to follow the Cuban example, the myth of the heroic guerrilla was a very selective recounting of Fidel Castro's road to power.



## NOTES

1. Jaime Suchlicki, *Cuba from Columbus to Castro* (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1974), 96–97.
2. Quoted in ibid., 105.
3. Fidel Castro, *History Will Absolve Me* (Bungay, U.K.: Richard Clay [The Chaucer Press], 1968), 40.
4. Ibid.
5. Che Guevara, *Reminiscences of the Cuban Revolutionary War*, trans. Victoria Ortiz (New York: Grove Press, 1968), 40.
6. The biblical number twelve is often used in accounts of the origins of Fidel's guerrilla band, but reliable observers counted fifteen men at the outset of the Sierra Maestra campaign.
7. Guevara, *Reminiscences*, 81.
8. Herbert Matthews, *The Cuban Story* (New York: George Braziller, 1961), 29–38.
9. Guevara, *Reminiscences*, 117.
10. See the discussion of communists' relations with dictators in Chapter 3 of this volume.
11. Carlos Franqui, *Diary of the Cuban Revolution*, trans. Georgette Felix et al. (New York: Viking Press, 1980).
12. Castro to Santiago leaders, 13 January 1958, ibid., 279.
13. Castro to Celia Sánchez, 16 April 1958, ibid., 300.
14. Castro to Mario Llerena and Raúl Chibás, 25 April 1958, ibid., 310.
15. Franqui to Castro and M-26-7 National Executive, October 1958, ibid., 431.