

TIMES PAST

1959

THE CUBAN REVOLUT

Fidel Castro came to power promising democracy and freedom. Now, after 50 years of repression and hardship, he's finally fading from the scene. Is there a new revolution in store for Cuba?

BY ANTHONY DEPALMA

PAGE ONE, and a Times editorial praising Castro, Jan. 2, 1959

TIMELINE: CUBA UNDER CASTRO

1959

Fidel Castro and his guerrilla army overthrow the U.S.-backed dictatorship of Fulgencio Batista. Castro takes charge, with his brother Raúl as deputy, and Che Guevara third in command.

1960

Castro nationalizes most businesses, including American companies, without compensation. The U.S. breaks diplomatic relations and imposes an economic embargo.

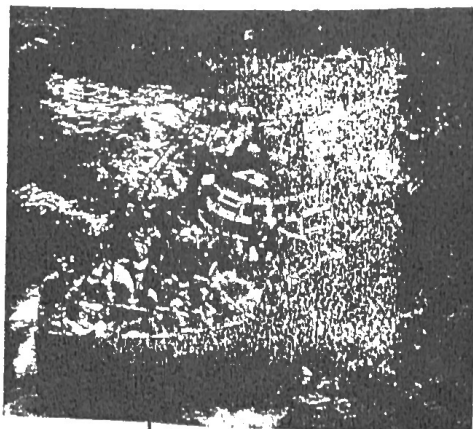
It was the last day of 1958, and many of the richest and most powerful people in Havana had gathered at the Riviera Hotel to welcome in the new year. The orchestra blared Afro-Cuban music, and the champagne flowed freely. But the mood was somber.

Far from the glamorous capital, a bearded 32-year-old lawyer-turned-revolutionary named Fidel Castro and a few hundred of his followers were gaining ground in a long guerrilla war against Cuba's corrupt dictator, Fulgencio Batista. In fact, much of Cuba was boiling with rebellion.

Just before midnight, an American businessman at the Riviera said that on his way to the party he had seen a long line of cars heading toward the airstrip at Batista's army headquarters in Havana. Two guests at his table happened to be reporters for *The New York Times*, who immediately realized that Batista was preparing to flee, along with his family and key supporters. By the time they got to a telephone (cell phones were decades from being invented), several DC-4's were taking off for the

**BATISTA AND REGIME FLEE CUBA;
CASTRO MOVING TO TAKE POWER;**

ment to be said and this is an extraordinary young man, Fidel Castro, who fought against such heavy odds with such tenacity, bravery and intelligence ever since his pathetically weak band of youths landed in Oriente Province on Dec. 2, 1956. A great burden now falls on his shoulders, and a task harder in its way than the struggle for liberty that has now ended. The American people will wish him and all Cubans good fortune.



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1961

Castro announces that he's a Communist and strengthens ties with the Soviets. The U.S. backs the Bay of Pigs invasion—a disastrous attempt by C.I.A.-trained exiles to oust Castro.

1962

President Kennedy reveals that Soviet missiles are being installed in Cuba, bringing the U.S. and Soviet Union to the brink of nuclear war. The crisis is resolved after 13 tense days, and the missiles are removed.

1980

Maríel boatlift: Domestic unrest prompts Castro to allow anyone to leave; 125,000 Cubans head to Florida before the border is closed again after six months.

1991

The Soviet Union disintegrates; Castro loses his financial lifeline and Cuba's economy collapses.

2008

After becoming ill and ceding power to his brother Raúl in 2006, Fidel Castro resigns and Raúl formally takes over as Cuba's President.

Dominican Republic, where Batista and his entourage went into exile.

Castro and his rebels marched into Havana a few days later and were welcomed as conquering heroes by cheering crowds. Of course, those lining the streets had no way of knowing then that Castro and his revolution would soon rob Cubans of the most basic human rights and political freedoms, sink the Cuban economy, and rupture relations with Cuba's neighbor to the north, the United States.

WHO IS FIDEL CASTRO?

When Castro arrived in Havana, the *Times* reported, he "received a delirious welcome from the city's populace." Later that day, as he addressed the huge crowd, someone released white doves as a sign of peace and one landed on Castro's shoulder. Many Cubans took that as a sign that he was destined to lead them to a better future.

In fact, they knew little about him or what he stood for. He was the son of a wealthy planter from the eastern province of Oriente, where most of the fighting had taken place. He had

been active in student politics at the University of Havana and went on to become a lawyer and a candidate for the Cuban Congress in 1952. But when Batista canceled the elections and declared himself President, Castro decided to take up arms and overthrow the government.

Although Batista openly accused Castro and his followers of being under the influence of Communists, Castro promised to restore Cuba's constitution and hold free elections. He did not talk about Communism or radical economic theories. "You can be sure we have no animosity toward the United States and the American people," he told a reporter.

Many Cubans of all classes supported Castro because they wanted to get rid of Batista and the corruption that surrounded him; they were not looking for a radical change in their political or economic systems. And Cubans in the poorer countryside believed Castro would improve their lives.

But the Cuban revolution was not fundamentally a revolt

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by the poor. Before the revolution, Cuba was considered one of the most prosperous countries in Latin America. It had a well-developed educational and health system, and Havana was a popular tourist spot, especially for Americans, with ferry service to Florida, which was only 90 miles away.

For years, the United States supported Batista because he kept order with an iron hand. But as his rule became more corrupt and violent, Washington grew wary and stopped sending him military supplies a few months before he fled on New Year's Eve.

An editorial in *The New York Times* on Jan. 2, 1959, bid good riddance to Batista and praised Castro, calling him an "extraordinary young man." It concluded: "The American people will wish him and all Cubans good fortune." President Dwight D. Eisenhower formally recognized Castro's rebels as the legitimate government of Cuba, though in private, officials admitted they didn't know if Castro would keep his word to democratize his nation.

COZYING UP TO MOSCOW

It didn't take long for relations between Washington and Havana to sour. Within weeks of taking power, Castro and his lieutenant Che Guevara put hundreds of Batista supporters on trial. Most were hastily convicted, lined up against a stone wall at the old military prison in Havana, and shot. American politicians criticized the trials, and Castro in turn accused

Cold War, and the Soviets saw Cuba as a key strategic asset in America's backyard.

The Soviets supported Cuba with money and weapons, and tensions with the U.S. escalated. Eisenhower imposed a partial economic embargo in 1960. His successor in the White House, John F. Kennedy, approved a plan for Cuban exiles, backed by American firepower and the C.I.A., to invade Cuba. On April 17, 1961, 1,500 men landed in a swampy area on the southern coast of Cuba known as the Bay of Pigs.

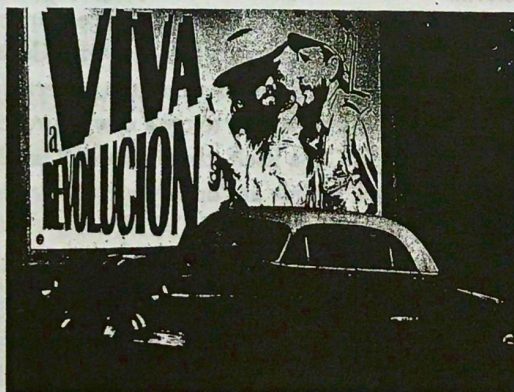
But at the last minute Kennedy withheld the air and naval support he had promised, and Castro easily killed or captured nearly all of the invaders. It was an embarrassing defeat for the United States and a huge propaganda victory for Castro.

CUBAN MISSILE CRISIS

A little over a year later, a U.S. spy plane flying over Cuba took startling photos of launch pads for nuclear missiles from the Soviet Union that could reach New York, Washington, and other cities on the Eastern seaboard in less than 15 minutes. Kennedy went on television to announce a naval blockade until the Soviets removed the missiles. The U.S. military was put on high alert and millions of Americans went to bed worrying that their homes might be destroyed while they slept. The Cuban Missile Crisis was the closest the world has ever come to a nuclear war.

After a tense 13-day standoff during which war could have started at any minute, Soviet leader Nikita Khrushchev

HAVANA is a great place to see classic American cars, like this 60-year-old Oldsmobile.



the United States of trying to interfere in Cuba's affairs.

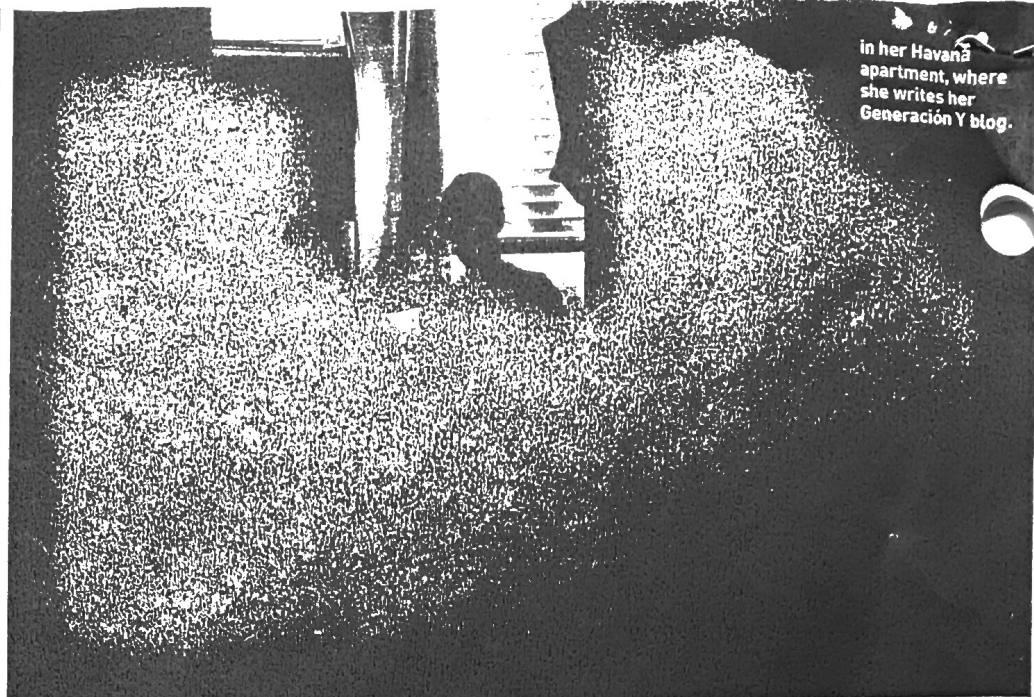
Later in 1959, the government started to confiscate thousands of American-owned farms and businesses, including a Colgate-Palmolive soap factory and the telephone company, which was owned by an American corporation.

As relations with the U.S. cooled, Cuba drew closer to the Soviet Union. The early 1960s were the height of the

agreed to remove the missiles. For his part, Kennedy promised that the U.S. would not try to invade Cuba again.

But relations between the U.S. and Cuba did not improve, and the economic embargo was tightened. It's now been in place for nearly 50 years, which is why the streets of Havana are filled with classic 1950s Buicks and Pontiacs: No American cars have been sold in Cuba since 1959. The Cuban government

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in her Havana apartment, where she writes her Generación Y blog.

UP: LANA URBURU/THE ST. PETERSBURG TIMES/THE NEW YORK TIMES; BOTTOM: AP/WIDEWORLD

blames the embargo rather than its decades of disastrous policies for its economic problems, even though it is free to trade with every other country but the U.S.

Fidel Castro, now 82, managed to defy the U.S. for half a century, tussling with 10 U.S. presidents before handing over the presidency earlier this year to his brother Raúl, who is 77. It's unclear just how much power Fidel still wields behind the scenes.

In his first weeks as President, Raúl Castro allowed Cubans to buy cell phones, computers, and DVD players for the first time, a signal that he may be willing to embrace new ideas. Many experts expect Cuba to follow the examples

University of Miami. "Based on the few minor changes that have been announced so far, the Cuban people are starting to say 'We want more.'"

Decades of political repression and Communist economic policies have left most Cubans in dire poverty. Salaries are low, housing is inadequate, and great swathes of once-beautiful Havana are crumbling. Basic foods like eggs, milk, chicken, and beans are rationed.

CHALLENGING THE NEW CASTRO?

More than a million Cubans have fled to the U.S. since the revolution, with hundreds dying in flimsy rafts in desperate attempts to reach Florida. Cuban-Americans have become a powerful political force in Florida, insisting that the embargo be kept in place. But many American companies want to do business with Cuba, and many younger Cuban-Americans who have never lived in Cuba think it's time for the U.S. to try a new approach.

In Cuba itself, there's a sense of change in the air, and some people are openly taking the risk of challenging the government.

A young woman named Yoani Sanchez recently wrote in her Generación Y blog (desdecuba.com/generaciony): "We are exceptional students of a government that, in almost 50 years of 'dancing alone' on the stage of our politics, has never given an apology for anything."

With all the problems facing Cuba, Sanchez is in no mood to get nostalgic about the approaching 50th anniversary of the revolution.

"I want to shake off all these anniversary stories and golden dates," she wrote. "I propose that the present no longer be used for recapping what happened and that instead it become what it should be—the springboard to launch us to tomorrow." ●



FIDEL CASTRO (left) handed over the presidency to his younger brother, Raúl (right), who has loosened some restrictions on Cubans.

of China and Vietnam: Communist countries that abandoned failed socialist economic policies in favor of a more free-market approach, while maintaining tight one-party control and keeping their authoritarian regimes in power.

"The biggest challenge facing Raúl is the growing expectation that there will be major change once Fidel is completely out of the picture," says Jaime Suchlicki, a Cuba expert at the