

Fidel Castro, Cuba's communist leader, dies at age 90

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Cuban President Fidel Castro points during a speech before the United Nations General Assembly in New York City, October 12, 1979. Cuban President Raul Castro announced the death of his brother Fidel Castro at age 90 on Cuban state media on November 25, 2016. Photo: AP Photo/Marty Lederhandler, File

MIAMI, Fla. — Fidel Castro has died at age 90. The leader of Cuba for a half-century led a rebel army to improbable victory, embraced communism and defied the power of 10 American presidents.

With a shaking voice, President Raul Castro said on state television that his older brother died at 10:29 on Friday night. He ended the announcement by shouting the revolutionary slogan, "Toward victory, always!"

A Tense Relationship With The U.S.

Castro's reign over the island-nation 90 miles (145 kilometers) from Florida was marked by its tenuous relationship with the United States.

In 1961, during the Bay of Pigs invasion, the United States' Central Intelligence Agency (CIA) tried and failed to overthrow the Castro government. A year later, the Communist USSR tried to keep nuclear missiles in Cuba, causing U.S. President John F. Kennedy to threaten nuclear war.

At the time, the United States was in a Cold War standoff with the USSR because of its spreading communist ideals. In communist countries, the government owns most things and few people have private property or possessions. The citizens of those countries also have fewer freedoms as a result. The United States opposed communism and embraced capitalism, where the government and business remain separate. The U.S. also embraced a democratic government. Eventually, the USSR agreed to remove the missiles.

"Socialism Or Death"

Castro was a bearded revolutionary who survived a crippling U.S. trade embargo as well as dozens, possibly hundreds, of assassination plots. He died 10 years after ill health forced him to hand power over to his brother Raul.

Castro overcame imprisonment at the hands of Cuban dictator Fulgencio Batista. He was exiled in Mexico and his rebellion had a disastrous start before it succeeded. He rode into Havana, Cuba's capital, in January 1959 to become, at age 32, the youngest leader in Latin America.

His commitment to socialism was unwavering, though his power finally began to fade in mid-2006 when health issues forced him to hand over the presidency to Raul in 2008.

"Socialism or death" remained Castro's rallying cry even as Western-style democracy swept the globe and other communist governments in China and Vietnam embraced capitalism. The changes around the world left Cuba, an island of 11 million people, economically crippled.

Reactions In Today's Changing Cuba

Fidel Castro survived long enough to see Raul Castro negotiate an opening with U.S. President Barack Obama on December 17, 2014. At that time, Washington and Havana announced they would move to restore government ties for the first time since they were severed in 1961. He cautiously blessed the historic deal with his lifelong enemy in a letter published after a monthlong silence. Obama made a historic visit to Havana in March 2016.

Carlos Rodriguez, age 15, was sitting in Havana's Miramar neighborhood when he heard that Fidel Castro had died.

"Fidel? Fidel?" he said, slapping his head in shock. "That's not what I was expecting. One always thought that he would last forever. It doesn't seem true."

But the news cheered the community of Cuban exiles in Florida who had fled Castro's government. Thousands gathered in the streets in Miami's Little Havana to cheer and wave Cuban flags.

Castro's Journey To Power

Fidel Castro Ruz was born on August 13, 1926, in eastern Cuba's sugar country. There, his Spanish immigrant father worked first recruiting labor for U.S. sugar companies and later built up a successful plantation of his own.

Castro's life as a rebel began in 1953 with a reckless attempt to steal equipment from the Cuban military in the eastern city of Santiago. Most of his comrades were killed and Fidel and his brother Raul went to prison.

When he finally succeeded to become Cuba's leader, the U.S. was among the first to formally recognize his government. The country cautiously trusted Castro's early promises that he merely wanted to restore democracy, not install socialism.

Within months, though, Castro made huge changes in how Cuba traded and did business. Members of the old government went before courts, and many were killed by firing squads over two years. Non-government newspapers were closed and in the early years, gay people were herded into camps for "re-education."

In 1964, Castro admitted to holding 15,000 people as political prisoners and thousands of Cubans fled, including Castro's own daughter and sister.

Mixed Views On The Revolution

Still, the revolution thrilled millions in Cuba and across Latin America. Across Latin America, many people saw it as an example of how the seemingly arrogant Americans could be defied. Many on the island were happy to see land being taken from the upper class.

As Castro became aligned with the USSR and communism, Washington began working to get him out of power by cutting the United States' purchases of sugar, the island's economic mainstay. Castro, in turn, took businesses and houses owned by Americans on Cuba and took them for the Cuban government.

The American government put into place a block on trade. It banned nearly all U.S. products going to the island except for food and medicine, and it cut its government dealings with Cuba on January 3, 1961.

Castro helped other revolutions in Latin American countries and Africa in the 1960s and 1970s. Over the years, he sent Cuban doctors abroad to help the poor and helped to hide Black Panther leaders from the United States government.

Plans For Funeral

By the time Castro left power 49 years after his triumphant arrival in Havana, he was the world's longest-ruling head of government, aside from monarchs.

Cuba's government announced that Castro's ashes would be buried on December 4 in the eastern city of Santiago that was a birthplace of his revolution. That will follow more than a week of honors, including a nearly nationwide caravan retracing, in reverse, his tour from Santiago to Havana with the triumph of the revolution in 1959.

Quiz

1 Select the paragraph from the section "Castro's Journey To Power" that MOST thoroughly explains why Castro was feared and criticized by some.

2 All four sentences from the article below help illustrate that the U.S. opposed Castro's leadership in Cuba.

Which sentence from the article BEST shows this idea?

- (A) In 1961, during the Bay of Pigs invasion, the United States' Central Intelligence Agency (CIA) tried and failed to overthrow the Castro government.
- (B) The United States opposed communism and embraced capitalism, where the government and business remain separate.
- (C) As Castro became aligned with the USSR and communism, Washington began working to get him out of power by cutting the United States' purchases of sugar, the island's economic mainstay.
- (D) The American government put into place a block on trade. It banned nearly all U.S. products going to the island except for food and medicine, and it cut its government dealings with Cuba on January 3, 1961.

3 The central idea of the article is developed by:

- (A) quoting world leaders on their opinions of Castro's leadership style and decisions
- (B) discussing Cuba's role in relationship to the U.S. and the USSR during the Cold War in depth
- (C) detailing both negative and positive effects of Castro's rule in Cuba
- (D) comparing Fidel Castro's government with that of his brother, Raul Castro

- 4 Read the two paragraphs from the section "Reactions In Today's Changing Cuba."

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How do these paragraphs develop a central idea of the article?

- (A) They show how some Cubans feared for their safety under Castro's rule.
- (B) They illustrate the importance of Castro's legacy to Cubans and the lasting effect he has had on the country.
- (C) They show the deep admiration and respect that many Cubans still have for Castro.
- (D) They illustrate the unexpected nature of Castro's death and the surprisingly quick onset of his disease.