

Excerpt from *History Will Absolve Me*, Fidel Castro, 1953

Castro made the speech in his own defense in court against the charges brought against him after he led an attack on the Moncada Barracks. Though no record of Castro's words was kept, he reconstructed them later for publication. It became the manifesto of his 26th of July Movement.

Cuba's land situation, the problems of industrialization, living standards, unemployment, education and public health: these are the problems-along with the attainment of civil liberty and political democracy-to the solution of which the revolutionary 26th of July Movement directs its efforts. This presentation may seem cold and theoretical to the reader, unless he is familiar with the fearful tragedy which our country is living through. At least 85 percent of Cuba's small-scale farmers rent their land, and face the constant threat of eviction. More than half of our best arable land is in foreign hands; in Oriente, the broadest province of Cuba, the lands of The United Fruit Company and of the West Indies Fruit Company unite our northern and southern shores. Throughout the country, 200,000 rural families are Without a square foot of land on which they can support themselves; yet almost ten million acres of untouched arable land remain in the hands of powerful interests. Cuba is primarily an agricultural country. The rural areas Were the cradle of our independence; the prosperity and greatness of our nation depend on a healthy and vigorous rural population, willing and able to till the soil, and on a state which protects and guides that population. If this is so, how can the present situation be allowed to continue?

Except for a few food-producing industries and some woodworking and textile plants, Cuba is essentially a producer of raw materials. She exports sugar and imports candy; she exports leather and imports shoes; she exports iron and imports plows. Everyone agrees that there is a great need to industrialize: that we lack metal, paper and chemical industries; that the techniques of agriculture and animal husbandry must be improved; that our food-producing industries must be expanded to meet the ruinous competition of European cheese, condensed milk, liquors and cooking oil, and of American canned foods; that we need a merchant fleet; that the tourist trade is a potential source of great income. But the possessors of capital keep the people bowed under ox-yokes, the state folds its arms, and industrialization will wait for kingdom come....

The future of the country and the solution of its problems cannot continue to depend on the selfish desires of a dozen financiers, on the cold profit-and-loss calculations of a few magnates in air-conditioned offices. The country cannot continue to beg, on bended knee, for miracles from a few "golden calves." Cuba's problems will only be solved if we Cubans dedicate ourselves to fight for their solution with the same energy, integrity and patriotism our liberators invested in the country's foundation. They will not be solved by politicians who jabber unceasingly of "absolute freedom of enterprise," the sacred "lady of supply and demand" and "guarantees of investment capital."

A revolutionary government, with the endorsement of the nation, would rid our institutions of corrupt and mercenary bureaucrats, and proceed immediately to the industrialization of the country--mobilizing all our idle capital, which amounts to more than 1.5 billion pesos [one Cuban peso at this time was equal to one US dollar], through the National Bank and the Bank for the Promotion of Agriculture and Industry. This great task of planning and administration must be put in the hands of men of absolute competence, who are completely outside the sphere of politics.

A revolutionary government, after installing as owners of their plots the 100,000 small farmers who now rent their land, would proceed to a final settlement of the land problem. First, it would establish--as the constitution requires--a maximum size for each type of agricultural holding, expropriating the excess acreage. Thus public lands stolen from the state would be recovered, marshes and swamplands drained, areas set aside for reforestation. Second, the revolutionary government would distribute the remainder of the expropriated lands to our rural families (giving preference to the largest), sponsor the formation of agricultural cooperatives for the joint use of expensive farm machinery and refrigerated storage facilities, and provide guidance, technical knowledge and equipment for the farmer....

Cuba can easily support a population three times what it is now. There is no reason, then, why misery should exist among its present inhabitants. The markets should be full of produce; the pantries of our homes should be well-stocked; every hand should be industriously at work. No, this is not inconceivable. What is inconceivable is that there should be men who will accept hunger while there is a square foot of land not sowed; what is inconceivable is that 30 percent of our rural folk cannot sign their names and that 90 percent know nothing of Cuban history; what is inconceivable is that the majority of our rural families live in conditions worse than those of the Indians whom Columbus found when he discovered "the most beautiful land that human eyes have seen."

Fidel Castro, The Problem of Cuba and its Revolutionary Policy

Address to the UN General Assembly, 26 September 1960

What did the Revolution find when it came to power in Cuba? What marvels did the Revolution find when it came to power in Cuba? First of all the Revolution found that 600,000 able Cubans were unemployed—as many, proportionately, as were unemployed in the United States at the time of the great depression which shook this country and which almost created a catastrophe in the United States. That was our permanent unemployment. Three million out of a population of somewhat over 6,000,000 did not have electric lights and did not enjoy the advantages and comforts of electricity. Three and a half million out of a total of slightly more than 6,000,000 lived in huts, shacks and slums, without the slightest sanitary facilities. In the cities, rents took almost one third of family incomes. Electricity rates and rents were among the highest in the world. Thirty-seven and one half percent of our population were illiterate; 70 per cent of the rural children had no teachers; 2 per cent of population, that is, 100,000 persons out of a total of more than 6,000,000 suffered from tuberculosis. 95% of the children in rural areas were affected by parasites, and the infant mortality rate was therefore very high, just the opposite of the average life span.

On the other hand, 85 per cent of the small farmers were paying rents for the use of land to the tune of almost 30 per cent of their income, while 1 1/2 percent of the landowners controlled 46 percent of the total area of the nation. Of course, the proportion of hospital beds to the number of inhabitants of the country was ridiculous, when compared with countries that only have halfway decent medical services.

Public utilities, electricity and telephone services all belonged to the United States monopolies. A major portion of the banking business, of the importing business and the oil refineries, the greater part of the sugar production, the best land in Cuba, and the most important industries in all fields belonged to American companies. The balance of payments in the last ten years, from 1950 to 1960, had been favorable to the United States with regard to Cuba to the extent of one thousand million dollars....

What was the state of our reserve when the tyrant Batista came to power? There was \$500,000,000 in our national reserve, a goodly sum to have invested in the industrial development of the country. When the Revolution came to power there was only \$70,000,000 in our reserves.

Then another law was passed, a law canceling the concessions which had been granted by the tyranny of Batista to the Telephone Company, an American monopoly. Taking advantage of the fact our people were defenseless, they had obtained valuable concessions. The Revolutionary Government then canceled these concessions and re-established normal prices for telephone services. Thus began the first conflict with the American monopolies.

The third measure was the reduction of electricity rates, which were the highest in the world. Then followed the second conflict with the American monopolies. We were beginning to appear

communist; they were beginning to daub us in red because we had clashed head on with the interests of the United States monopolies.

Then followed the next law, an essential and inevitable law for our country, and a law which sooner or later will have to be adopted by all countries of the world, at least by those which have not yet adopted it: the Agrarian Reform Law.... In my country it was absolutely necessary: more than 200,000 peasant families lived in the countryside without land on which to grow essential food crops.

We decided to go on with the agrarian reform. Of course, the limits set to latifundia in Cuba would amaze a representative of the Netherlands, for example, or of any country of Europe, because of their extent. The maximum amount of land set forth in the Agrarian Reform Law is 400 hectares (988 acres).... in Cuba, where there were American monopolies that had up to 200,000 hectares--I repeat, in case someone thinks he has heard wrong, 200,000 hectares--an agrarian reform law reducing the maximum limit to 400 hectares was inadmissible.

But the truth is that in our country it was not only the land that was the property of the agrarian monopolies. The largest and most important mines were also owned by those monopolies. Cuba produces, for example, a great deal of nickel. All of the nickel was exploited by American interests, and under the tyranny of Batista, an American company, the Moa Bay, had obtained such a juicy concession that in a mere five years--mark my words, in a mere five years--it intended amortizing an investment of \$120,000,000. A \$120,000,000 investment amortized in five years!...

And so the Revolutionary Government passed a mining law which forced those monopolies to pay a 25 per cent tax on the exportation of minerals. The attitude of the Revolutionary Government already had been too bold. It had clashed with the interests of the international electric trusts; it had clashed with the interests of the international telephone trusts; it had clashed with the interests of the mining trusts; it had clashed with the interests of the United Fruit Co; and it had in effect, clashed with the most powerful interests of the United States, which, as you know, are very closely linked with each other. And that was more than the Government of the United States--or rather, the representatives of the United States monopolies--could possibly tolerate....

Close to five hundred million dollars was recovered from the politicians who had enriched themselves during the tyranny of Batista - close to five hundred million dollars in cash and other assets was the total we were able to recover from the corrupt politicians who had been sucking the blood of our country for seven years. It is the correct investment of these assets which enables the Revolutionary Government, while at the same time developing plans for industrialization and for the development of agriculture, to build houses, schools, to send teachers to the farthest corners of the country, and to give medical assistance to everyone - in other words, to carry out a true program of social development.

Human Rights in Cuba

Excerpt from the Freedom House 2015 report on Cuba

The Castro brothers have long dominated Cuba's one-party political system, in which the Communist Party of Cuba (PCC) controls all government offices and most civil institutions.

All political organizing outside the PCC is illegal. Political dissent, whether spoken or written, is a punishable offense, and dissidents are systematically harassed, detained, physically assaulted, and frequently sentenced to years of imprisonment for seemingly minor infractions. The regime has called on its neighborhood-watch groups, known as Committees for the Defense of the Revolution, to strengthen vigilance against "antisocial behavior," a euphemism for opposition activity. This has led to the use of "acts of repudiation," or supposedly spontaneous mob attacks, to intimidate and silence political dissidents. In recent years, dissident leaders have reported an increase in intimidation and harassment by state-sponsored groups as well as short-term detentions by state security forces. According to the Cuban Commission for Human Rights and National Reconciliation (CCDHRN), a record number of politically motivated short-term detentions were recorded in 2014, with figures totaling 8,899 as opposed to the 6,424 cases documented in 2013.

The Cuban government relies heavily on the military as well as on members of the Castro family for control of both business and politics. President Castro's son, Alejandro—a former member of the army—plays a vital role in the administration, serving as both chief of intelligence and as a liaison with China. The president's son-in-law, Luis Alberto Rodríguez López-Callejas, is CEO of Gaesa, the sector of the military that controls all business operations....

The Cuban news media are owned and controlled by the state. The independent press is considered illegal and its publications are classified as "enemy propaganda." Government agents routinely infiltrate the ranks of independent journalists, often accusing them of being mercenaries working at the behest of foreign powers. Independent journalists, particularly those associated with the island's dozen small independent news agencies or human rights groups, are subject to harassment. Nevertheless, some state media have begun to cover previously taboo topics, such as corruption in the health and education sectors. The national newspaper Granma has begun to publish letters to the editor from the public on economic issues, and state television, while generally a mouthpiece of the PCC, recently inaugurated a new program, Cuba Dice (Cuba Says), that features "man-on-the-street" interviews. A number of publications, especially those associated with the Catholic Church, have emerged as key players in debates over the country's future, including Espacio Laical, Cuba Posible, Palabra Nueva, and Convivencia. Low-circulation academic journals such as Temas are similarly able to adopt a relative level of openness and critical posture.

Despite a continued state monopoly on the mass media and one of the Western Hemisphere's lowest internet penetration rates—only 5 percent of the population—in recent years Cuba has seen a number of developments in information and communication technology (ICT) capabilities, access to uncensored news, and the availability of new digital data dissemination channels. These

developments include the growth of citizen journalism and an increase in the number of independent bloggers, the opening of more than 150 internet cafés in 2013 and 2014, and the possibility of accessing e-mail via cell phone for the first time in 2014. The appearance of a small number of independent, island-based news outlets—including the sites Havana Times, On Cuba, and 14ymedio (launched by pioneering blogger Yoani Sánchez in May 2014)—also marks a significant advance, as do the appearance of a number of unauthorized “mesh” networks that use private wi-fi networks to share information, and the emergence of an underground digital data distribution system known as “paquete semanal” (weekly packet). Despite these improvements, however, the government restricts access to ICTs by making connections prohibitively expensive and controlling content....

The Roman Catholic Church has played an important role in civil society, enabling discussion of topics of public concern and offering material assistance to the population. The Vatican not only urged Presidents Barack Obama and Raúl Castro to discuss normalizing relations but also mediated negotiations throughout 2013 and 2014. Nevertheless, official obstacles hamper religious freedom in Cuba. Churches may not conduct ordinary educational activities, and many church-based publications are plagued by state as well as self-censorship. Progress was evident in 2014, however, when the government granted the Catholic Church permission to build a new religious center for the first time in more than 50 years.

Academic freedom is restricted in Cuba. Teaching materials commonly contain ideological content, and affiliation with PCC structures is generally needed to gain access and advancement in educational institutions. On numerous occasions, university students have been expelled for dissident behavior, a harsh punishment that effectively prevents them from pursuing higher education....

According to the Cuban constitution, citizens’ limited rights of assembly and association may not be “exercised against the existence and objectives of the Socialist State.” Nearly all politically motivated short-term detentions in recent years have targeted members of independent associations, human rights groups, political parties, or trade unions.

As in past years, on International Human Rights Day on December 10, the state cracked down on human rights activists, arbitrarily detaining them for short periods of time. Surprisingly, the government allowed Ladies in White—an activist group that has long faced repression from the regime—to march uninhibited later that month, following the December 17 agreement between the United States and Cuba.

Cuban workers do not have the right to strike or bargain collectively, and independent labor unions are illegal.

The Cuban Economy & US-Cuban Relations

Cuban Economy

The Cuban Revolution could easily be seen a matter of the glass being half empty or half full. In terms of political rights, it is hard to see how anyone could hold Cuba up as a model of freedom. Going from a dictatorship (Batista in the 1950s) to a one party state (the Cuban Communist Party from 1959 onward) is not much of an advance, if it is any progress at all. But in social and economic terms, there is more to celebrate, although even there, there is still much more progress that could be made.

In social terms, Cuban society is far beyond what it was in the 1950s under Batista, and it is hard to see Cuba making these gains if Batista (or someone like him) were still in control of Cuba. In Fidel Castro's letter of resignation to the people of Cuba in 2008, he pointed out that the average Cuban has attended 12 years of school. It has a lower infant mortality rate than the US and Canada (4.63 for every thousand live births; it is 4.65 in Canada and 5.87 in the US). Cuba also has a rather high life expectancy (79 years), just one year shorter than that of the US.

But Cuba's economic growth has not kept pace with its social gains. Despite Castro's railing at Cuba being run in the 1950s for the benefit of foreign companies and countries, Cuba still does not produce enough food to feed itself, now spending \$2 billion a year on food imports, which constitute 70% of the food that Cubans consume.

Economic reform is vitally important to Cuba. The consensus of scholars (both outside and inside Cuba) is that without economic growth, social gains cannot be maintained. To be sustainable, progressive politics require economic prosperity. If Cuba is forced to divert too much of its land to grow food, it cannot grow sugarcane that it can export to other nations. If it cannot find a way to support itself, it will have to take doctors who would otherwise service Cuban patients, and have them go overseas to earn much needed cash. Cuban doctors and engineers send home \$1 billion a year in remittances.

As an example of economic problems canceling out social gains, in recent years, Cuba has had to reduce to one third of its former levels, the number of doctors available to the Cuban people, as they have sent the rest outside of the country (some 30,000 to Venezuela, where they service the medical needs of the Venezuelan people) earning desperately needed income. Cuban scholars admit that most of Cuba's economic growth has simply been income from Cubans who work abroad (such as in Venezuela).

Another big problem for Cuba is the number of government workers, who do not produce anything, but merely offer "services." When Vietnam began its economic reforms in 1986, services accounted for about 33 percent of GDP. By contrast, services in Cuba make up close to 75 percent of the island's GDP. Service exports (mainly of health-care professionals), combined with tourism and remittances, are major money makers for the nation.

Raul's Reforms

Despite the fiery rhetoric of Fidel Castro in retirement (see his letter in reply to Obama's visit to Cuba), his brother Raul (who took over when Fidel resigned in 2008) has tried to implement a small amount of free market reforms. Under Raul, Cuba has striven to increase private sector employment from 500,000 to 2 million by 2016. Even though the goal will not be met, Raul has been aggressively pursuing this. He has orchestrated the laying off of many in the public sector (leaving them no choice but to find work in the private sector). By the start of 2014, 596,500 state employees had been dismissed, amounting to 10 percent of the labor force.

Much idle, uncultivated land has been redistributed, in an attempt to stimulate agricultural production. In December 2007 there were 6.6 million total hectares of total uncultivated agricultural land, and by June 2012, it was reduced to 1.4 million hectares. State land ownership has fallen by 1.1 million hectares; the amount of land cultivated by private hands has grown by 1.2 million. Crops from private farmers now account for 57 percent of the total food production in the country, despite these farmers farming just under 25 percent of the arable land.

US Policy Towards Cuba

The U.S. embargo remains a formidable obstacle to the island's long-term economic prosperity, and it casts a long shadow over Cuban domestic politics. In the case of Vietnam, it was only after the lifting of the U.S. embargo in 1994 that the economy began to transform in earnest. Given Cuba's proximity to the United States and its relatively low labor costs, a similar shift in U.S. law could have a profound impact on the island.

In January, U.S. Secretary of State John Kerry opened his confirmation hearing by celebrating his close collaboration with Senator John McCain (R-Ariz.) in overcoming the legacy of war in order to restore U.S. relations with Vietnam. As a Democrat who won nearly half of Florida's Cuban American vote in 2012, Obama is in a better position than any of his predecessors to begin charting an end to the United States' 50-year-long embargo.

The geopolitical context in Latin America provides another reason the U.S. government should make a serious shift on Cuba. Rather than perpetuate Havana's diplomatic isolation, U.S. policy embodies the imperial pretensions of a bygone era, contributing to Washington's own isolation. Virtually all countries in the region have refused to attend another Summit of the Americas meeting if Cuba is not at the table. Cuba, in turn, currently chairs the new Community of Latin American and Caribbean States, which excludes Washington.

The US has imposed an embargo for 56 years, since 1960, when the US refused to export anything except food or medicine to Cuba, after they nationalized US owned oil refineries (Castro did this in response to these refineries refusing to refine Soviet crude oil). In 2015, despite the embargo, the U.S. exported nearly \$300 million worth of products to Cuba; 96% of this was in the form of meat and poultry, soybeans, corn, animal feed and other foodstuffs.