

## **Presidential Brief: The Situation in Cuba**

### **Why was Cuba a concern for the United States in the 1950s?**

U.S. worries in the Caribbean and Central America, however, did not end with Arbenz. On the contrary, Cuba was an even bigger concern in the 1950s. Politically, Cuba had been fairly stable since Fulgencio Batista seized power from a reform-minded government in 1934. Washington supported Batista as a strongman who would maintain order on the island and not upset U.S. interests. Even after Batista's defeat in elections in 1944, Cuba remained close to the United States. At the same time, though, official corruption and graft were mounting. Hope for reform suffered a setback when Batista staged a coup to take power in 1952. Few Cubans expected the Batista regime to tolerate democratic change in their country. As a result, resentment against the government grew during the 1950s.

Few Americans were aware of Cuba's political troubles. In the United States, Cuba was known best as a glamorous resort. A boom in tourism to the island began in the 1920s and reshaped Cuba's image. Cuba was associated with casinos, nightclubs, and tropical beaches. American money helped provide Havana with more Cadillacs per capita than any city in the world during the 1950s. But the wealth also brought problems to Cuba. By the 1950s, American organized crime was firmly established on the island, along with drugs and prostitution.

Economically, Cuba could claim one of the highest per capita incomes in Latin America. In reality, however, many Cubans could not find full-time employment, especially in the country side. Meanwhile, many middle-class Cubans depended on expensive imports from the United States to maintain their lifestyle, which was far below the standard of their American neighbors. With inflation rising, prospects for the future were not reassuring. Cuba in the 1950s relied more than ever on the export of sugar. Price increases in the 1940s had brought prosperity to the island, but the ups and downs of the sugar market in the 1950s badly shook the economy.

### **Why did Fidel Castro turn to armed struggle against the Batista regime?**

Opposition to Batista developed gradually in the 1950s. Most Cuban political parties gave up on the democratic process when Batista rigged elections in 1954. The next year, the police and army broke up student demonstrations. Seeing few alternatives, a handful of opponents to the regime turned to armed struggle. A young lawyer named Fidel Castro was one of the most noteworthy. The son of an impoverished Spanish immigrant who had become a wealthy landowner, Castro attended Cuba's top schools. Tall and athletic, he was even offered \$5,000 by the New York Giants to play professional baseball in the United States. Castro's true interests, however, was politics.

Castro first captured public attention with an almost suicidal attack on an army base in 1952. He hoped that a dramatic blow against the Batista regime would spark an insurrection throughout Cuba. The assault, however, failed to set off a larger uprising. Instead, most of Castro's nearly 2000 followers were killed, and Castro himself was jailed for two years. Sailing a small yacht from Mexico to Cuba in 1956, Castro and

eighty fellow revolutionaries launched another attack against Batista. Most were killed by Batista's forces before reaching shore. Without arms or supplies, the eighteen survivors of the landing straggled into Cuba's isolated eastern mountains. Far from the center of power, Castro began his guerilla war by attacking outposts of the unpopular Rural Guard. Thousands of landless peasants joined the struggle against Batista in 1957 and 1958, especially after the government forced many villagers into military camps.

As Castro's movement gathered strength in the countryside, other opponents of Batista disrupted life in the cities. Government offices were bombed, power lines cut, and trains derailed. Batista responded with still greater violence and repression against those who challenged his rule. By 1958, even factions in the military and police were joining the opposition. In February of that year, Catholic bishops in Cuba called for a new government.

### **Why did public opinion turn against Batista?**

Batista's human rights violations also turned U.S. opinion against him and led the United States to halt arms deliveries to Cuba. Facing opposition from almost every direction, Batista had little hope for survival. On January 1, 1959, he resigned and fled the country. Castro's forces quickly assumed the leadership of the revolutionary movement, and on January 9, Castro entered Havana.

In April 1959, Castro was welcomed in the United States and spoke to large enthusiastic crowds at U.S. universities. Although Castro states that he was against communism and dictatorship, U.S. government officials remained unsure of Castro's stance towards the Soviet Union. Nonetheless he was briefed by the CIA about U.S. perceptions of the Soviet threat and met with Vice-President Nixon.

*"The one fact that we can be sure of is that he has those indefinable qualities which make him a leader of men. Whatever we may think of him, he is going to be a great factor in the development of Cuba and very possible in Latin American affairs generally. He has the power to lead." -Vice-President Richard Nixon.*

By the middle of 1959, the United States no longer felt unsure of Castro. Mindful of the long history of U.S. involvement in Cuba and Latin America, Castro increasingly viewed the United States as a threat. His government began taking American-owned property in Cuba without compensation. He suppressed Cubans who were critical of him through exile or by putting them in jail, and he became increasingly critical of the United States. Perhaps more important to the United States during the Cold War, Castro's rhetoric in his speeches seemed to align him with the Soviet Union. Cuban increasingly came to be regarded as a base for communist subversion in the United States' backyard.

### **What role did Cuban and the Cold War play in the president election of 1960?**

Candidates Senator John F. Kennedy and Vice-President Richard M. Nixon both tried to show that they would be better able to stand up to the Soviet Premier Nikita Khrushchev. In fact, in their campaigns both candidates talked mostly about the Cold war and the competition with the Soviet Union. For example, a traditional subject of domestic politics – increasing economic growth – was discussed in the terms of the Cold War Kennedy argued that creating economic growth would allow the United States to win the arms race and to demonstrate capitalism's superiority over communism. Kennedy also harshly criticized Nixon and the Eisenhower administration for failing to support Cuban "freedom fighters" who wanted to return to Cuba and overthrow Castro.

However, Kennedy learned after his inauguration as president in January 1961 that the Eisenhower administration had planned an operation to overthrow Castro. Encouraged by their success in Guatemala in 1954, the CIA had trained 1400 Cuban exiles to invade Cuba, march toward Havana, and start a rebellion against Castro.

Excerpted with permission from *The Cuban Missile Crisis: Considering its Place in Cold War History*. Choices for the 21st Century Education Program, Brown University, Providence, RI. © 2004, 2nd edition.

The CHOICES Program is an educational program of the Watson Institute for International Studies at Brown University. Through its curricular resources, professional development workshops and special projects, CHOICES engages secondary level students in international issues and contributes to a renewal of civic engagement among young people in the United States. More information can be obtained at [www.choices.edu](http://www.choices.edu).