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Fidel Castro - An appreciation

Fidel Castro: Undaunted Revolutionary

- Features - In Memoriam - Obituaries and appreciations -

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Description:

Fidel Castro Ruz, Cuba's revolutionary leader, president, and prime minister for five decades, died in Santiago de Cuba on Friday, Nov. 25. He was 90 years old. Although one of the most profound, clear-sighted, honest, and dedicated revolutionary leaders of the past half-century, Castro has been demonized by the corporate media as a dictator, tyrant, murderer, and torturer.

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Fidel Castro Ruz, Cuba's revolutionary leader, president, and prime minister for five decades, died in Santiago de Cuba on Friday, Nov. 25. He was 90 years old. Although one of the most profound, clear-sighted, honest, and dedicated revolutionary leaders of the past half-century, Castro has been demonized by the corporate media as a dictator, tyrant, murderer, and torturer.

These same critics especially the government of the United States, whose 50-year illegal embargo/blockade of Cuba has been condemned by virtually every other nation have no qualms about supporting the world's real tyrants, provided only that they offer zero resistance to the interests of the world's dominant imperialist powers. In the minds of Fidel's critics, his "original sin" was to challenge and overthrow capitalist power and prerogatives in Cuba and to spread Cuba's liberating message worldwide.

The 1959 establishment of the Cuban workers' state aimed at the construction of a socialist society on an island of only 11 million people shook the world and continues to do so.

"Fidel," as he was referred to by friends and comrades around the world, was the son of a wealthy landowner. With a Jesuit secondary school education, he graduated from the University of Havana in 1945 with a degree in law. He engaged in radical student struggles, but was not yet dedicated to socialist revolution, and became a member of the traditional bourgeois opposition formation, the Orthodox Party. His 1952 candidacy for the Cuban national congress was cut short with the military coup of Coronel Fulgencio Batista, a former Cuban president (1940-44), who proceeded to abolish Cuba's constitution and installed himself as dictator.

As a human rights attorney, Castro filed an unsuccessful lawsuit challenging Batista's coup on constitutional grounds. Not long afterward, he and a youthful band of radical followers, mostly students, organized a failed military attack on the Moncada and other police barracks in Santiago de Cuba on July 26, 1953. While Fidel and his young comrades were foiled in their expectations that the Moncada attack would spark a nationwide revolt, the date nevertheless became synonymous with and is celebrated as the beginning of the Cuban Revolution.

December 31, 2016

Fidel was tried before a Batista court and sentenced to 15 years in prison. Less than two years later, however, and on the occasion of Batista's 1954 post-coup election victory, the dictator, seeking a modicum of legitimacy for his regime, and facing broad opposition from working-class and bourgeois forces, declared an amnesty and freed all Cuba's political prisoners, including Fidel and his brother Raul.

Fidel represented himself in court and defended his attack on Moncada. His concluding statement, four hours in length, typical of Fidel's ever-defiant revolutionary character, was a ringing denunciation of the Batista tyranny that proved to be prophetic. He concluded: " I do not fear the fury of the miserable tyrant who snuffed out the life of 70 brothers of mine. Condemn me, it does not matter. History will absolve me."

Indeed it did! Two years later, Castro and 80 revolutionary fighters, including the Argentine doctor, Ernesto "Che" Guevara, who had originally signed on as a medic, arrived in Cuba on a 61-foot rickety wooden yacht built for a few dozen at best the Granma. They set out to begin a two-year guerrilla war in the Sierra Maestra, which defeated successive waves of U.S.-backed and armed Batista forces.

The guerrillas won the support of Cuba's peasant masses and were aided by a well-organized underground support network in Cuba's major cities. Their July 26 Movement, beginning with skirmishes at local Batista outposts, eventually vanquished the main force of the Batista Army in Santiago de Cuba. In time, commanders of the revolution, including Che Guevara and Camilo Cienfuegos, led military columns that defeated qualitatively larger but increasingly demoralized and disintegrating Batista forces across Cuba.

The rebels enter Havana

In a speech from Santiago de Cuba, Fidel proclaimed the revolution's victory on New Years Day, Jan. 1, 1959. Batista and his entourage fled to the Dominican Republic the following day. A week later, Fidel and his comrades, 10,000 strong, and having defeated an army five times their size, triumphantly entered Havana to be welcomed by hundreds of thousands of cheering Cubans.

The conservative *Time* magazine soon after described the scene as follows: "The face of dictatorship in Cuba was the padlock on Havana University, the bodies dumped on street corners by casual police terrorists, the arrogant functionaries gathering fortunes from gambling, prostitution and a leaky public till. In disgust and shame, a nervy band of rural guerrillas, aided by angry Havana professional men (plus opportunists with assorted motives), started a bloody civil war that cost more than \$100 million and took 8,000 lives. Last week they smashed General Fulgencio Batista's dictatorship."

But Cuba's socialist course was not immediately assured with the military victory of the July 26 Movement. The fundamentals of capitalist power, including Cuba's largely privately-held land and property, remained in the hands of foreigners - mostly U.S. corporations - or the Batista-era capitalist elite, including Cuba's anti-Batista capitalist supporters of the 1959 revolution. The central question - Which class shall rule? the masses of Cuban workers and peasants or the capitalist few remained unresolved.

Castro, still a revolutionary democrat, initially named key anti-Batista bourgeois figures to the central posts in the Cuban government, including anti-Batista politician Juan Miro Cardona as prime minister, Judge Manuel Urrutia as provisional president, and Cuban banker/economist Felipe Pazos, a one-time International Monetary Fund official in Washington.

In short order, however, beginning a few weeks after their initial appointments, these prominent figures proved incapable of meeting the ever-growing aspirations of the Cuban masses for land and fundamental changes that advanced their well-being. Thus, the modern history of the Cuban Revolution begins with the early and critical decisions of the Castro team as it confronted both U.S. imperialism and Cuba's national capitalist class. Both forces fully expected that Castro and his followers would differ little from past idealistic bourgeois revolutionaries in other countries, who had illusions that their visions of justice, reform, and democracy could be achieved within a capitalist framework.

Castro himself had honestly explained to prominent U.S. journalists, like Herbert Mathews, a New York Times editorial writer who visited Castro and the July 26 Movement guerrilla fighters in the Sierras, that he was not a "communist" but merely a dedicated revolutionary whose interests were not in conflict with those of the United States.

Ed Sullivan, a right-wing New York *Daily News* columnist, flew down to Havana and interviewed Fidel on Jan. 11, 1959. Sullivan assured Castro that "The people of the United States have great admiration for you and your men because you are in the real American tradition of George Washington." Fidel later appeared in his military fatigues on Sullivan's CBS show, one of the nation's leading popular entertainment television programs, and viewed by tens of

millions of people. Said Sullivan, while this writer was watching the show in awe, "Ladies and gentlemen of America, I want to introduce you to Fidel Castro, the George Washington of Cuba." Fidel smiled but did not speak. The live audience thundered with applause.

Cuba's transformation

The conquest of military power in Cuba marked only the beginning of a transformation process that would steadily unfold over the next two years. At each juncture, the Castro team was confronted with decisions that would either return Cuba to the capitalist orbit or irrevocably embark it on a socialist course. The first steps along the socialist road were taken when most all of the initial capitalist appointees proved incapable of implementing the revolution's key promises including a land reform that would, as Che Guevara, the first Minister of Agrarian Reform, argued, employing the credo of the 1911 Mexican Revolution, "grant the land to the tillers."

In May 1959, under Fidel's leadership, Cuba began confiscating U.S.-owned land and distributing it to Cuba's poor peasant masses. This had been the policy of the July 26 Movement before the formal conquest of power. Land in the countryside that had been liberated during the course of battle with the Batista army was given to the affected peasants, thereby cementing their loyalty to the revolution while winning new forces to the revolutionary army. In a similar vein, captured Batista soldiers were freed on condition that they did not return to fight Fidel's growing insurgency.

In the course of the next two years Cuba's land reform exceeded any in modern history since the great Russian Revolution of 1917, when the Bolshevik party of Lenin and Trotsky nationalized the land of a nation that was one-sixth of the earth's land surface and granted it to peasant committees for distribution to Russia's most oppressed, who represented 90 percent of the population.

Needless to say, Cuba's evolving and ever-deepening land reform program alienated both U.S. business interests and the landed interests of Cuba's national capitalist class. The latter increasingly separated themselves from the Castro-led revolutionary process, including financing and arming, with U.S. support, short-lived counterrevolutionary militias in the Escambray Mountains aimed at Fidel's overthrow.

With every step toward implementing the revolutionary promises of July 26 Movement, the U.S. government countered with increasingly hostile measures. Fidel and his evolving team consistently responded by deepening the ongoing revolutionary process. When the U.S.-owned Cuban oil refineries refused to process Soviet crude oil, they were nationalized. The U.S., under the Eisenhower administration, responded by cutting off Cuba's sugar quota, largely a "one crop economy," sugar sales to the U.S. represented a major portion of Cuba national income.

With regard to the economy as a whole and with the ouster of former Batista-era banker Felipe Pazos, the initial head of Cuba's National Bank, Fidel began a search of a replacement. He is said to have asked Cuba's core leadership group if "...anyone in the room had experience as an economist." Che Guevara reportedly raised his hand and was so appointed. Soon afterward, this humorous but incisive episode reveals, when asked about his "economist" experience, Che responded, "I thought Fidel asked if there were 'communists' in the room." As head of Cuba's central bank Guevara proceeded to implement a series of measures that centralized key sectors of Cuba's economy and allowed for Cuba's wealth and industries to operate to benefit the Cuban masses as opposed to the previous capitalist elite.

"To the wall with the terrorists!"

A critical choice was required when soon after the January 1959 victory the Cuban people spontaneously organized mass tribunals to bring to justice some 500 of the worst of Batista's murdering and raping death squad criminals. The ensuing public trials, often conducted in huge stadiums with thousands of Batista's victims present, many of whom proffered uncontested testimony as to the old regime's monstrous crimes, were challenged by U.S. government officials on the grounds that "due process," in the U.S. definition of the term, was denied. Few, if any, however, denied the guilt of Batista's assassins.

U.S. officials demanded that Castro intervene with forces from Cuba's new revolutionary army to halt these proceedings. Once again, Castro and his team refused. The murderers were shot before the firing squads of the revolutionary people when the mass verdict, "Al paredón por los terroristas!" (To the wall with the terrorists!) was proclaimed by Cuba's aroused and participating masses. As with every serious revolution in history, including the 1776 American Revolution and the U.S. Civil War, justice is rapidly dispensed by the long brutalized victims of ruling-class murder and tyranny.

The Bay of Pigs invasion

In addition to U.S.-backed military incursions, not to mention some 100 recorded U.S.-orchestrated efforts at Fidel's assassination over the course of the following decades (some put the figure at 600), the U.S. terminated all diplomatic relations with Cuba and imposed soon after a vicious and illegal embargo/blockade that continues to this day.

The U.S. embargo and diplomatic break with Cuba was followed by the CIA's secret organization and training in Nicaragua and Guatemala, then both U.S.-backed dictatorships, of some 1500 Miami and New Jersey-based Cuban exiles for the infamous April 17, 1961 invasion of Cuba at the remote Playa Girón (Bay of Pigs). Two days earlier, CIA pilots employed B-26 bombers in a failed effort to cripple Cuba's modest air force. But the attack signaled to Fidel and Cuba's armed forces that an invasion was imminent.

U.S. intelligence agencies had predicted that their sponsored invaders would be immediately welcomed by what they conceived of as the "Communist-oppressed Cuban masses." It never happened. In fact, the invasion was secretly conceived by the U.S. military as a pretext to enable the invaders, the sons and hirelings of Cuba's expropriated capitalist class, to quickly establish a beachhead at the Bay of Pigs and beyond, plant their counterrevolutionary flag as "legitimate" occupiers of Cuban territory, and then immediately call for U.S. official recognition and military support.

For the Cuban revolutionary government, the quick defeat of the invaders was crucial. Fidel himself, in a tank at the Bay of Pigs, and at the risk of his life, took command of Cuba's defenses. In less than three days, over a thousand invaders were captured: 100 were killed. Cuban government losses were also significant.

The John F. Kennedy administration initially denied any U.S. involvement, only to be discredited around the world by the direct testimony of many of the invaders. The U.S. propaganda/demonization machine shifted to spurious accusations that the Castro-led government would soon execute all those captured. Instead, the Cubans negotiated an agreement that returned almost all of the invaders to the U.S. in exchange for a U.S. pledge to supply medicines sufficient to inoculate the entire Cuban population against preventable diseases like polio, diphtheria, measles and smallpox.

Whatever remnants of capitalist property remained at the time of the 1961 U.S. invasion were eliminated outright when, in the name of the Cuban people, Fidel announced that the Cuban Revolution would proceed to nationalize the holdings of the Cuban capitalist class and all foreign-owned capitalists, "down to the nails in the soles of your boots." But the method employed by Castro's revolutionary team with regard these nationalizations was unique to say the least. The value of the properties taken from Cuba's elite was determined by the Batista-era official tax records, values reported by the owners themselves. When the latter complained that these figures were inaccurate and highly understated, the Castro team retorted, "You mean to tell us that for decades you have not been paying your fair share of taxes!" Based on Batista's tax records all confiscated capitalists were offered full compensation... paid for via newly-minted Cuban bonds that matured in 20 years! Just compensation indeed! Needless to say Batista fled the country with whatever cash reserves remained while he and his cohorts retained control over the foreign bank accounts they used to stash monies long plundered from the Cuban people.

The Cuban Missile Crisis

It was only after the Bay of Pigs invasion that Fidel formally announced, on Dec. 2, 1961, that he was a Marxist-Leninist. The previous month, he had declared that Cuba's revolution was socialist in character.

Fearing yet another invasion, this time perhaps with the open participation of the U.S. military, the Castro government shocked the world in 1962 when it called on the USSR to aid in the construction of nuclear missile launching sights on Cuban shores. As Russian ships headed toward Cuba loaded with nuclear-tipped missiles, President Kennedy ordered the U.S. Fleet in the region to intercept them while proclaiming that if Cuba fired a single missile at the U.S. the U.S. would consider it an act of war by the Soviet Union and would respond in kind.

This Cuban Missile Crisis put the entire world on edge. For the first time, the possibility of a nuclear war between the USSR and the U.S. loomed as a distinct possibility. At the last moment a negotiated agreement was reached wherein the missiles were withdrawn in return for a U.S. pledge to never invade Cuba. Unpublished or secret aspects of the agreement included the U.S. dismantling of its nuclear weapons bases in Turkey.

Cuba's revolutionary internationalism included its sending thousands of Cuban fighters to support the Angolan government's defense of its sovereignty when confronted with a massive armed invasion by apartheid South Africa's military aimed at restoring a pro-U.S. regime in that country.

At the famous 1986-87 Battle of Cuito Cuanavale Cuban troops defeated a U.S.-backed South African invasion, in time contributing to the end of South African rule of its protectorate in Namibia, and, in 1994 to the end of South Africa's apartheid system. Nelson Mandela, in a subsequent address to the Cuban people, stated that Cuito Cuanavale was "a turning point for the liberation of our continent and my people."

Fidel: the evolution of a revolutionary

Fidel Castro was a bold and courageous revolutionary fighter who came to understand from direct experience that his democratic and egalitarian aspirations could not be realized within the framework of the capitalist system, which is inherently oppressive and predatory.

Under his leadership and with the massive political and moral support of Cuba's oppressed and exploited, Fidel first led in the conquest of military power against a brutal U.S.-backed dictatorship and then proceeded to lead in the

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establishment of what he hoped would be an egalitarian capitalist democracy with equal rights for all. But he quickly came to realize that his initial liberal capitalist allies had no intention of sharing their wealth and economic prerogatives with the Cuban masses. When they resisted implementing the revolution's promised land reform and other such democratic measures, they were quickly eliminated from formal government power.

For another six months, more or less, Cuban society existed in a contradictory form - a workers and farmers government. That is, the formal and evolving government administrative structures were under the control of representatives of the mass of workers and small farmers while the economic forms - private ownership of land and the means of production, banking and finance - remained dominated by the elite capitalist few.

The Castro leadership resolved this contradiction early on, with each adopted measure increasingly limiting the economic power of Cuban capitalism both the foreign and the native variants. By mid-1959 Cuban became a workers' state, having effectively and qualitatively eliminated almost all capitalist private property relations.

For the first time in the Western Hemisphere, a free nation, revolutionary Cuba, devoted its resources to the advancement of the interests of the vast majority. Cuba's literacy program became of model for the world. On a volunteer basis, students more than half were women were encouraged to leave their schools and universities to head for the countryside with only a Coleman (kerosene) lantern and the barest possessions in hand.

By day, the students joined the newly landed poor peasant farmers to toil in the field; by night, in the still electricity-lacking rural areas, they taught these same poor farmers to read and write, in short order raising Cuba's literacy levels to the highest in the world.

Cuba's prostitutes (Havana had become infamous for its mafia-owned gambling casinos and brothels) were trained to take their place among Cuba's finest teachers. Rent on all forms of housing was limited to 10 percent of income, and soon phased out completely. A massively expanded and free system of quality health care and free education was established throughout the island. Cuba today graduates a higher percentage of its population with post-college degrees than any other nation. Cuba has the highest percentage of its population working as medical doctors of any nation earth.

All kinds of government financial support to Cuba's peasant poor was advanced, including low or zero-interest loans for the purchase of seeds and machinery. Universities and hospitals were constructed throughout the island, free to all. Cuba abolished all forms of institutional racism, established mass women's organizations to advance the well-being of women, organized trade unions where workers discussed and debated the nation's priorities and, above all, established the famous Committees for the Defense of the Revolution. The latter were neighborhood-based and armed committees to defend Cuba against U.S.-initiated terrorist activities - and there were many.

Indeed, revolutionary Cuba functioned as a nation of armed people with weapons in hand, day and night, to defend their own interests - perhaps the most striking example of the Castro leadership's confidence in the Cuban masses.

Cuba established a world-class biomedical industry devoted to finding cures for diseases that plague people in Cuba and around the world. Cuban culture art, music, ballet, sports, literature, etc. flourished as never before in the modern era, with Cuba becoming a world cultural center. Its ballet ranks among the top 10 in the world. For a small nation, its athletes win unprecedented numbers of Olympic metals, often ranking in the top 10-20 of all participating nations.

All of the above, and more, were realized in revolutionary Cuba only as a consequence of its abolition of capitalism, led by the Fidel Castro leadership team.

While Cuba's example permeated the consciousness of the youth and revolutionary fighters around the world, U.S. imperialism employed the most monstrous methods of destruction to defeat it, including using biological warfare to wipe out Cuba's banana crops and to kill an estimated 100,000 pigs, not to mention bombing Cuban hotels and shooting down a commercial aircraft that killed Cuba's Olympic fencing team and many other passengers.

Fidel Castro never relented in his defense of the interest of the Cuban and the world's peoples, whose periodic popular and massive mobilizations in the many millions of people exceeded almost any in human history.

Combating racism

Cuba, thoroughly racist and segregated under Batista rule, boldly brought its anti-racist message to the U.S. in 1961 when a Castro-led team attended a meeting of the United Nations General Assembly. When news that a high end mid-town Manhattan hotel had refused rooms for the multi-racial Cuban delegation, Malcolm X, then a leader of the Nation of Islam, publicly invited the Cubans to stay in Harlem.

The New York chapter of the Fair Play for Cuba Committee, led by Berta Green, a member of the Socialist Workers Party, followed up on Malcolm's challenge and reached an agreement with the Cubans to spend their days in Harlem's Hotel Theresa, where Fidel met with Malcolm a stunning rebuke not only to U.S. racism but to a good portion of the U.S. socialist left who at that time rejected Malcolm's revolutionary black nationalism as "racism in reverse."

The Castro-team's internationalism was not limited to words. Believing that Cuba's guerrilla example could be extended to other countries, in the mid-1960's Cuba organized teams of fighters to establish guerrilla "foci" in every Latin American country except Paraguay and Mexico.

Cuba sponsored the famous OLAS conference (Conference of Latin American Solidarity) in 1967 where the vast majority of delegates favored the extension of Cuba's socialist revolution. Fidel's closing remarks noted that a minority of the conference delegates were not in agreement with this perspective, an unmistakable allusion to Moscow-oriented Communist Parties.

OLAS's concluding declaration stated in part: "Revolutionary armed struggle - triumphant in Cuba and already started in Venezuela, Colombia, Guatemala and Bolivia - will not end until the bureaucratic and military apparatus of the bourgeoisie and the landholders is destroyed and the revolutionary power of the working people is established, confronting at the same time the internal counterrevolution and Yankee intervention, to resolutely tear out imperialist domination at its roots."

Cuba and permanent revolution

There was no doubt that Cuba's revolutionary idealism and dedication to peasant centered rural revolutionary struggle to remove U.S.-backed Latin American dictatorships flew in the face of the Stalinist USSR's view that socialist revolution in poor countries was not on the agenda.

But Fidel and his well-intentioned revolutionary fighters tended to underestimate the critical importance of constructing urban-based mass revolutionary workers' parties of the Leninist type and instead focused on relatively

isolated rural guerrilla warfare, not as an adjunct to the seizure of power but rather, as the central directing agency of the revolution.

While successful in Cuba, Cuban-supported rural guerrilla warfare efforts, as with Che's unsuccessful effort in Bolivia, had to be abandoned as it became clear that isolated guerrilla struggles, especially with U.S. imperialism on the alert as never before, could not substitute for the construction of deeply rooted and disciplined, urban-based, revolutionary working-class parties.

Like all human beings, Fidel Castro and his compañeros in the Cuban leadership were never without flaws or free from mistakes and shortcomings. Despite its socialist and democratic spirit and practice, beleaguered Cuba failed to establish the forms of direct democracy that characterized the highest point of the Russian Revolution led by Lenin and Trotsky in 1917.

Soviets (the Russian word for workers' councils, as the basis for the direct political rule of the working masses) do not exist in Cuba. In essence, Cuba's Communist Party makes most of the key decisions in Cuban society.

In my view, a revolutionary workers state finds its fullest expression in the formal, direct, democratic, and institutionalized rule of the working masses. A revolutionary party, no matter how dedicated to the people's cause it may be, cannot substitute itself for the rule of the working masses.

The Cuban leadership's forging of democratic workers' councils today would be the surest way to ensure the ongoing commitment of the Cuban people to the revolution's historic goals, as well as the efficient planning of an economy that best represents the interests of the Cuban masses. Fidel's criticism of Stalinism

Fidel was keenly aware of the Stalinist nature of Cuba's Batista-era pro-Moscow Popular Socialist Party. The latter opposed Fidel's July 26 Movement's struggle for power as "ultraleft," if not "Trotskyist."

In the view of Cuban Stalinists, whose policy was to seek a rapprochement with so-called progressive capitalist governments, including Batista's during his first presidency, socialist revolution was premature and impossible in poor and neo-colonial countries. This contrasted with Trotsky's conception of the revolutionary process in the modern era demonstrated to the world with the Russian Revolution of 1917.

Trotsky held that any successful revolution in the modern era must be "permanent," or uninterrupted, that is, it had to both accomplish the democratic tasks that modern capitalism could no longer implement (e.g., land reform and democratic rights for all) and it had to place the working class, as opposed to capitalist reformers, in power and abolish the capitalist system itself.

The Cuban Revolution amounted to a rejection of the Stalinist "two-stage" conception of revolution, wherein overthrowing capitalism and replacing it with a workers state with the goal of building socialism are to be relegated to a distant "second stage," if at all. This single question remains the critical issue that today separates revolutionists from pro-capitalist reformers the world over.

Venezuela is a prime example of the latter strategy, where the Hugo Chavez/Maduro governments, unlike revolutionary Cuba, failed to challenge the essential framework of Venezuelan capitalism. Venezuela's land, banks, and key financial institutions, as well as significant portions of its massive fossil fuel resources, have remained in the hands of its capitalist ruling class. Notwithstanding the constant ever-deepening U.S. imperialist efforts at undermining Venezuela today, this single fact - the failure or political incapacity of Venezuela's leaders to challenge

capitalist property relations and lead in the empowerment of Venezuela's working masses - in great measure explains Venezuela's tragic devolution today.

Cuba and the USSR

The miracle of the Cuban Revolution is the simple fact that it has endured in the face of the greatest imaginable obstacles. These include a fifty-five year and still ongoing U.S. embargo/blockade, an act of war that would have likely destroyed any lesser revolutionary effort. Add to this the demise of the USSR in 1989-90. As a result, Cuba's tragically necessary lifeline to basic fossil fuel resources and other necessities for more than three decades was terminated virtually overnight, bringing on a great depression that few believed Cuba could survive. Yet revolutionary Cuba, re-charged by Fidel's unbending optimism and egalitarian spirit, did survive and set out to maintain its revolutionary commitments against all odds.

Fidel referred to this "Special Period," a period of "neither war nor peace," as one that would test the mettle of the Cuban people and its leadership as never before. A strict and egalitarian food rationing system was implemented that assured the minimum requirements of the entire population. Cuba transformed its fossil fuel and chemical fertilizer-based food production infrastructure to a model of sustainable agriculture, implementing unprecedented systems of innovative crop rotation, organic fertilizers and non-poisonous organic pest control techniques, all of which resulted in productivity levels that exceeded "modern" chemical-based agricultural practices.

Every aspect of Cuban society, including transportation, industry, healthcare, and even rooftop gardening, was revisited and transformed to maximize efficiency to meet the needs of the virtually isolated Cuban masses.

Fidel and Stalinism

To his death, Fidel remained the harshest critic of U.S. imperialism, constantly cautioning Cuba's leaders, even after his retirement a decade ago, to beware of the capitalist-restorationist intentions that of the Obama administration.

While isolated Cuba was compelled to adopt many of the Soviet-style, that is, Stalinist aspects of bureaucratic planning and management, Fidel was nevertheless exemplary in taking his distance from world Stalinism, at least in part. While the Cubans reluctantly endorsed the USSR's crushing of the 1968 Prague Spring uprising against Stalinist rule in Czechoslovakia, Fidel incisively questioned the legitimacy of a government and of a "socialism" that required the use of force against its own people. Fifteen years later Fidel excoriated Grenada's Bernard Coard as a Stalinist for his key role in the assassination of Grenada's Prime Minister, Maurice Bishop. The latter had been imprisoned for challenging Coard's moves to implement Stalinist-type bureaucratic institutions in Grenada as opposed to Bishop's efforts to foster decision-making workers' and zonal councils and related forms of socialist democracy. Bishop's assassination marked the end of the promising Grenadian Revolution and opened the door wide to the 1983 U.S. invasion. Only the Cuban's, assigned as workers to build Grenada's world class airport, resisted the U.S. onslaught, with Fidel's subsequent and lengthy analysis of this tragedy, condemning Coard's Stalinism and the U.S. invasion, widely disseminated.

No doubt, Fidel and his revolutionary team were not without important limitations. The near total identification of the Cuban Communist Party with the Cuban state institutions or government saw the Cubans not infrequently supporting repressive governments like Mexico, especially when Mexico was seen as a critical source of oil and other necessary resources. It is one thing for the Cuban state to establish trade and other relations with capitalist governments; it is

quite another for the Cuban Communist Party to politically support such repressive governments, as it did in supporting Mexico's PRI (Institutional Revolutionary Party) dictatorship. Need we mention that Cuba expressed a preference for Hillary Clinton in the 2016 election as it did for most Democratic Party presidential candidates in the past?

Party and state in Cuba

In Cuba, despite the formal separation of the Cuban CP and the National Assembly of People's Power (the latter the official government of Cuba) few doubt that any significant decisions in Cuban society are made outside the purview of the CCP. To be sure, such decisions are frequently made following the massive input or "consultation" with the Cuban people through multiple thousands of local assemblies that engage millions in discussion and debate over critical issues. But the final decisions reside with the party only. However much the Cuban CP relies on periodic input from the masses, and however much, in sharp distinction from Stalinist CP's in the USSR and Eastern Europe in the past, the Cuban CP in no manner represents a hardened bureaucratic or Stalinist caste that must rely on mass repression to maintain its rule, Fidel's party ran and continues to run the Cuban state.

In contrast, in the earliest years of the 1917 Russian Revolution led by Lenin and Trotsky, power in society as a whole was vested in the workers' councils (soviets in Russian) established on a national basis in the course of the revolution itself. Representatives to these councils at every level of society were directly elected by the Soviet people, most often at the workplace. All representatives were subject to immediate recall and received the pay of skilled workers in their industry. In contrast to Cuba today, the Russian soviets of workers, peasants and soldiers representatives constituted the state power itself and not the Bolshevik Party. The latter was a vanguard party of the most advanced workers but not synonymous with the Soviet Government, that was structured to represent the broad Russian working class and peasant masses. Workers council-type institutions do not exist in Cuba, in significant part perhaps because the Cuban CP as well as Fidel, beleaguered by imperialism, isolated in the extreme and subjected to constant pressures from within and without, believe that the Cuban CP would be less subject to capitalist restorationist pressures than the Cuban masses themselves. In my view, the establishment of direct socialist democracy, that is, the rule of the revolutionary masses in their own name and not the rule of a party, however revolutionary the latter may be, would strengthen not weaken the Cuban revolution. The direct involvement of the working masses, who are daily involved in every aspect society's productive processes, can only increase overall efficiency and generalized acceptance. Workers' organization and control of production and other key aspects of society's functioning would also lend maximum credibility to decisions made, even if these decisions might involve implementing necessary social cutbacks in order to best ensure the common good. Democratic socialist planning and control of society would also strengthen the bond between the CCP as the leading party of the revolution and the Cuban masses, the very bond that brought the revolution to power and enabled it to survive to this day.

Undoubtedly, no nation on earth, not to mention a tiny island nation surrounded by a world imperialist system that relentlessly seeks its overthrow, can endure indefinitely. "Socialism in one country" has never been the view of serious revolutionaries. Socialism has always been conceived of as a new social order of plenty as opposed to a beleaguered fortress of scarcity that has limited a options to solve the most elementary needs of its people. Yet Cuba continues to defy the odds, and, in fact, has amazingly won victorious against all its arrogant detractors as well as its would-be ruthless conquerors.

Fidel's example endures

Cuba's historic socialist revolution, its fundamental break with capitalism, its half century-plus endurance and the

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undaunting respect and admiration it holds in the hearts and minds of oppressed people everywhere, reminds us once again that capitalist oppression and plunder is incompatible with human progress, that capitalism cannot exist without racism, sexism, exploitation and war and that capitalism must be challenged and abolished at the hands of its victims. This is Fidel Castro's lasting contribution to humanity's future, a legacy of uninterrupted struggle to usher in the world socialist order.