

Was Fidel Good for Cuba?

A Debate Between

Carlos Alberto Montaner & Ignacio Ramonet

Nearly 50 years after a small island nation embarked on one of history's most radical social experiments, it's time to measure the results. Does Fidel Castro's exit offer Cubans a long-awaited chance for freedom and prosperity, or merely mark the end of an era in which Cuba saw unprecedented success? One of Castro's harshest critics squares off with one of his foremost advocates.

COMMUNISM HAS FAILED CUBA

By Carlos Alberto Montaner

After nearly 50 years of suffering under Fidel Castro's regime, Cubans can now realistically prepare for life after El Comandante. As of this writing, the 80-year-old Castro is very ill, if not completely incapacitated. When he dies, will the communist regime he created back in 1959 survive? Or will the country be transformed into a pluralist democracy, equipped with a market-based economic system and the existence of private property, as was the case with almost all of the communist Eastern Bloc dictatorships after the fall of the Soviet Union?

I predict the latter. In the Americas, at the turn of the 21st century, a dictatorship where human rights are not respected, which has more than 300 political prisoners—including 48 young people for collecting

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signatures for a referendum, 23 journalists for writing articles about the regime, and 18 librarians for loaning forbidden books—cannot be sustained. Fidel Castro's death will be the starting point for a series of political and economic changes similar to those that occurred in Europe. Here's why.

First, Castro's leadership is nontransferable. He is a strongman who has personally exercised power for almost half a century. Although his ideology is communism, he is from the same anthropological stock as Spain's Francisco Franco or the Dominican Republic's Rafael Trujillo: the authoritarian military man. This type of authority, based as it is on a combination of fear and respect, cannot be handed down. It's true that Castro's brother, Raúl, has been hand-picked as the successor. But, at 75, his age is also a liability—as is his alcoholism and lack of charisma. In short, he fails to inspire the kind of loyalty that his brother has. In all likelihood, Raúl will simply



play a transitional role between the communist dictatorship and the arrival of democracy.

Second, the Cuban people know that the system Castro created has failed. Every day, they must reckon with the realization that communism has aggravated all of Cuba's basic material problems to the point of desperation. Food, housing, drinking water, transportation, electricity, communications, and clothing are wants that cannot be compensated for by an extensive but very poor educational and health system. Paradoxically, even the revolution's achievements incriminate the regime. The fact that Cuba has a reasonably educated population fosters the society's desire for change and its dissatisfaction with a system bent on having the immense majority of Cubans live miserably. No one is more anxious to abandon egalitarian collectivism than the legion of engineers, doctors, technicians, and teachers forced to live without the slightest hope of betterment. These educated and frustrated Cubans will attempt to press for reform within the communist institutions, or even outside of them.

Third, Cuba must eventually face up to history. The country cannot continue as an anachronistic,

collectivist, communist dictatorship in a world where Marxism has been completely discredited. Cuba belongs to Western civilization. It is part of Latin America, and it makes no sense for its government to keep the country isolated from its surroundings, its roots, and its natural evolution any longer. After all, the dictatorships of Latin America, both on the left (like Velasco Alvarado in Peru) and on the right (Augusto Pinochet and the military regimes in Argentina, Brazil, and Uruguay), were all replaced by governments legitimized at the ballot box.

Lastly, the reformists know that change is not only possible, it is desirable. Cuban leaders, especially those younger than Fidel and his brother Raúl's generation, realize that they are not heroes in a tale of romantic exploits, but the promoters of an absurd system from which everyone escapes who can. And, at the same time, they know, from having watched it in Eastern Europe, there is life after communism. They have all the moral and material incentives to contribute to change. I predict a peaceful change based on agreement between the regime's reformists and opposition democrats both on and off the island.

CUBA'S FUTURE IS NOW

By *Ignacio Ramonet*

Those who argue that after Fidel, Cuba will follow in the footsteps of Eastern Europe stubbornly refuse to see what is already before their eyes. President Fidel Castro has not been on the job since late last July—that is, it's already been more than five months “after Fidel.” And yet, nothing has happened. The regime has not collapsed, nor have the much-anticipated public protests erupted. The system is showing that it can operate normally under these conditions, and the legal institutions are withstanding the shock of Fidel's withdrawal.

Although the current situation has come about because of a gradual decline in Castro's health, it has served as a dress rehearsal for the day when Fidel is no longer alive. And, for the time being, the rehearsal is proving successful, confirming that commentators like you, who compare Cuba to Hungary, are simply wrong.

Unlike in Hungary, major Cuban reforms have not been the result of foreign ideas driven by foreign

troops arriving on Soviet-armored vehicles. Rather, they have proceeded from a popular movement in which the hopes of peasants, workers, and even professionals from the small urban bourgeoisie have converged. This movement also capitalized on the desire for genuine national independence (frustrated by the 1898 U.S. intervention) and the longing to put an end to humiliating racial discrimination. And it continues to have the support of the majority of its citizens. Castro's death will not dismantle a movement hundreds of years in the making. To disavow this national character is to ignore some of the regime's essential dimensions. And it is to fail to understand why, 15 years after the disappearance of the Soviet Union, Cuba's regime is still in place.

Cuba in the years after Castro will, of course, be influenced by outside events. The colossus to the north will see to that. Witness the Bush administration's suggestion of naming someone to lead the “transition in Cuba,” as though the country were some colonial protectorate. It's a shocking suggestion,



even to some members of the opposition. Clearly, the United States is bent on maintaining a misguided relationship with Cuba. It continues to bolster an embargo that, besides making Cubans suffer, has only further legitimated to the rest of the world the regime it aims to defeat. Washington's position is so irrational that even the Bush administration admits that the embargo will not cease until neither Fidel nor his brother Raúl is at the helm. Which means that the U.S. embargo has less to do with any particular political regime than it does the personalities of two individuals. It gives one an idea of the level of neurosis that dictates U.S. policy toward Cuba.

Although the United States is unlikely to reverse its stubborn Cuba policy anytime soon, other Latin American countries have proven more than willing to recognize the advances and advantages of the Cuban system. The generalized failure in Latin America of the neoliberal models preached in the 1990s has rejuvenated Cuba's image as a social model. No one can deny the country's successes in education, health, sports, or medicine. They are again making Cuba a benchmark for the disenfranchised of Latin America. Washington's strategy to isolate Cuba in the hemisphere has failed. Indeed, Cuba has never been as embraced by its neighbors as it is today. Néstor Kirchner in Argentina, Luiz

Inácio "Lula" da Silva in Brazil, Evo Morales in Bolivia, Hugo Chávez in Venezuela, and Daniel Ortega in Nicaragua have all publicly expressed respect for Fidel Castro and solidarity with Cuba. And the majority of them are adopting "Cuban solutions" for some of their social problems. This legacy will undoubtedly outlive Fidel Castro.

You also fail to emphasize the reforms that Castro's regime has embarked on, including the opening up to foreign investment, partial deregulation of foreign trade, the decriminalization of the possession of foreign currency, the revitalization of tourism, and so on. More important, the regime has diversified the country's trade relations, signing agreements with Argentina, Brazil, China, Venezuela, and Vietnam. The result? During the past 10 years, Cuba's average annual growth in gross domestic product was roughly 5 percent, among the highest in Latin America. In 2005, for example, the country saw growth rates of 11.8 percent (including the value of its social services), and a similar rate is expected for 2006.

For the first time in its history, this country does not depend on a preferred partner, as it depended, successively, on Spain, the United States, and the Soviet Union. It is more independent than ever. With that rare and hard-earned distinction, Cubans are unlikely to reverse course.

CUBANS ARE POOR AND ENSLAVED

Carlos Alberto Montaner responds

Anyone familiar with Cuban history knows that Fidel led the revolution against President Fulgencio Batista to restore freedoms to Cuba and to reinstate the Constitution of 1940, not to create a communist dictatorship copied from the Soviet model. The reason communism has not tumbled in Cuba, just as it has not in North Korea, is because of the country's complete repression. It's a brand of repression linked entirely to one dying man. When he goes, so too will much of the fear that his regime instills in its people.

In spite of political differences, all human beings have the same hopes: They prefer freedom to oppression, human rights to tyranny, peace to war, and they want their living conditions to improve for themselves and their families. This statement is as true in Hungary as it is in Cuba. Cubans want the same changes that repressed peoples have always fought for. And when Fidel Castro's passing provides them a chance to make those changes, they will seize it.

Just look at the facts. At cubaarchive.org, Cuban economist Armando Lago and his assistant, Maria Werlau, have compiled a balance sheet that explains why Castro's regime forced 2 million Cubans (and their descendants) into exile. Under Castro, there have been

roughly 5,700 executions, 1,200 extrajudicial murders, 77,800 dead or lost raftsmen, and 11,700 Cuban dead in international missions, most of them during 15 years of African wars in Ethiopia and Angola. Castro's legacy will be one of bloodshed and injustice, not one of Latin "solidarity" and reform.

You blame the United States and its embargo for the Cuban people's material problems. But your analysis ignores the devastating impact that collectivism and the lack of economic and political freedoms—not the United States—had upon Soviet Bloc countries, ultimately leading to their demise. And statistics on Cuba's economic growth are highly suspect. The official Cuban numbers for Castro's economic and social achievements are so poorly regarded that the Economic Commission for Latin America and the Caribbean opted not to take them into account when it compiled its own statistics on the true measures of Cuban society. And the idea that Cuba is now more independent than ever is laughable, considering that much of the economic growth that you cite is buoyed by \$2 billion a year in Venezuelan subsidies.

When Castro's revolution started, he asserted that all of the country's economic ills originated from Washington's exploitation of the island. Since then,



he has claimed that they are due to the fact that Washington does *not* exploit it. Which is it? It is also a curious paradox of the Castro regime that it fiercely opposes the U.S.-backed Free Trade Area of the Americas, while it demands that the embargo be lifted so it can trade freely with the United States. These contradictions notwithstanding, the truth is that the United States is a remarkable trade partner of Cuba's. Every year, the United States sells

to Cuba roughly \$350 million in agricultural products, it permits money transfers estimated at \$1 billion a year (or half the island's exports), and, what's more, it grants resident visas to 20,000 Cubans each year, relieving the government of serious social pressures. And the United States is already preparing for the end of the sanctions once Cuba proves to be headed down the road to democracy. That is not the behavior of an implacable enemy.

CASTRO'S ENVIABLE RECORD

Ignacio Ramonet responds

Even if Fidel Castro were as repressive as you believe, history provides no shortage of examples of discontented people rising up against repression. From the former East Germany to Poland, Hungary, and Czechoslovakia, on up to China, just to cite cases of rebellions against authoritarian communism, people have managed to fight oppression. In Fidel Castro's Cuba, however, there have been no major uprisings. When Castro eventually succumbs to his illnesses, there is nothing to suggest that Cubans will suddenly rise up against socialism.

You must stop looking at Cuba through an ideological prism and twisting the facts to fit in with a preconceived scheme of things. It is time to reason

like adults. Your statistics, which blur the number of fighters killed in an old war (1956–59) with the number of people anxious to emigrate, the majority for economic reasons, show nothing. Exaggeration turns to insignificance.

No serious organization has ever accused Cuba—where, in fact, a moratorium on the death penalty has been in place since 2001—of carrying out “disappearances,” engaging in extrajudicial executions, or even performing physical torture on detainees. The same cannot be said of the United States in its five-year-old “war on terror.” Of these three types of crimes, not a single case exists in Cuba. On the contrary, to a certain extent the Cuban regime stands for life. It has succeeded in increasing life expectancy and lowering infant mortality. As *New York Times* columnist Nicholas Kristof asserted in a Jan. 12, 2005, article, “If the U.S. had an infant mortality rate as good as Cuba's, [it] would save an additional 2,212 American babies a year.”

These successes constitute a great legacy of Fidel Castro's, one that few Cubans, even those in the opposition, would want to lose and one that the many Latin Americans who have been swayed recently by populist leaders covet. Cubans enjoy full employment, and each citizen is entitled to three meals a day, an achievement that continues to elude Brazil's Lula.

But Castro will not only be remembered as a defender of the weakest and poorest citizens. Historians 100 years from now will credit Castro with building a cohesive nation with a strong identity, even after a century and a half of the white, elitist temptation to side with the United States out of fear of the numerous and oppressed black population. They will remember him correctly, as a preeminent pioneer in the history of his country.



THE END OF A SAD CHAPTER

Carlos Alberto Montaner responds

How can you speak of “no major uprisings”? You know as well as I that, in fact, there was popular resistance to the establishment of the communist dictatorship. In the 1960s, thousands of peasants rose up in arms in the mountains of Escambray and were quashed by Castro’s regime. The number of political prisoners in the first two decades of his regime was estimated at 90,000, and even the government admits to 20,000.

In addition to this quantification of the “human cost of the revolution,” anyone who wants to know the cruelty of the communist repression in Cuba can read the 137 Amnesty International reports and press releases on the subject, or the abuses documented in numerous Human Rights Watch accounts. The most publicized crime of the Castro era has so far been the deliberate sinking of the boat “13 de Marzo” ordered on July 13, 1994, with 72 refugees on board. Of the 41 who drowned, 10 were children.



Castro will not be remembered as a luminary or an upholder of human rights. The Cuban people will look back on the Castro era with sadness. He leaves as an inheritance a detailed catalogue of how not to govern. We should have different political parties and not just one dogmatic, inflexible, impoverishing, and misguided one. We should respect human rights. We should trust in the democratic method, in the rule of law, in the market, and in private property, just as do the most prosperous and happy nations on Earth. We must tolerate and respect religious minorities and homosexuals,

forever prohibiting “acts of repudiation” or pogroms against people who are different. We must permanently eradicate the “apartheid” that prevents Cubans from enjoying the hotels, restaurants, and beaches that only foreigners are allowed to frequent. We must live in peace, giving up the international adventurism that cost so much blood in Africa, as well as in half of the planet’s guerrilla groups, which Castro inspired. With his passing, we must strive to be, in short, a normal, peaceful, and modern nation, not a delirious revolutionary project aimed at changing the history of the world.

SEEING THE TRUTH

Ignacio Ramonet responds

As long as we are talking about gross human rights violations, why don’t we begin with the United States’ continued protection in Miami of two avowed terrorists, Cuban exiles Luis Posada Carriles and Orlando Bosch, who are accused of blowing up a Cuban civil aircraft on Oct. 6, 1976, killing 73 people? This act has yet to be denounced by those in Miami who continue to nurse old resentments against Cuba. They have not protested against the 3,000 Cuban victims killed by terrorist actions financed by and directed from the United States. Could this be a double standard, a repudiation of “bad” (al Qaeda) terrorism and an acceptance of “good” (anti-Cuban) terrorism?

And if human rights are a concern for you, how can you deny that Cuba, a small country, is the one

that gives the most medical assistance to dozens of poor states throughout the world? In more than 30 countries, there are some 30,000 Cuban doctors working for free. Proportionately speaking, it would be as if the United States sent 900,000 doctors to the Third World. The “Miracle Mission” alone, which provides free cataract operations for poor Venezuelans, Bolivians, and Central Americans, has given more than 150,000 people back their eyesight. Is seeing one’s children and the landscapes of one’s homeland not a fundamental human right? Cuba does not accept its denial to millions of poor people.

It is a shame that while you look back with heated reproaches, you do not see the truth of what is happening in Cuba today and do not know how to decode the permanence of its socialist regime.

CUBA LIBRE

Carlos Alberto Montaner responds

There are always intellectuals ready to justify crimes. It was the case with Stalin and Franco, and now it will be the case with Castro. It is morally incomprehensible: They love the executioners and hate the victims. How can the Cuban government simultaneously respect solidarity with its Latin neighbors and yet fail to uphold human rights in its own backyard? Where is the mutual incompatibility between solidarity and democracy? Judging a half century of incompetent and atrocious dictatorship by the cataract operations it performs is

the fascist argument characteristically wielded by Franco’s apologists: His dictatorship was good because Spaniards managed to eat three times a day. It was also the argument of South Africa’s racists: Apartheid was good because the country’s blacks were not as poor as their neighbors. Castro’s dictatorship was good, we now learn, because it leased doctors to the Third World.

No, all dictatorships—like all forms of terrorism—are reprehensible. Don’t forget that Castro came to power using guerrilla and terrorist tactics (Havanans remember perfectly the “Night of 100

Bombs” in 1958), but more serious is the fact that the island has been used as a staging area for narcotrafickers, including the Colombian group FARC. Do these intellectuals want a regime like Cuba’s for France? I suppose not. And if they do not want it for France or for themselves, why do they want it for us Cubans? Do we Cubans not have the right to

freedom and democracy? But, despite this sad complicity, the day will come for releasing the political prisoners, for holding pluralist elections, and for beginning the material and moral reconstruction of an artificially impoverished society cruelly terrorized by repression and devastated by Stalinist totalitarianism. After Castro, Cuba will be free.

VIVA FIDEL!

Ignacio Ramonet responds

Prominent intellectuals have always been on the side of those plagued by the arrogance of the powerful opponents of Fidel Castro’s Cuba are no exception. Setting oneself up against Cuba and in favor of the United States, whose administration is accused of very serious abuses (torturing prisoners, kidnapping civilians locked up without trial in secret jails, murdering suspects, and creating a prison in Guantánamo Bay, Cuba, completely outside the law) as denounced by the world’s respectable consciences, is not the behavior of a halfway-informed citizen.

It is not even a question of an intellectual stance. Being an intellectual must be earned. And the first step is to become informed and not to mention South African apartheid while ignoring that it collapsed only when its elite troops were defeated in December 1986 at Cuito Cuanavale, “apartheid’s Stalingrad,” not by U.S. forces, but by Cuban troops. That is what prompted Nelson Mandela, an icon for our time, to say that Fidel Castro’s revolution “has been a source of inspiration to all freedom-loving people.” He, like so many of the Cubans who will mourn their leader’s passing, was wont to cry, “Viva comrade Fidel Castro!” **FP**

[Want to Know More?]

Both participants of this debate have written extensively on Fidel Castro and his life, legacy, and impact on Latin America. Ignacio Ramonet’s *Fidel Castro: Biografía a dos voces* (Madrid: Debate, 2006) is the product of more than 100 hours of interviews with Castro. Carlos Alberto Montaner’s *Journey to the Heart of Cuba: Life as Fidel Castro* (New York: Algora, 2001) offers a critical assessment of the psychological profile and political legacy of the Cuban leader.

For insight into Castro’s psyche—and reading habits—see the rare book review he penned discussing the work of his friend Gabriel García Márquez in “Chronicle of a Friendship Foretold” (*FOREIGN POLICY*, March/April 2003). In *After Fidel: The Inside Story of Castro’s Regime and Cuba’s Next Leader* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2005), former CIA officer Brian Latell details how the relationship between Fidel and Raúl continues to shape the myths and reality of Cuban history. Jorge Domínguez looks forward to a future without Fidel in “Cuba: His Brother’s Keeper,” part of *FOREIGN POLICY*’s package on post-dictatorship societies, “The Day After” (*FOREIGN POLICY*, November/December 2003).

The short film *Bye Bye Havana* (Journeyman Pictures, 2005), by J. Michael Seyfer, paints a colorful and sobering picture of the Cuba that Fidel will leave behind. Reporter Anthony DePalma narrates “Focus on Cuba: Fidel Castro Cedes Power” (*NYTimes.com*, Aug. 2, 2006), a photo essay that captures the emotional drama surrounding Castro’s exit from the political stage.

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