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‘The Flower of Culture’
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The Cuban revolution, led by the young Fidel Castro, sets the stage for tenuous relations with the United States. The Cuban missile crisis arises from growing U.S.–Cuba tensions over Cuba’s relationship with the Soviets.

The U.S. intervention against Spain was no doubt motivated in part by the desire to help the Cuban people attain freedom. But it is a sad fact that, after the war for independence, Cuba became much like a U.S. colony. Forced into poverty under these circumstances, the Cuban people could not help but harbor anti-American sentiments.

After World War II, Fulgencio Batista, a military officer and former Cuban president, seized the reins of power in a 1952 coup. He installed himself as a dictator and for seven years oppressed and tyrannized the Cuban people — while lining his pockets at their expense.

This ill-famed regime was finally toppled in the Cuban revolution led by Fidel Castro. On Jan. 1, 1959, Batista fled the country, and Castro and his revolutionary forces, greeted by the joyous cheers of the citizens, entered the capital of Havana.

Castro was only 32 years old. He had devoted seven years to the anti-Batista revolutionary movement. He was a committed revolutionary who had survived armed insurrections, imprisonment, exile and guerrilla warfare in the mountains. Winning the people’s support, he had now succeeded in ousting the Batista dictatorship.

In the beginning, the key cabinet posts of the new revolutionary government were occupied by moderates, and there wasn’t a great emphasis on socialist revolution. The U.S. administration under President Dwight D. Eisenhower quickly recognized the new government. But when Castro became the country’s premier in February, he began to emphasize a popular socialist revolution, focusing primarily on labor and farm workers. In order to close the enormous gap between the nation’s rich and poor, this perhaps was unavoidable.

In May, the First Agrarian Reform Law was passed, and huge estates were confiscated. In 1960, when three American oil companies refused to refine petroleum that Cuba had imported from the Soviet Union, the Cuban government nationalized the refineries. From that point on, the relationship between Cuba and the United States plummeted.

America responded by drastically cutting its imports of Cuban sugar. It also banned exports of most U.S. products to Cuba, leading to the island’s isolation from much of the world through external trade restrictions and economic sanctions.

Cuba would starve unless it could export its sugar — and the Soviet Union presented itself as a buyer. This inevitably led to the strengthening of Soviet–Cuban relations.

The institution of socialism in Cuba proceeded rapidly, and more and more large corporations and private land holdings were nationalized. One source suggests that by the end of 1960, some \$1 billion in U.S. assets in Cuba was nationalized.

Naturally, this led to a steady worsening of relations between the two countries, and on Jan. 3, 1961, the United States severed diplomatic relations with Cuba. When John F. Kennedy was inaugurated as the 35th U.S. president on Jan. 20, the two nations were already locked in an antagonistic standoff. It came to a head with the Bay of Pigs invasion a few months later, on April 17.

This was an abortive invasion of Cuba by a force of anti-Castro Cuban exiles, but in fact

the CIA was deeply involved in both its planning and execution. The intelligence reports supplied to the U.S. leaders at the time concerning anticipated Cuban response suggested that once the Cuban exiles landed, anti-Castro forces in Cuba would rise with them and overthrow the government with little resistance. But exactly the opposite happened.

The exiles were driven back by Cuban armed forces in a mere three days. And, instead of inciting a rebellion against Castro's government, the invasion further cemented the Cuban people's unity.

President Kennedy received strong domestic and international criticism for this debacle. Actually, a short time before announcing his presidential candidacy, Kennedy referred to Castro as an intellectual heir to the legacy of Simón Bolívar, hero of South American independence. He also adopted a more flexible posture toward Cuba and other Latin American nations, to better understand the heavy burdens borne by those countries and the revolutionary ideals of their peoples. That Kennedy would approve the Bay of Pigs invasion, which appears to have been the brainchild of the previous administration, remains one of the great historical ironies of that era.

At this time, Castro declared the Cuban revolution to be a socialist one. To Cuba, the United States was seen as a powerful, threatening giant in the north. The Bay of Pigs incident produced in the Cuban people a sense of crisis and the fear that the United States might invade at any moment. It was also a major factor in driving Cuba further into the arms of the Soviet Union.

In 1962, Cuba signed a trade agreement with the Soviets. This resulted in the expulsion of Cuba from the Organization of American States and a complete U.S. embargo on all trade with Cuba.

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