

Cuba Under Fidel Castro

A review article

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Having just turned 80 on August 13 and undergone major surgery for what may have been stomach cancer at the end of July, a transitional time may be near in Cuba with Fidel Castro Ruz beginning to hand over power to his brother Raul and/or others in the months ahead. It passed without irony or mention of imperial arrogance in a brief front page comment in the August 19th issue of the Wall Street Journal that the US won't invade Cuba but a "dynastic succession" is not acceptable. It would have been too much to expect the Journal to have noted that same type succession happened in the US in 2000 and 2004 and in elections exposed and documented as badly tainted at least and likely stolen at worst on top of five arrogant Supreme Court Justices refusing to allow a proper recount of the disputed vote and, in effect, annulling the voice of the people and replacing it with their choice for president. It's called "democracy, American style." It also would have been too much to expect the WSJ to challenge the language it quoted asking what right does anyone in the Bush administration have to tell another nation what type succession policy is or is not acceptable.

No one can know for sure what lies ahead for Cuba or if Castro will even survive. But now beginning his ninth decade and clearly facing a long and difficult recovery, the Cuban leader may have no other choice than to step aside in handling the country's day to day affairs although his influence will always be felt as long as he's alive and lucid. When, not if, the time of transition arrives, an historic era will have passed for the Cuban people and the region. And, while it won't be easy for a successor replacing a 'legend,' the history of just Israel and the US alone shows it can happen successfully. It likely will in Cuba as well because the great majority of people there won't tolerate a return to the ugly, repressive pre-Castro past even though most of them never lived through it.

Looking back, one thing for sure can be said about Fidel Castro. He's the longest serving political leader in the world having first gained power on January 1, 1959. For him and Cuba it marked the successful culmination of his quest to do so that began with his unsuccessful attack on the Moncada army post in Santiago de Cuba in July, 1953 for which he stood trial and was sentenced in October that year to serve 15 years in the Isle of Pines penitentiary. For his efforts and while in prison Castro fast became a legend which may or may not have helped him win amnesty and release in May, 1955 after which he first became a non-violent agitator against the US backed oppressive and corrupted Fulgencio Batista dictatorship. Because he was censored and banned from speaking publicly, that strategy got him nowhere and he was forced to leave Cuba for Mexico to plan what became his 26th of July Movement that would be the means to take by force what no opposition in Batista's Cuba could achieve politically. With few resources and little support, Castro and 82 of his followers returned to the Sierra Maestra Mountains in his country in December, 1956 to begin the

revolution that would finally succeed when he and what grew to 800 loyal followers entered Havana on January 1, 1959. His small band of determined resistance guerilla fighters had defeated Batista's army of thousands and forced the Cuban dictator to flee the country. From that time forward, the rest, as they say, is history.

The "Liberation" of Cuba, US-Style

From the earliest days of Cuba under Castro, the US imposed harsh conditions on the island state and waged an unending undeclared war against it. It wanted to destabilize the government, kill Fidel Castro or at the least make life so intolerable for the Cuban people, they'd willingly allow themselves to be ruled again by the interests of capital and the dictates of so-called "free market" forces. That many-decade campaign of state-directed terror never worked and likely never will convince the great majority of the Cuban people to favor giving up the essential social gains they now have for a return to what they surely know was a repressive past. They understand if it ever happened, it would be a throwback not just to the days and ways of the hated Batista regime but also to the time US President McKinley "liberated" the island from Spain in an earlier war based on a lie. From that time forward until the Castro-led revolution, the US effectively ruled Cuba as a de facto colony and used it to serve the interests of wealth and power at the expense of the welfare of the people. In his time, McKinley promised to let the Cubans govern themselves after the Spanish-American war, but the dominant Republicans in the Congress had other ideas and were only willing to go along with the island's self-rule if under it the US was allowed "to veto any decision (the Cuban government) made."

One of the earliest examples of US dominance was the Platt Amendment the Congress passed in 1901 after the US "liberated" Cuba in 1898. This federal law ceded Guantanamo Bay to the US to be used as the naval base we've had ever since and granted the US the right to intervene in Cuban affairs whenever it deemed it necessary. Theodore Roosevelt later signed the original Guantanamo lease agreement the terms of which gave the US jurisdiction over the territory that can only be terminated by the mutual consent of both countries as long as annual rent payments are made. The US thus gave itself the right to occupy part of sovereign Cuban territory in perpetuity regardless of how the Cuban people feel about it. The Castro government clearly wants the US out and through the years made its views clear by refusing to cash every US lease payment check it got other than the first one right after the successful revolution.

The US Embargo on Cuba

Whatever one's view of Fidel Castro Ruz, it's clear the achievements of the Republica de Cuba under his rule for nearly 48 years have been remarkable. He managed to do it in spite of the oppressive partial embargo the US imposed on the island state in October, 1960 that became a total embargo 16 months later in February, 1962 when it was expanded to include everything except non-subsidized sales of food and medicines and a month later banned the import of all goods made from Cuban materials regardless of where they were made. The embargo was further tightened with the passage of the Cuban Democracy (Torricelli) Act in 1992 that legalized the encouragement of pro-US opposition groups to act forcefully against the Castro government. It was made still far worse in 1996 after the passage of the outrageous Helms-Burton Act that allows the US government the right to sue any corporation anywhere that does business with Cuba.

Today the US embargo remains in place but is under siege because of its unpopularity

among sectors of the US business community that want access to the Cuban market. They include oil and agricultural interests that see the profit potential of trading with Cuba and want to end the restrictions on it now in place. For US oil companies there are potential Cuban oil reserves they want access to, and for agribusiness there's a significant Cuban market for their exports. As a result, the pressure is mounting on the Bush administration which up to now has been defiant in its opposition to Fidel Castro and remains hostile and punitive. But of late the action has been in the Congress with attempts to pass legislation and avoid a Bush veto to ease the current restrictions and allow some economic relations with Cuba that for decades have been banned. For now it's uncertain whether the demands of US business will win out over the fiercely unyielding Bush administration's anti-Castro foreign policy. This and past administrations have always resisted all outside pressure to change their multi-decade hostile policy stance that included ignoring over a dozen overwhelming UN General Assembly votes to end the embargo. In all those votes (excluding abstentions), it was nearly the entire world voting to end it and two or three nations wanting to keep it - the US, Israel and one or another Pacific island.

Travel and Other Restrictions On US Citizens

To destabilize the Castro government, the US for over 40 years has also imposed travel and other restrictions on its own citizens. After the Cuban Missile Crisis in October, 1962, President Kennedy first imposed restrictions on travel to the island in February, 1963. Through the years, US laws have changed at times but have grown harsher under the current Bush administration. Technically no US citizen can legally travel to Cuba without a Treasury license to do so. Doing it otherwise will subject anyone caught to fines up to \$10,000 and possibly much higher as well as up to 10 years in prison. Until 2001, the travel restrictions were loosely enforced with only 16 criminal prosecutions between 1983 and 1999. However, all that changed post-2001, and now anyone caught travelling illegally to Cuba stands a real risk of heavy fine and possible imprisonment in this time of USA Patriot Act justice and the fraudulent "war on terror."

For those US citizens allowed to travel to Cuba, there are further limitations on the amount of money they may spend there or send to the country in the case of remittances to immediate family members there or to a Cuban national living in a third country. Under US Treasury license authorization, a visitor is allowed to spend a maximum \$50 per day for non-transportational expenses and an additional \$50 per day for transportation expenses. It's also permissible for persons in the US 18 years of age or older to remit to an immediate family member in Cuba or a Cuban national in a third country a maximum \$300 per household in any consecutive three month period.

These restrictions of movement and a citizen's right to use ones own financial resources freely likely violate two or more amendments to the US Constitution although nothing in the Constitution specifically guarantees the freedom to travel. At the time the Constitution was written, the right to travel freely was unquestioned and was unheard of before the Cold War began after WW II. After that time limitations were imposed, but challenges to them were made all the way to the Supreme Court which ruled in 1967 that restricting freedom of movement was an infringement of a citizen's constitutional rights. Justice William Douglas said at the time that "Freedom of movement is the very essence of our free society, setting us apart.....it often makes other rights meaningful." On two other occasions in 1962 and 1984, the High Court ruled otherwise by narrow margins but only under "the weightiest conditions of national security" necessitated by the Cold War. It's quite likely a Bush-friendly majority on the present Court would uphold the harsher restrictions favored by the Bush

administration and permit one more way for them to destroy our civil liberties.

And they no doubt would do it despite the fact that the right of free movement anywhere encroaches on the right to liberty which the Fifth Amendment specifically states citizens cannot be deprived of without the due process of law. This restriction also likely violates the First Amendment right of free expression and to be able to hear the speech of others, gather information and associate with others as we choose – activities that should be inviolate in a free and democratic society. In addition, the fact that freedom of travel was an unquestioned right when the Constitution was drafted is the reason for the Ninth Amendment which grants the states all other rights not specifically written into the Constitution. Any restrictions thus imposed and enforced in violation of constitutional law are a direct infringement of our sacred freedoms, fundamental rights and civil liberties and unless challenged and successfully reversed in the courts are dangerous steps toward a national security police state under which citizens and residents have no rights.

US restrictive laws also violate international law under Article 12 of the UN International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights that guarantees everyone the right to leave any country, including one's own, and return to it. Article 13 of the non-binding Universal Declaration of Human Rights guarantees the same thing as does the 1975 US - Soviet Union Helsinki Agreement committing both nations to protecting the right of its citizens to move freely across borders. The US, especially since the advent of the current Bush administration, has shown its contempt for international and US constitutional law ruling instead by Executive Order to pursue whatever policies it wishes in a manner characteristic of a dictatorship and with no restraint put on it by the Congress or the courts.

The result is a gross infringement of our civil liberties that will likely become far worse in the wake of the Orwellian Real ID Act of 2005 passed by the US Congress to become effective in May, 2008. This law mandates that every US citizen and legal resident have a national ID card (in most cases a person's driver's license) that will contain on it the holder's vital personal information. It also requires the states to meet federal ID standards. A likely future requirement will be what now is mandated by mid-2007 for all newly issued and renewed passports – that they be embedded with a radio frequency identification (RFID) technology computer chip that will be able to track all the movements, activities and transactions of everyone having them. This is an Orwellian dream for any government wanting police state powers and will let US authorities know the names of all persons in the US travelling to Cuba or anywhere else in cases where they did it from third countries so as to remain anonymous. No longer, and with national ID cards mandatory by mid-2008, the tracking of all US citizens and legal residents will become even easier.

Nearly Forty-Eight Years Later and Looking Back – the Castro Revolution and His Government

Fidel Castro's revolution likely was born in March, 1952 after Fulgencio Batista seized power forcibly by coup d'état after it was clear he had no chance of winning the presidential election that year in which he was running a distant third in the polls. Batista, with full backing from the US, instituted a brutal police state that served the interests of capital and turned the island into a casino and brothel. It was marked by severe corruption, little concern for social needs, and violent crackdowns against the people to maintain order. Fidel Castro wanted none of it. Despite being born into a wealthy Cuban farming family in 1926, being educated in private schools and later at the University of Havana to study law, Castro went his own way. He became politically active early on in 1947 and joined the Partido

Ortodoxa Party of the Cuban People to campaign against government corruption and misrule and to demand reform. He also began a law practice in a small partnership after receiving his degree in 1950 devoting most of his time to representing the poor.

Castro wanted change in Cuba and no doubt learned back then if it couldn't come about politically it would have to happen by force. As events dictated, Castro came to power by the latter path when he became the country's Prime Minister in February, 1959 following the successful revolution he led. He's held on to it to this day. He kept his title of premier until 1976 when he became the President of the Council of State and Council of Ministers as chief of state and head of the Cuban government and ruling Communist Party of Cuba (PCC) that was formed in October, 1965. Under the 1976 Constitution, the Republica de Cuba vests all legislative power in the country's 619 member National Assembly of People's Power who serve five year terms. To be elected to it, those candidates must receive at least 50% of the eligible votes. At the executive level sits a 24 member Council of State that's elected by the Assembly and headed by an elected president and vice-president. The Council's President (currently Fidel Castro) is both Head of State and Head of Government. The Vice-President is his brother Raul. Executive and administrative power is vested in the Council of Ministers as recommended by the Head of State.

The PCC has governed Cuba since being formed and is Cuba's only legally recognized political party. While other political parties and opposition groups exist in the country, their activities are minimal and the state views them as mostly illegal. The Cuban Constitution allows free speech, but the opposition's rights are restricted under Article 62 that states: "None of the freedoms which are recognized for citizens can be exercised contrary to...the existence and objectives of the socialist state, or contrary to the decision of the Cuban people to build socialism and communism. Violations of this principle can be punished by law." That one party basis is how Cuba has been governed since Castro assumed power, and officially the Republica de Cuba is called a socialist state. It was inspired and guided by the principles of Jose Marti, Cuba's 19th century born greatest hero who believed freedom and justice for the people should be the cornerstones of any government and despotic regimes that abused human rights should be condemned.

Castro's Human Rights Record In A Climate of Continued US Efforts To Destabilize and Topple His Government. A Comparison to Hugo Chavez's Record in Venezuela

Castro's record as Cuba's leader is mixed at best as judged by the principles its "greatest hero" espoused. Unlike his ally and friend President Hugo Chavez in Venezuela who established a true participatory democracy by national referendum, Castro chose not to allow Cuba to be governed democratically. Instead he decided early on that he above all others would decide what was best for the Cuban people and little dissent would be allowed. The result is that while Cuba is a model state in delivering essential social services to be discussed in detail below, it comes at the expense of the freedom to oppose the ruling state authority. In the past, Amnesty International reported on the crackdown on dissent in Cuba and in recent years on the significant increase in what Amnesty calls the number of prisoners of conscience. The Cuban government claims only "foreign agents" whose activities endanger Cuban independence and security have been arrested, but Amnesty disagrees even while recognizing the threat to the island by the US and the harm done to it by years of an oppressive and unjustifiable embargo.

Amnesty was quite clear in its language stating: "The economic, commercial and financial

embargo imposed by the United States against Cuba has served as an ongoing justification for Cuban state repression and has contributed to a climate in which human rights violations occur.” Those violations include accusations of police state arrests, unfair trials, arbitrary imprisonments and the right to use capital punishment in cases of armed hijacking even after the Castro government placed a moratorium on the death penalty in 2001. While some of what Amnesty reports may be true, it’s also important to note what it leaves out. It pays little attention to how for decades the US repeatedly tried to destabilize Cuba under Castro, isolate it in the region, destroy its economy, and failed in many attempts to assassinate the Cuban leader. Amnesty also doesn’t explain how the US recruited and used various non-governmental organizations (NGOs) to act as spies under the cover of their supposed missions. The Cuban government has every right to arrest, prosecute and imprison the ones they catch committing these acts of subversion against the island state for the US authorities that hired them, and Amnesty and other human rights groups fail to fulfill their obligation for full disclosure by not explaining this.

Hugo Chavez in Venezuela has also been a US target for elimination but charted a somewhat different course than Fidel Castro in spite of it since being elected President in December, 1998 and assuming office in February, 1999. From the start, Chavez and his Movement for the Fifth Republic Party (MVR) wanted and got his revolution by the ballot box. In fairness to Castro, he too preferred that way but found it impossible under the repressive dictatorship of Fulgencio Batista. Hugo Chavez had a more favorable climate and once elected sought to achieve what few other political leaders ever do – keep his promises to the people who elected him. In a nation of overwhelming poverty, he wanted to follow the vision of 19th century revolutionary hero Simon Bolivar and his spirit of Bolivarianism to free the Venezuelan people of what Bolivar called the imperial curse “to plague Latin America with misery in the name of liberty.”

He did it with his own Bolivarian Revolution based on the principles of participatory democracy and social justice, convened a National Constituent Assembly to draft a new constitution that reflected these principles, and allowed the Venezuelan people the right to vote it into binding law by national referendum which they did overwhelmingly in December, 1999. The new constitution which went into effect in December, 2000 established the legal foundation for Hugo Chavez to move ahead with the political, economic and social justice structural changes he wanted for his people. He wanted to lift them from poverty, guarantee them essential social services like free health care and education to the highest level, the right of free expression to include criticizing the President, and the fundamental principle of true participatory democracy so that the people have a say in how their country is governed.

Fidel Castro much earlier was a model for Hugo Chavez in how he established essential social services for the Cuban people like world-class free health care for all and free education through the university level. These will be discussed in detail below. But he failed by not fully permitting Cuba to be governed democratically with unrestricted free and fair elections, effective opposition parties, the right to speak freely, openly and critically of the President even though everyone holding political office in the country including the President and Vice-President must be elected to it.

The Castro government also imposes unfair travel restrictions on the movement of its people requiring them to obtain exit visas to leave the island. More recently these restrictions were relaxed somewhat but not entirely. They’re still imposed on professionals with essential skills, and in the case of human rights activists who have the right to leave

Cuba but not to return. These freedom of movement restrictions violate international law under Article 12 of the UN International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights as already explained. Seeing that Hugo Chavez and Fidel Castro appear to be good friends and allies, it's to be hoped the Cuban leader or his successor will see how successful the Chavez approach has been in Venezuela and one day wish to alter the Cuban state model to be in full accordance with the spirit and letter of Bolivarianism.

Nearly Five Decades of US-Directed Intimidation, Destabilization and Attempts to Overthrow the Castro Government

The US-directed terror campaign to oust Fidel Castro began under Presidents Dwight Eisenhower and Kennedy with the failed Bay of Pigs invasion, continued with "The Cuban Project" (aka Operation Mongoose) in 1961 to "help Cuba overthrow the Communist regime" and Fidel Castro and aim "for a revolt which can take place in Cuba by October, 1962." It continued under the same and new names with many dozens of plots through the years to kill Castro including bizarre ones like using a poisoned wetsuit, poison pens, a pistol hidden in a camera (that almost worked), exploding cigars, explosive seashells in Castro's favorite diving places and a special hair removal powder to make the leader's beard fall out (maybe believing the latter scheme would remove Castro's power much like the biblical Sampson lost his physical strength after Delilah had his hair cut). In the mid-1990s, Noam Chomsky commented that "Cuba was the target of more international terrorism than probably the rest of the world combined, up until Nicaragua in the 1980s." And it was conducted by US-initiated state terrorism against the island state to remove a leader because he chose not to govern the way the US wished him to.

Besides the schemes listed above, the list of US terror tactics against Cuba is far too long to list in total here. They include US attacks on Cuban sugar mills by air, a 1960 blowing up of a Belgian ship in Havana harbor killing 100 sailors and dock workers, dynamiting stores, theaters, a Havana department store and burning down another one. In addition, there were dozens of attacks and bombings and over 600 known plans or attempts to assassinate Fidel Castro including the bizarre ones listed above. The CIA also conducted biological warfare against Cuba including introducing dangerous viruses to the island affecting sugar cane and other crops, African swine fever in 1971 that resulted in the need to slaughter half a million pigs, and hemorrhagic dengue fever that caused the deaths of at least 81 children in 1981. These incidents were later confirmed in declassified US documents.

It's also well remembered that Cubana flight 455 was terror-bombed in October, 1976 by former CIA agent Luis Posada Carriles that killed the 73 people on board. The plot was likely masterminded by Orlando Bosch who devoted his life to committing terrorist attacks against Cuba and trying to kill Fidel Castro. Now at age 80, he lives near Miami and was recently interviewed by Andy Robinson of La Vanguardia. He told Mr. Robinson he once nearly succeeded in killing Castro in 1971 in Chile (with a pistol hidden in a camera), but the assassins sent there to do it "chickened out and didn't shoot" even though they were standing meters away from the Cuban leader and easily could have done it.

Posada, too, was frank in at least one interview he gave to the New York Times. He said "The CIA taught us everything... explosives, how to kill, bomb, trained us in acts of sabotage." Posada, like Bosch, spent 40 years trying to overthrow the Castro government forcibly and was personally responsible for many acts of violence over that period. In April, 2005 he sought political asylum in the US, apparently won't get it as the Bush administration is seeking a "friendly" country to extradite him to while ignoring requests for

extradition by Cuba and Venezuela to face charges of terrorism in both countries. Posada was also likely responsible for other terror-bombings of hotels later in the 1990s to destroy the Cuban tourist industry with the help of CIA financing to do it. It's also well known that CIA trained US based paramilitary groups like Alpha 66 and Brothers to the Rescue in Florida are free to operate from here where they're regarded as heroes among Cuban reactionaries. They have no fear of prosecution or extradition to Cuba for their crimes against the island state.

With all the detail above and much more than this article can cover, it's easy to understand that the Cuban government or any other under such continued assault to destabilize and topple it would be on high alert at all times and would always have to take all necessary precautions to assure the security of the state, its leader and people. That's more true than ever today as the out-of-control Bush administration is committed to regime change on the island and set up a Commission for Assistance to a Free Cuba to help achieve it. The Commission presented its Report to the President in July this year detailing its plan to return Cuba to its pre-Castro de facto colonial status and end the Castro socialist revolution and all the benefits it brought to the Cuban people. In a word, the Bush administration wants to do for Cuba what it did in "liberating" Iraq and Afghanistan and do it by force if necessary. It wants to re-privatize every publicly operated state enterprise and return the Cuban people to the status of serfs exploited by capital, set up a puppet government to administer the changeover, and have it all controlled by Washington and the corporate giants its beholden to.

Fidel Castro knows he's under threat and must take every measure to thwart it. To do otherwise would be foolish and irresponsible. Nonetheless, no leader or government should ever do this by denying its citizens and residents their civil liberties nor should the people anywhere allow them to be taken. Benjamin Franklin understood the danger and wisely explained that "Those who would give up Essential Liberty to purchase a little Temporary Safety, deserve neither Liberty nor Safety." And he likely also said those willing to make that sacrifice for security will lose both. So while all necessary precautions are fully justified and necessary against a dangerous and determined adversary or even in a time of war, under no circumstances should a free people ever be willing to give up what they always should be working for to secure and preserve.

Cuba As A Socialist State

In the early years of the Cuban revolution, the Castro government made a clean break with all vestiges of the world capitalist economy. It nationalized US industries like the public utilities, carried out land reform, closed down the Mafia-owned casinos and ended long-standing and systemic corruption. Fidel Castro intended to build a socialist state based on the principles of a largely state-owned, government directed planned economy. He did it and transformed the nation from one controlled mostly by US capital interests and the underworld to the current system in place under which most of the means of production are owned and operated by the state which employs most of the labor force.

But Cuba has been changing somewhat since the dissolution of the Soviet Union that provided it with large and vitally needed subsidies, supplied it with oil at low prices and provided a ready market for Cuban exports like a large portion of its annual sugar crop it no longer could sell to the US because of the economic embargo. Out of necessity to revive its economy that was severely affected in the early 1990s, the Castro government began to allow a limited amount of free enterprise. To increase its agricultural output and relieve food

shortages, it changed its farm strategy to an emphasis on smaller-sized ones and shifted from state-owned to cooperative production allowing farmers the right to receive a certain percentage of the profits from their crop yields above a basic required level. The government's goal was to incentivize farmers to reach their maximum production potential and earn income for themselves by doing it. The Cuban government also began to allow commercial Agricultural Markets to be opened around the country as further incentive for farmers to produce more and privately be able to profit from selling the excess amount of it. These Markets have also been a tactical success in neutralizing the negative effects of the country's black market by making a more readily available supply of affordable food for the Cuban people able to avail themselves of it.

The government also introduced changes in the areas of small retail and light manufacturing enterprises loosening the restrictions on the right to operate them as private for-profit businesses. In addition, the government legalized the use of the US dollar and mounted a concerted effort to take advantage of the island's desirable Caribbean location to develop the country's tourism industry by encouraging offshore private investment. In 1995, the Cuban Constitution was changed to encourage it. It granted 100% ownership to foreign companies in joint ventures on the island - up from the 49% cap established in 1982. The change brought about a dramatic increase in joint venture agreements that jumped from 20 in 1991 to 398 in 2001 (substantially in the tourist sector). Cuba has benefitted from them all as a way to attract foreign capital, boost the economy, and provide jobs for the Cuban people. The results so far are significant as tourism experienced impressive growth in the last 15 years. The annual number of visitors to Cuba in 2004 was about 2 million or a six-fold increase since 1990 and the amount they spent increased eight-fold to nearly \$2 billion. By the year 2000, private sector employment had grown to about 23% of the total labor force which was up from 8% in 1981. Over the same period, public sector employment dropped to about 77% of the total from the 92% level it was at in 1981.

Social Services under Castro

In delivering essential social services to the Cuban people, the Castro government has had its most notable and admirable successes. Its through them that the Castro revolution became firmly institutionalized in the hearts and minds of the great majority of the people who never before had a government providing for their essential needs they'll now never relinquish without a fight. Why should they. Article 50 of the Cuban Constitution adopted in 1976 and approved by 97% of the country's eligible voters at the time mandates that all Cubans are entitled to receive free medical, hospital and dental care including prophylactic services. The Constitution emphasizes public health, preventive care, health education, programs for periodic medical examinations, immunizations and other preventive measures. It guarantees that all Cubans will have their health protected, and in Article 43 it stipulates that all citizens have the same rights without regard to "color of skin, gender, religious belief, national origin and any distinction harmful to the dignity of man." The Constitution also provides for worker health and safety, help for the elderly and pregnant working women having the right to paid leave before and after birth to ensure maternal and infant health. In 1983, Cuba also adopted the Public Health Law that makes it a fundamental and permanent state obligation to assure, improve and protect the health of its citizens including the rehabilitation of persons suffering from physical or mental disabilities. These services are intended to restore patients to active, productive lives and improve their overall welfare.

In 1989, the World Health Organization (WHO) singled out the Cuban health care system as a "model for the world." It cited its extensive system of family doctors and sophisticated

tertiary care facilities, emphasis on its nutritional safety net, its low infant mortality rate at 6 per 1,000 population that's equal to the average for the developed world and lower than the 7 per thousand for the US. Cuba also equals the US in life expectancy, has double the number of physicians per 1000 population than the US and an overall lower mortality rate. It also has the most complete infant immunization coverage in the developing world and an exemplary national health and nutrition education program emphasizing the development and use of chemical-free, non-GMO, organically grown fresh produce which it hopes to have enough of in another decade to feed its entire population. And it accomplishes all this at a far lower cost per capita than its rich northern neighbor that spends the most per capita of any nation but doesn't care for over 46 million of its citizens who have no access to health care services and many millions more with far too little.

At the end of the 1990s, the WHO updated its findings on health care delivery in Cuba following the dissolution of the Soviet Union combined with the severities caused by the US embargo. It reported severe shortages of needed pharmaceuticals and medical supplies that constrained the ability of the Cuban government to service all the medical and health needs of its people fully. But the Castro government has always had to deal with hardships and shortages of essential goods and services and most often proved its ingenuity to handle adversity in innovative ways eventually devising solutions to deal with them. One way it did it is through government investment in and development of a world-class homegrown biotechnology industry done in the state-of-the-art research labs of the Cuban Genetic Engineering and Biotechnology Center. Here Cuban scientists invented cholesterol-lowering drugs, detection tests for AIDS, a meningitis vaccine, remedies for hepatitis B, and other new pharmaceuticals. The Cuban people reap the benefit of these discoveries free of charge and the government earns needed foreign exchange reserves by exporting these products to ready world buyers for them outside the US.

The Cuban people have every reason to be proud of the quality and breadth of their health care delivery system. It's world-class in stature as is the country's education system that's also totally free to all Cubans to the highest university level and shows Fidel Castro's commitment to the wisdom of Diogenes who said "The foundation of every state is the education of its youth." Castro offers these services not just to his own people but uses them to export as well to other nations needing them, particularly in the region, as a means of barter trade in return for essential products Cuba needs to import like oil from its ally Venezuela.

Just how good education is in Cuba is seen in a report on it by the Latin American Center for the Evaluation of the Quality of Education which is part of the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO). It showed Cuban students achieved nearly double the scores in math and literature of any of the other 14 Latin American or Caribbean nations currently in the organization. It does it because the Castro government is committed to delivering first class education to all in the country and mandates the right to it for everyone in Article 51 of the Cuban Constitution.

It says: "Everybody has a right to education. This right is guaranteed by the extensive and free system of schools, part-time boarding schools, boarding schools and scholarships in all types and at all levels of education, by the free provision of school materials to every child and young person regardless of the economic situation of the family, and by the provision of courses suited to the student's aptitude, the requirements of society and the needs of economic and social development." The quality of teaching is also high, and class sizes are much lower in number than in the US, and they may get down as low as 15 on average to

allow Cuban teachers more time to spend with their students than their US, Latin American and Caribbean counterparts.

Cuba has also virtually eliminated illiteracy (as has Venezuela with the help of thousands of Cuban teachers sent to the country) while in the US the Department of Education cites a functional illiteracy rate of 20% of the population. But that figure excludes a far higher percentage of the high-school educated population that can only read at an elementary school level and when seeking entrance to college must get remedial help to qualify. The same high percentage of US high school graduates also shows up on low-rated math skills, again requiring remedial help to advance to the college level.

The Cuban education system is much different. It's not just the best in the hemisphere, but it's one that emphasizes breadth as well as quality. All students receive education in math, reading, the sciences, arts, humanities, social responsibility, civics and participatory citizenship. The aim is to give all Cubans the skills they need to make them better and more productive citizens. It's done so they may contribute as adults to helping the nation improve and further develop its impressive programs in health, education, the sciences, ecology, agriculture and the arts.

The results are impressive, yet life is still hard for the average Cuban because of the US embargo against the country. It prevents many goods from entering, including essential ones like certain foodstuffs and drugs, that would ease conditions and make them more tolerable. It also makes many of those that do come in more costly because of the greater transportation cost to get them there from distant places like Europe.

Nonetheless, and in spite of the overwhelming obstacles it faces, the Castro government has been committed to serving the basic needs of the Cuban people and through the years has been innovative and unrelenting in finding ways to do it well. As a result, the government always managed to avoid a humanitarian disaster by maintaining in place the pillars of its social model that affirm a priority to human development and essential needs. Besides its world-class health care and education systems, Cubans are assured a nutritious food supply at affordable prices and availability of it free in schools, hospitals and homes for the elderly. The Cuban government also maintains a commitment to scientific research that will produce benefits for the people as well as attention to cultural development. And it's done it all and more in spite of the severe budgetary constraints under which it must function making the achievements all the more impressive.

Fidel Castro's commitment to his people was expressed in Law Number 49 passed one month after he assumed power. It stipulated that the government would provide social services to those needing them. The current law assures special assistance (including financial help) will be provided to the most vulnerable groups in need to include the elderly, persons unable to work and single mothers. The Constitution also mandates that all its citizens are to be treated equally under the law, removed restrictions on religious belief from the Constitution in the early 1990s allowing Cubans the right to freely express and practice their religious beliefs as long as they're not opposed to the socialist principles of the state, and commits the government to assuring all its people have the right to a job and access to sports and culture. As a result, the country has full employment and no homeless people on the streets which compares to its rich northern neighbor that has a considerable problem in both areas but does almost nothing to address them.

What May Lie Ahead For Cuba and Its People

A watershed moment may have arrived for Cuba with the July 31 announcement that Fidel Castro underwent major surgery for what may have been stomach cancer. In official post-operative statements by officials and Fidel himself, the surgery went well and recovery is proceeding normally although it may be long and uncertain. That certainly is true for a man who on August 13, turned 80. In the pictures released of the Cuban leader he looked fine but not feisty as he likely would have prior to his surgery. At this point, it's likely neither he nor his doctors are certain what his prognosis is, but they and the Cuban people know one thing for sure. All his life Fidel Castro has been an unrelenting committed fighter, and he's not likely to change now, especially as his life and welfare may hang in the balance.

Still, Cuba seems certain to be approaching a critical moment in its post-Batista history. It now must address the issue of succession, its commitment to its socialist principles and how it will relate to the rest of the world, especially the US that's totally committed to regime change in the island state and a return of the country to its oppressive former rule by the interests of capital. What may unfold ahead is anyone's guess so here's one to consider. Before the Castro revolution, the Cuban people had only known decades of exploitation, repression and no attention paid to the most basic of human social needs. But since Fidel Castro came to power they've gotten them, and it hardly seems likely they'll ever willingly give them up without a fight. The US may be planning to return the Cuban state to its ugly past, but the best guess ventured here is it won't happen because Cubans won't allow it to. The great majority of them support Fidel Castro and all he's done for them. They know he won't rule the island forever, and if now is the time for him to step aside, they expect and no doubt will get a new leader as fully committed to serving them as the man who more than any other leader in the past half century is a living legend. Alive or passed on, Fidel Castro will be a great symbol and hero to the Cuban people. They're not likely ever to want to let his legacy die.

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