

History Will Absolve Me: Fidel Castro, Sixty Years Later

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Today marks the 60th anniversary of Fidel Castro's famous "History Will Absolve Me" speech, given in his defense during his trial following the unsuccessful guerrilla attack on the Moncada barracks on July 26 of that year.

The complete speech, which was transcribed after the fact entirely from memory, is available [here](#) in English and [aquí](#) en Castellano, and below I am highlighting certain extracts which I think are still critically relevant today.

To mark this occasion, one source of inspiration has been this year's publication of Arnold August's *Cuba and Its Neighbours: Democracy in Motion* ([Zed Books](#), [Fernwood Publishing](#)); chapter 5 (Democracy, Elections and the New State) begins with a few pages devoted to describing and analyzing the significance of the Moncada assault and the "History Will Absolve Me" speech.



As Arnold August explains in his important new book, the current debate about democracy, elections, and the nature of the revolutionary state in Cuba, really owes its origins to the period beginning in 1953. The intention behind the Moncada action was to effectively restart the Cuban Wars of Independence of 1868-1898.

Fidel Castro gave intellectual credit to José Martí for motivating this attack, but as August notes, he was equally well versed with the works of Lenin and Marx at that time. In the extracts below, one can witness Fidel drawing on an even wider body of thinking concerning “freedom,” which includes key thinkers in the western liberal tradition.

Indeed, August acknowledges that there is some debate as to “how radical” Castro’s speech was, with the emerging consensus in Cuba being that it was shaped and suited for the circumstances of the time and was perhaps the most radical statement available in that context. I also see the logic in the latter proposition, if by radical we mean a far-reaching program to solve the most deeply rooted social and political-economic problems and their cultural manifestations.

As related by August, Castro commented in 2007 that his 1953 speech contained “the basic elements of a future Socialist revolution, which didn’t have to come immediately—it could be carried out gradually, progressively, but it would be solid and uncontainable...although we wouldn’t hesitate to radicalize it if necessary” (p. 92).

In a revolutionary outlook on a struggle that would act as a preview of the hemisphere’s rebellion against dependent modernization over the next 40 years, and against

neoliberalism in the 20 years that followed them, Fidel Castro planted a number of cornerstones for a program of radical change. Among these were the notion that sovereignty lies within the people (and here Castro chose “the people” as a category, over “class”); a militant program of agrarian reform to break the monopoly of large estates owned by the very few, that is, the oligarchy; greatly increased rights to increased revenues and even ownership by workers and peasants; and a sweeping transformation of housing, education, and healthcare.

These are not accidental choices, nor are they “natural”—they are all key features of any revolutionary leftwing program of social transformation that we find in the Americas and further afield. They speak to a vision of a dignified, good life, free from the avoidable miseries of daily life that are solely the product of the decisions and greed of others.

These elements for achieving social justice in concrete terms can be found, beyond Cuba, in the programs of the [Sandinista Front for National Liberation in Nicaragua](#); the [Farabundo Martí Front for National Liberation](#) in El Salvador; a range of revolutionary organizations in Guatemala such as the [URNG](#); the [New Jewel Movement in Grenada](#); and closer to the present, the movements and parties embodied by the leadership of [Hugo Chávez](#), [Evo Morales](#), and [Rafael Correa](#), and further away, in Libya under Muammar Gaddafi. Marking this 60th anniversary thus becomes a way of acknowledging original precedents and inspiring ideas that would then emerge and develop in their own terms, in their own contexts, on different soils.

Within months of the trial, as August informs us, tens of thousands of copies of this speech were printed and distributed, and it remains one of the landmark political statements in the history of the Americas.



HISTORY WILL ABSOLVE ME

Select Passages

Are they that afraid of the truth?

Honorable Judges: Why such interest in silencing me? Why is every type of argument foregone in order to avoid presenting any target whatsoever against which I might direct my own brief? Is it that they lack any legal, moral or political basis on which to put forth a serious formulation of the question? Are they that afraid of the truth? Do they hope that I, too, will speak for only two minutes and that I will not touch upon the points which have caused certain people sleepless nights since July 26th? Since the prosecutor's petition was restricted to the mere reading of five lines of an article of the Social Defense Code, might they suppose that I too would limit myself to those same lines and circle round them like some slave turning a millstone? I shall by no means accept such a gag, for in this trial there is much more than the freedom of a single individual at stake. Fundamental matters of principle are being debated here, the right of men to be free is on trial, the very foundations of our existence as a civilized and democratic nation are in the balance. When this trial is over, I do not want to have to reproach myself for any principle left undefended, for any truth left unsaid, for any crime not denounced.

An uprising against a usurper of the people's power can never be a crime:



It is a fundamental principle of criminal law that an imputed offense must correspond exactly to the type of crime described by law. If no law applies exactly to the point in question, then there is no offense.

The article in question reads textually: 'A penalty of imprisonment of from three to ten years shall be imposed upon the perpetrator of any act aimed at bringing about an armed uprising against the Constitutional Powers of the State. The penalty shall be imprisonment for from five to twenty years, in the event that insurrection actually be carried into effect.'

In what country is the Honorable Prosecutor living? Who has told him that we have sought to bring about an uprising against the Constitutional Powers of the State? Two things are self-evident. First of all, the dictatorship that oppresses the nation is not a constitutional power, but an unconstitutional one: it was established against the Constitution, over the head of the Constitution, violating the legitimate Constitution of the Republic. The legitimate Constitution is that which emanates directly from a sovereign people. I shall demonstrate this point fully later on, notwithstanding all the subterfuges contrived by cowards and traitors to justify the unjustifiable. Secondly, the article refers to Powers, in the plural, as in the case of a republic governed by a Legislative Power, an Executive Power, and a Judicial Power which balance and counterbalance one another. We have fomented a rebellion against one single power, an illegal one, which has usurped and merged into a single whole both the Legislative and Executive Powers of the nation, and so has destroyed the entire system that was specifically safeguarded by the Code now under our analysis.

My voice will not be stifled:

I warn you, I am just beginning! If there is in your hearts a vestige of love for your country, love for humanity, love for justice, listen carefully. I know that I will be silenced for many years; I know that the regime will try to suppress the truth by all possible means; I know that there will be a conspiracy to bury me in oblivion. But my voice will not be stifled – it will rise from my breast even when I feel most alone, and my heart will give it all the fire that callous cowards deny it.

Everyone had instructions, first of all, to be humane in the struggle...

Let me mention two important facts that facilitate an objective judgement of our attitude. First: we could have taken over the regiment simply by seizing all the high ranking officers in their homes. This possibility was rejected for the very humane reason that we wished to avoid scenes of tragedy and struggle in the presence of their families. Second: we decided not to take any radio station over until the Army camp was in our power. This attitude, unusually magnanimous and considerate, spared the citizens a great deal of bloodshed. With only ten men I could have seized a radio station and called the people to revolt. There is no questioning the people's will to fight.

The regime has emphatically repeated that our Movement did not have popular support. I have never heard an assertion so naive, and at the same time so full of bad faith. The regime seeks to show submission and cowardice on the part of the people. They all but claim that the people support the dictatorship; they do not know how offensive this is to the brave Orientales. Santiago thought our attack was only a local disturbance between two factions of soldiers; not until many hours later did they realize what had really happened. Who can doubt the valor, civic pride and limitless courage of the rebel and patriotic people of Santiago de Cuba? If Moncada had fallen into our hands, even the women of Santiago de Cuba would have risen in arms. Many were the rifles loaded for our fighters by the nurses at the Civilian Hospital. They fought alongside us. That is something we will never forget.

It was never our intention to engage the soldiers of the regiment in combat. We wanted to seize control of them and their weapons in a surprise attack, arouse the people and call the soldiers to abandon the odious flag of the tyranny and to embrace the banner of freedom; to defend the supreme interests of the nation and not the petty interests of a small clique; to turn their guns around and fire on the people's enemies and not on the people, among whom are their own sons and fathers; to unite with the people as the brothers that they are instead of opposing the people as the enemies the government tries to make of them; to march behind the only beautiful ideal worthy of sacrificing one's life - the greatness and happiness of one's country. To those who doubt that many soldiers would have followed us, I ask: What Cuban does not cherish glory? What heart is not set aflame by the promise of freedom?

...as to the rest of the national armed forces, would they have fought against a people in revolt? I declare that they would not! A soldier is made of flesh and blood; he thinks, observes, feels. He is susceptible to the opinions, beliefs, sympathies and antipathies of the people. If you ask his opinion, he may tell you he cannot express it; but that does not mean he has no opinion. He is affected by exactly the same problems that affect other citizens - subsistence, rent, the education of his children, their future, etc. Everything of this kind is an inevitable point of contact between him and the people and everything of this kind relates him to the present and future situation of the society in which he lives. It is foolish to imagine that the salary a soldier receives from the State - a modest enough salary at that - should resolve the vital problems imposed on him by his needs, duties and feelings as a member of his community.

...I have a right to express an opinion about the Armed Forces because I defended them when everyone else was silent. And I did this neither as a conspirator, nor from any kind of personal interest - for we then enjoyed full constitutional prerogatives. I was prompted only

by humane instincts and civic duty. In those days, the newspaper *Alerta* was one of the most widely read because of its position on national political matters. In its pages I campaigned against the forced labor to which the soldiers were subjected on the private estates of high civil personages and military officers. On March 3rd, 1952 I supplied the Courts with data, photographs, films and other proof denouncing this state of affairs. I also pointed out in those articles that it was elementary decency to increase army salaries. I should like to know who else raised his voice on that occasion to protest against all this injustice done to the soldiers. Certainly not Batista and company, living well-protected on their luxurious estates, surrounded by all kinds of security measures, while I ran a thousand risks with neither bodyguards nor arms.

...I want to be just above all else, so I can't blame all the soldiers for the shameful crimes that stain a few evil and treacherous Army men. But every honorable and upstanding soldier who loves his career and his uniform is dutybound to demand and to fight for the cleansing of this guilt, to avenge this betrayal and to see the guilty punished. Otherwise the soldier's uniform will forever be a mark of infamy instead of a source of pride.

...On the other hand, the soldiers endure a worse tyranny than the civilians. They are under constant surveillance and not one of them enjoys the slightest security in his job. Any unjustified suspicion, any gossip, any intrigue, or denunciation, is sufficient to bring transfer, dishonorable discharge or imprisonment. Did not Tabernilla, in a memorandum, forbid them to talk with anyone opposed to the government, that is to say, with ninety-nine percent of the people? ... What a lack of confidence! ... Not even the vestal virgins of Rome had to abide by such a rule! As for the much publicized little houses for enlisted men, there aren't 300 on the whole Island; yet with what has been spent on tanks, guns and other weaponry every soldier might have a place to live. Batista isn't concerned with taking care of the Army, but that the Army take care of him! He increases the Army's power of oppression and killing but does not improve living conditions for the soldiers. Triple guard duty, constant confinement to barracks, continuous anxiety, the enmity of the people, uncertainty about the future - this is what has been given to the soldier. In other words: 'Die for the regime, soldier, give it your sweat and blood. We shall dedicate a speech to you and award you a posthumous promotion (when it no longer matters) and afterwards... we shall go on living luxuriously, making ourselves rich. Kill, abuse, oppress the people. When the people get tired and all this comes to an end, you can pay for our crimes while we go abroad and live like kings. And if one day we return, don't you or your children knock on the doors of our mansions, for we shall be millionaires and millionaires do not mingle with the poor. Kill, soldier, oppress the people, die for the regime, give your sweat and blood...'



No weaponry can vanquish the people:

They have tried to establish the myth that modern arms render the people helpless in overthrowing tyrants. Military parades and the pompous display of machines of war are used to perpetuate this myth and to create a complex of absolute impotence in the people. But no weaponry, no violence can vanquish the people once they are determined to win back their rights.

...This is how peoples fight when they want to win their freedom; they throw stones at airplanes and overturn tanks!

What does the struggle of the people really mean? Which people? What kind of struggle?

When we speak of struggle and we mention the people we mean the vast unredeemed masses, those to whom everyone makes promises and who are deceived by all; we mean the people who yearn for a better, more dignified and more just nation; who are moved by ancestral aspirations to justice, for they have suffered injustice and mockery generation after generation; those who long for great and wise changes in all aspects of their life; people who, to attain those changes, are ready to give even the very last breath they have when they believe in something or in someone, especially when they believe in themselves. The first condition of sincerity and good faith in any endeavor is to do precisely what nobody else ever does, that is, to speak with absolute clarity, without fear. The demagogues and professional politicians who manage to perform the miracle of being right about everything and of pleasing everyone are, necessarily, deceiving everyone about everything. The revolutionaries must proclaim their ideas courageously, define their principles and express their intentions so that no one is deceived, neither friend nor foe.



In terms of struggle, when we talk about people we're talking about the six hundred thousand Cubans without work, who want to earn their daily bread honestly without having to emigrate from their homeland in search of a livelihood; the five hundred thousand farm laborers who live in miserable shacks, who work four months of the year and starve the rest, sharing their misery with their children, who don't have an inch of land to till and whose existence would move any heart not made of stone; the four hundred thousand industrial workers and laborers whose retirement funds have been embezzled, whose benefits are being taken away, whose homes are wretched quarters, whose salaries pass from the hands of the boss to those of the moneylender, whose future is a pay reduction and dismissal, whose life is endless work and whose only rest is the tomb; the one hundred thousand small farmers who live and die working land that is not theirs, looking at it with the sadness of Moses gazing at the promised land, to die without ever owning it, who like feudal serfs have to pay for the use of their parcel of land by giving up a portion of its produce, who cannot love it, improve it, beautify it nor plant a cedar or an orange tree on it because they never know when a sheriff will come with the rural guard to evict them from it; the thirty thousand teachers and professors who are so devoted, dedicated and so necessary to the better destiny of future generations and who are so badly treated and paid; the twenty thousand small business men weighed down by debts, ruined by the crisis and harangued by a plague of grafting and venal officials; the ten thousand young professional people: doctors, engineers, lawyers, veterinarians, school teachers, dentists, pharmacists, newspapermen, painters, sculptors, etc., who finish school with their degrees anxious to work and full of hope, only to find themselves at a dead end, all doors closed to them, and where no ears hear their clamor or supplication. These are the people, the ones who know misfortune and, therefore, are capable of fighting with limitless courage! To these people whose desperate roads through life have been paved with the bricks of betrayal and false promises, we were not going to say: 'We will give you ...' but rather: 'Here it is, now fight for it with everything you have, so that liberty and happiness may be yours!'

The Five Revolutionary Laws:



The five revolutionary laws that would have been proclaimed immediately after the capture of the Moncada Barracks and would have been broadcast to the nation by radio must be included in the indictment....

The first revolutionary law would have returned power to the people and proclaimed the 1940 Constitution the Supreme Law of the State until such time as the people should decide to modify or change it. And in order to effect its implementation and punish those who violated it - there being no electoral organization to carry this out - the revolutionary movement, as the circumstantial incarnation of this sovereignty, the only source of legitimate power, would have assumed all the faculties inherent therein, except that of modifying the Constitution itself: in other words, it would have assumed the legislative, executive and judicial powers....

The second revolutionary law would give non-mortgageable and non-transferable ownership of the land to all tenant and subtenant farmers, lessees, share croppers and squatters who hold parcels of five caballerías of land or less, and the State would indemnify the former owners on the basis of the rental which they would have received for these parcels over a period of ten years.

The third revolutionary law would have granted workers and employees the right to share 30% of the profits of all the large industrial, mercantile and mining enterprises, including the sugar mills. The strictly agricultural enterprises would be exempt in consideration of other agrarian laws which would be put into effect.

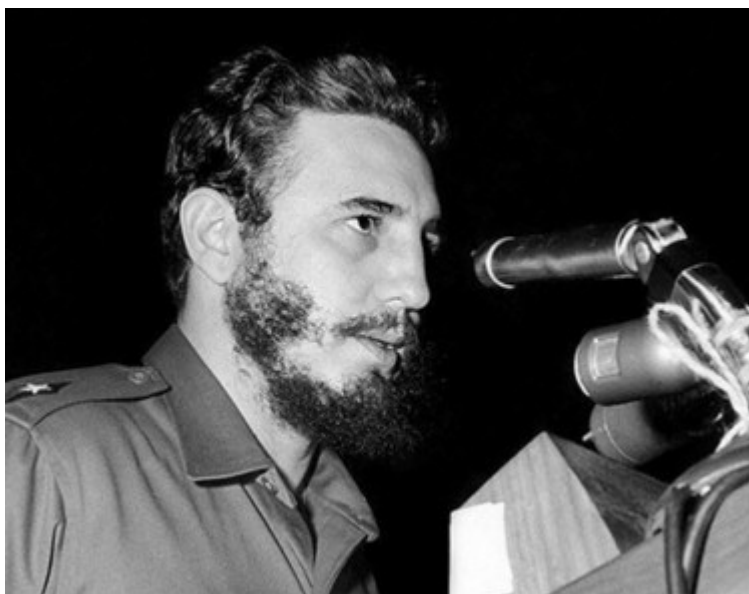
The fourth revolutionary law would have granted all sugar planters the right to share 55% of sugar production and a minimum quota of forty thousand arrobas for all small tenant farmers who have been established for three years or more.

The fifth revolutionary law would have ordered the confiscation of all holdings and ill-gotten gains of those who had committed frauds during previous regimes, as well as the holdings and ill-gotten gains of all their legates and heirs....

Furthermore, it was declared that the Cuban policy in the Americas would be one of close solidarity with the democratic peoples of this continent, and that all those politically persecuted by bloody tyrannies oppressing our sister nations would find generous asylum, brotherhood and bread in the land of Martí; not the persecution, hunger and treason they find today. Cuba should be the bulwark of liberty and not a shameful link in the chain of despotism.

...The problem of the land, the problem of industrialization, the problem of housing, the problem of unemployment, the problem of education and the problem of the people's health: these are the six problems we would take immediate steps to solve, along with restoration of civil liberties and political democracy.

The landscape of social injustice:



...Eighty-five per cent of the small farmers in Cuba pay rent and live under constant threat of being evicted from the land they till. More than half of our most productive land is in the hands of foreigners. In Oriente, the largest province, the lands of the United Fruit Company and the West Indian Company link the northern and southern coasts. There are two hundred thousand peasant families who do not have a single acre of land to till to provide food for their starving children. On the other hand, nearly three hundred thousand caballerías of cultivable land owned by powerful interests remain uncultivated. If Cuba is above all an agricultural State, if its population is largely rural, if the city depends on these rural areas, if the people from our countryside won our war of independence, if our nation's greatness and prosperity depend on a healthy and vigorous rural population that loves the land and knows how to work it, if this population depends on a State that protects and guides it, then how can the present state of affairs be allowed to continue?

Except for a few food, lumber and textile industries, Cuba continues to be primarily a producer of raw materials. We export sugar to import candy, we export hides to import shoes, we export iron to import plows ... Everyone agrees with the urgent need to industrialize the nation, that we need steel industries, paper and chemical industries, that we must improve our cattle and grain production, the technology and processing in our food industry in order to defend ourselves against the ruinous competition from Europe in cheese products, condensed milk, liquors and edible oils, and the United States in canned goods; that we need cargo ships; that tourism should be an enormous source of revenue. But the capitalists insist that the workers remain under the yoke. The State sits back with its arms

crossed and industrialization can wait forever.

Just as serious or even worse is the housing problem. There are two hundred thousand huts and hovels in Cuba; four hundred thousand families in the countryside and in the cities live cramped in huts and tenements without even the minimum sanitary requirements; two million two hundred thousand of our urban population pay rents which absorb between one fifth and one third of their incomes; and two million eight hundred thousand of our rural and suburban population lack electricity....

Our educational system is perfectly compatible with everything I've just mentioned. Where the peasant doesn't own the land, what need is there for agricultural schools? Where there is no industry, what need is there for technical or vocational schools? Everything follows the same absurd logic; if we don't have one thing we can't have the other.

Only death can liberate one from so much misery:

Only death can liberate one from so much misery. In this respect, however, the State is most helpful - in providing early death for the people. Ninety per cent of the children in the countryside are consumed by parasites which filter through their bare feet from the ground they walk on. Society is moved to compassion when it hears of the kidnapping or murder of one child, but it is indifferent to the mass murder of so many thousands of children who die every year from lack of facilities, agonizing with pain. Their innocent eyes, death already shining in them, seem to look into some vague infinity as if entreating forgiveness for human selfishness, as if asking God to stay His wrath. And when the head of a family works only four months a year, with what can he purchase clothing and medicine for his children? They will grow up with rickets, with not a single good tooth in their mouths by the time they reach thirty; they will have heard ten million speeches and will finally die of misery and deception. Public hospitals, which are always full, accept only patients recommended by some powerful politician who, in return, demands the votes of the unfortunate one and his family so that Cuba may continue forever in the same or worse condition.

No excuse for such poverty:



Cuba could easily provide

for a population three times as great as it has now, so there is no excuse for the abject poverty of a single one of its present inhabitants. The markets should be overflowing with produce, pantries should be full, all hands should be working. This is not an inconceivable thought. What is inconceivable is that anyone should go to bed hungry while there is a single inch of unproductive land; that children should die for lack of medical attention; what is inconceivable is that 30% of our farm people cannot write their names and that 99% of them know nothing of Cuba's history. What is inconceivable is that the majority of our rural people are now living in worse circumstances than the Indians Columbus discovered in the fairest land that human eyes had ever seen.

My logic is the simple logic of the people:

Since this trial may, as you said, be the most important trial since we achieved our national sovereignty, what I say here will perhaps be lost in the silence which the dictatorship has tried to impose on me, but posterity will often turn its eyes to what you do here. Remember that today you are judging an accused man, but that you yourselves will be judged not once, but many times, as often as these days are submitted to scrutiny in the future. What I say here will be then repeated many times, not because it comes from my lips, but because the problem of justice is eternal and the people have a deep sense of justice above and beyond the hairsplitting of jurisprudence. The people wield simple but implacable logic, in conflict with all that is absurd and contradictory. Furthermore, if there is in this world a people that utterly abhors favoritism and inequality, it is the Cuban people. To them, justice is symbolized by a maiden with a scale and a sword in her hands. Should she cower before one group and furiously wield that sword against another group, then to the people of Cuba the maiden of justice will seem nothing more than a prostitute brandishing a dagger. My logic is the simple logic of the people.

Rebellion, freedom, dignity: A history of political thinking



The right of rebellion against tyranny, Honorable Judges, has been recognized from the most ancient times to the present day by men of all creeds, ideas and doctrines.

It was so in the theocratic monarchies of remote antiquity. In China it was almost a constitutional principle that when a king governed rudely and despotically he should be deposed and replaced by a virtuous prince.

The philosophers of ancient India upheld the principle of active resistance to arbitrary authority. They justified revolution and very often put their theories into practice. One of their spiritual leaders used to say that 'an opinion held by the majority is stronger than the king himself. A rope woven of many strands is strong enough to hold a lion.'

The city states of Greece and republican Rome not only admitted, but defended the meting-out of violent death to tyrants.

In the Middle Ages, John Salisbury in his *Book of the Statesman* says that when a prince does not govern according to law and degenerates into a tyrant, violent overthrow is legitimate and justifiable. He recommends for tyrants the dagger rather than poison.

Saint Thomas Aquinas, in the *Summa Theologica*, rejects the doctrine of tyrannicide, and yet upholds the thesis that tyrants should be overthrown by the people.

Martin Luther proclaimed that when a government degenerates into a tyranny that violates the laws, its subjects are released from their obligations to obey. His disciple, Philippe Melancton, upholds the right of resistance when governments become despotic. Calvin, the outstanding thinker of the Reformation with regard to political ideas, postulates that people are entitled to take up arms to oppose any usurpation.

No less a man than Juan Mariana, a Spanish Jesuit during the reign of Philip II, asserts in his book, *De Rege et Regis Institutione*, that when a governor usurps power, or even if he were elected, when he governs in a tyrannical manner it is licit for a private citizen to exercise tyrannicide, either directly or through subterfuge with the least possible disturbance.

The French writer, François Hotman, maintained that between the government and its subjects there is a bond or contract, and that the people may rise in rebellion against the tyranny of government when the latter violates that pact.

About the same time, a booklet - which came to be widely read - appeared under the title *Vindiciae Contra Tyrannos*, and it was signed with the pseudonym Stephanus Junius Brutus. It openly declared that resistance to governments is legitimate when rulers oppress the people and that it is the duty of Honorable Judges to lead the struggle.

The Scottish reformers John Knox and John Poynt upheld the same points of view. And, in the most important book of that movement, George Buchanan stated that if a government achieved power without taking into account the consent of the people, or if a government rules their destiny in an unjust or arbitrary fashion, then that government becomes a tyranny and can be divested of power or, in a final recourse, its leaders can be put to death.

John Althus, a German jurist of the early 17th century, stated in his *Treatise on Politics* that sovereignty as the supreme authority of the State is born from the voluntary concurrence of all its members; that governmental authority stems from the people and that its unjust, illegal or tyrannical function exempts them from the duty of obedience and justifies resistance or rebellion.

Thus far, Honorable Judges, I have mentioned examples from antiquity, from the Middle Ages, and from the beginnings of our times. I selected these examples from writers of all creeds. What is more, you can see that the right to rebellion is at the very root of Cuba's existence as a nation. By virtue of it you are today able to appear in the robes of Cuban Judges. Would it be that those garments really served the cause of justice!

It is well known that in England during the 17th century two kings, Charles I and James II, were dethroned for despotism. These actions coincided with the birth of liberal political philosophy and provided the ideological base for a new social class, which was then struggling to break the bonds of feudalism. Against divine right autocracies, this new philosophy upheld the principle of the social contract and of the consent of the governed, and constituted the foundation of the English Revolution of 1688, the American Revolution of 1775 and the French Revolution of 1789. These great revolutionary events ushered in the liberation of the Spanish colonies in the New World – the final link in that chain being broken by Cuba. The new philosophy nurtured our own political ideas and helped us to evolve our Constitutions, from the Constitution of Guáimaro up to the Constitution of 1940. The latter was influenced by the socialist currents of our time; the principle of the social function of property and of man's inalienable right to a decent living were built into it, although large vested interests have prevented fully enforcing those rights.

The right of insurrection against tyranny then underwent its final consecration and became a fundamental tenet of political liberty.

As far back as 1649, John Milton wrote that political power lies with the people, who can enthrone and dethrone kings and have the duty of overthrowing tyrants.

John Locke, in his essay on government, maintained that when the natural rights of man are violated, the people have the right and the duty to alter or abolish the government. 'The only remedy against unauthorized force is opposition to it by force.'

Jean-Jaques Rousseau said with great eloquence in his Social Contract: 'While a people sees itself forced to obey and obeys, it does well; but as soon as it can shake off the yoke and shakes it off, it does better, recovering its liberty through the use of the very right that has been taken away from it.' 'The strongest man is never strong enough to be master forever, unless he converts force into right and obedience into duty. Force is a physical power; I do not see what morality one may derive from its use. To yield to force is an act of necessity, not of will; at the very least, it is an act of prudence. In what sense should this be called a duty?' 'To renounce freedom is to renounce one's status as a man, to renounce one's human rights, including one's duties. There is no possible compensation for renouncing everything. Total renunciation is incompatible with the nature of man and to take away all free will is to take away all morality of conduct. In short, it is vain and contradictory to stipulate on the one hand an absolute authority and on the other an unlimited obedience...'

Thomas Paine said that 'one just man deserves more respect than a rogue with a crown.'

The people's right to rebel has been opposed only by reactionaries like that clergyman of Virginia, Jonathan Boucher, who said: 'The right to rebel is a censurable doctrine derived from Lucifer, the father of rebellions.'

The Declaration of Independence of the Congress of Philadelphia, on July 4th, 1776, consecrated this right in a beautiful paragraph which reads: 'We hold these truths to be self-evident, that all men are created equal, that they are endowed by their Creator with certain inalienable rights, that among these are Life, Liberty and the Pursuit of Happiness; That to secure these Rights, Governments are instituted among Men, deriving their just powers from the consent of the governed; That whenever any Form of Government becomes destructive of these ends, it is the Right of the People to alter or abolish it and to institute a new Government, laying its foundation on such principles and organizing its powers in such form

as to them shall seem most likely to effect their Safety and Happiness.'

The famous French Declaration of the Rights of Man willed this principle to the coming generations: 'When the government violates the rights of the people, insurrection is for them the most sacred of rights and the most imperative of duties.' 'When a person seizes sovereignty, he should be condemned to death by free men.'

...

I know that imprisonment will be harder for me than it has ever been for anyone, filled with cowardly threats and hideous cruelty. But I do not fear prison, as I do not fear the fury of the miserable tyrant who took the lives of 70 of my comrades. Condemn me. It does not matter. History will absolve me.



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