

Many Happy Returns Fidel. Long Live Fidel Castro

By [Steven Walker](#)

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Fidel Castro, the revolutionary icon of the latter 20th century, is 90 today. Steven Walker looks back over his momentous life

Fidel Castro is 90 years old today, and unlike other 90-year-olds, this former Head of State will not receive much acknowledgement in the mainstream media this year but his achievements cannot be overstated.

The fact he is alive at all is testimony to his resilience and fortitude and the failed attempts by the CIA to assassinate him.

He is probably the most iconic revolutionary figure of the 20th Century and the story of his fight to liberate Cuba from external control and American mafia influence in the 1950's is a shining example of resistance and determination.

Castro decided to fight for the overthrow of Fulgencio Batista's military junta by founding a paramilitary organisation known as The Movement.

In July 1953, they launched a failed attack on the Moncado Barracks during which many militants were killed and Castro was arrested.

Placed on trial, he defended his actions and provided his famous "History Will Absolve Me" speech, before being sentenced to 15 years' imprisonment.

Renaming his group the 26th July Movement (MR-26-7), Castro was pardoned by Batista's government in May 1955, who no longer considered him a political threat.

Restructuring the MR-26-7, he fled to Mexico with his brother Raul, where he met with Argentine Che Guevara, and together they set up a small revolutionary force intent on overthrowing Batista.

In November 1956, Castro and 81 revolutionaries sailed from Mexico aboard the Granma and crash-landed near to Los Cayuelos. Attacked by Batista's forces, they fled to the Sierra Maestra mountain range, where the 19 survivors set up an encampment from which they waged guerrilla war against the army. Boosted by new recruits that increased the guerilla army's numbers to 200, they co-ordinated their attacks with the actions of other revolutionaries across Cuba.

The Cuban revolution was completed in January 1959 following the final victory led by Che Guevara over government troops in Santa Clara.

Fidel Castro's 90th birthday offers a chance to consider where he drew inspiration from and

the ideas which prompted his band of guerillas to mount a campaign against overwhelming odds.

On the advice of those who noted his passion for argument, Fidel enrolled at the University of Havana in 1945 to study law. A world divided ideologically between Capitalism and Communism stimulated a febrile political atmosphere in university. Two of his earliest university friends belonged to the Communist Youth and he made his first overtly political speech in 1946, criticising the dictatorship of Gerardo Machado, Batista's predecessor.

Fidel was aligned with two main political groupings at university - the Movimiento Socialista Revolucionario (MSR) led by Rolando Masferrer and the Union Insurreccional Revolucionaria (UIR) led by Emilio Trio.

This was where his revolutionary apprenticeship was refined, where he learned much about the nature of Cuban institutions and how steeped in corruption and violence they were.

The two groups jostled for prominence on campus, while outside the corrupt President Ramon Grau San Martin — installed as an American puppet in 1944 — was running Cuba.

Two of the key historical and political events dominating students at Havana University and influencing their beliefs, ideas and perceptions of Cuba's past and future were the independence struggles of 1868 to 1898 led by Jose Marti, and the revolutionary movement of 1927 to 1933 involving former army officers, students and government officials that had led to the overthrow of President Machado in 1933.

But Fidel recognised that these were incomplete shifts in fundamental power — simply replacing varieties of colonial rulers and corrupt American puppet dictators.

Fidel vowed to succeed in creating a truly independent Cuba, a proper self-determining country led by those on the side of the many rather than the few.

In early 1947 Fidel became increasingly politically active, openly criticising President Grau and Batista for their failed leadership and corruption. His political profile was growing and he was seen prominently as a leading mourner at the funeral of the much-respected communist labour leader Jesus Menendez, who had been shot dead by an army captain in Manzanillo.

In 1948 the Cuban presidency passed to Carlos Prio, who with the influential army officer Batista, gave unparalleled freedom to the American Mafia who accelerated the degeneration of Cuba into what became widely renowned as America's brothel, where casinos, gambling and gangsterism flourished and the proceeds of organised crime were stashed away from mainland American tax authorities.

The pattern of Fidel's journey to later succeed in overthrowing the Batista dictatorship in 1959 was being hardened.

What seems to have been of much more significance was to identify with those fellow students and historical Cuban heroes, such as Jose Marti, and satiate his appetite for revolution and insurrection.

Fidel was by now immersing himself in student politics and actively supporting the fight for

independence in Puerto Rico and demonstrating solidarity with other student movements in Argentina, Venezuela, Colombia and Panama, which were demanding an end to American colonial rule via financed puppet dictatorships.

Eduardo Chibas left the Autentico, the Authentic Revolutionary Party of Cuba, and in 1947 founded the Partido Popular Cubano (PPC- Cuban People's Party) quickly becoming better known as the Ortodoxo party. Fidel joined immediately, finding in Chibas yet another hero, who he followed with great enthusiasm, regarding him as a man of the future destined to pave the way to Cuba's independence.

The Ortodoxo party soon established itself as the first serious opposition to the government, fully adopting the principles and values of the revered nationalist martyr Jose Marti for anti-imperialism, socialism, economic independence, political liberty and social justice.

Although the attack on the Moncado barracks in 1953 failed, the trial in the Santiago de Cuba Palace of Justice began on September 21 1953 and ended on October 6 1953, after eleven sessions.

The Cuban civil code of justice, based on the Napoleonic code practiced in Europe and Latin America, had the verdict determined by a panel of three judges rather than by a jury of peers as under common law in the U.S. and Great Britain.

After the accused heard the charges against them, they were called to testify on their own behalf. The defendants were represented by 24 attorneys but Castro, a trained lawyer, assumed his own defence and lied under oath to avoid implicating rebels on trial.

In May 1955 Fidel was released after pressure from his supporters.

Four years later he was in power and now, nearly six decades on, we can raise a glass to him on his 90th despite all the efforts of the CIA.

Steven Walker is the author of *Fidel Castro: From Infant to Icon*

ebook: www.amazon.co.uk/Fidel-Castro-Infant-Steven-Walker-ebook/dp/B00QM7GH4S

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