

THE PATH TOWARD TOTALITARIANISM: THE CASE OF CUBA¹

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I was a boy when Fidel Castro rode triumphantly into Havana on January 8, 1959. It seemed as if the whole country had gone wild about the bearded young man (he was only 33) whom so many, at home and abroad, hailed as a hero for having driven out dictator Fulgencio Batista y Zaldívar, who seven years earlier had put an end to Cuba's democracy in a bloodless *coup d'état*. Think of the receptions given to the Beatles when they arrived in the U.S.A., a city celebrating a victory of its team in the World Series or the Super Bowl, and a New Year's party in Times Square all rolled into one, and you have a pretty good idea what it was like. And for the next few months we listened, enraptured, for hours on end, to Castro's manly, eloquent voice,² as he deceived us into thinking that the revolution was, as one of his early slogans put it to preemptively deny that he was a communist, "as green as Cuba's palm trees."³ His image saturated the country. It was an exhilarating time. That, in any case, is how the boy that was I remembers those days.⁴

The following year ushered in a cataclysmic change in the political climate. In February, Soviet Deputy Premier Anastas Mikoyan arrived. In September, Fidel Castro literally embraced Nikita Khrushchev in New York. It was as if the specter of communism was stalking the country, presaging the coming darkness at noon.⁵ Joy turned into

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terror, hope into desperation. Relatives and friends who never before would have contemplated emigrating stampeded for the exits, frantic to get out of the country via any avenue available before the Iron Curtain⁶ clamped shut. In April 1961, we (that is, my parents, three younger brothers and I) boarded a Spanish-flag ocean liner bound for Veracruz, Mexico. As the ship sailed out of Havana harbor, half of our extended family, some never to be seen again, waved goodbye with their handkerchiefs. It was a tearful moment. Only a few days later, my favorite uncle, my father's older brother, landed at the Bay of Pigs as a member of the ill-fated [Brigade 2506](#), and was taken prisoner. Supported in Mexico City by my mother's Godfather for several months, we applied and were granted resident visas to the United States.⁷ In September, first by train and then by bus, we made our way to Miami, then the capital of Cuban exiles, today of Cuban-Americans.

What we thought would be temporary exile turned into permanent expatriation. I graduated from Miami Edison High School in 1966, earned a B.A. in Government and Economics at the University of Miami, and a Ph.D. in Political Science and Economics at Indiana University. At IU, it was with shock and consternation that I discovered that Fidel Castro's stock among Latin Americanists (academics who specialize in the study of the region) was high and rising. In the 1980s, simmering indignation boiled over when so many of them embraced Nicaragua's Sandinistas with the same fervor many of us had greeted Castro in 1959. I had had enough. In a series of guest columns published over a period of several years in [The Times of the Americas](#)⁸ and a student newspaper at UC San Diego, [California Review](#), I challenged their interpretation of the Nicaraguan revolution and the war in El Salvador, ridiculing their sophomoric infatuation with the Sandinistas and their Salvadoran counterparts, the FMLN. In the 1990s, I followed up

with “The Latin American Studies Association vs. the United States: The Verdict of History” (1994) and “Dictatorships and Double Standards: The Latin American Studies Association on Cuba” (1995).⁹

Unsurprisingly, then, given my background and field of study, throughout my academic career the study of Cuba and communism has been an interest to which I return periodically. At the University of West Florida, every second or third year I teach a course titled “Cuba, Castro and the U.S.A.,” and another titled “Dictatorships.” In the latter, I assign students to read Richard Overy’s *Dictators. Hitler’s Germany, Stalin’s Russia* (2004)¹⁰, a book I cannot recommend highly enough. It systematically explores the operational similarities of the two regimes. Their ideological differences notwithstanding, they employed comparable methods to control society, economy, and state. Although with different conceptions of Utopia, both were imbued with anti-capitalist, anti-individualist, anti-liberal, anti-Christian, anti-Semitic, in short, anti-Western ideologies. Both extended their totalitarian tentacles into every nook and cranny of society—culture, science, economy, religion, law, education, medicine. Most disturbing of all, they did so with the cooperation or complicity of large swaths of the population. Once the Nazis or Bolsheviks overcame opposition (much stiffer in Russia than in Germany, where Hitler came to power by way of election), out of ideological conviction, opportunism, coercion or fear, most people, included many members of prestigious professions, complied with the regimes’ dictates. This was so even if only a militant minority, comprising about 10% of the population, became National Socialist or Communist party members.

Fascism (of which Nazism was its most bizarre variant) perished in World War II. But not so communism. Unlike its rival, Marxism-Leninism espouses a universalist program. Thus, it never has lost its appeal among certain influential sectors of Western society, including education and the media, even as under regimes founded upon it millions of human beings have perished in prison, forced labor camps, famine, before a firing squad, or a bullet in the back of the head. (See RESOURCES section, below.)

Before the Berlin Wall fell, I taught a course titled “The Theory and Practice of Communism.” There I assigned Marx and Engels’ *The Communist Manifesto*,¹¹ a screed that is part philosophy of history, part social science, part morality play, and part call to action; and Lenin’s *What is to be Done?*,¹² a manual for infiltrating every institution of society with professional revolutionaries. Additionally, I had them read a varying assortment of articles, book chapters, excerpts from memoirs and films on the actual record of communist regimes. In the 1990s, thinking that the liberation of all European countries formerly under communist rule and the lowering of the Hammer and Sickle over the Kremlin signaled that the beast had been put away for good, we deleted the course from our offerings. However, what a French author called *The Totalitarian Temptation* (1978),¹³ like many a Christian heresy, had not died. It only retreated temporarily, only to return in a different guise, speaking a different language, seizing on new or recurring social problems to gain adherents. As Professor Laconte quotes from J. R. R. Tolkien’s *Lord of the Rings*, “As Gandalf the Wizard explains to Frodo Baggins: ‘Always after a defeat and a respite, the Shadow takes another shape and grows again.’ Or, as Elrond, the Lord of Rivendell, intones, ‘And the Elves deemed that evil was ended forever, and it was not so’.”¹⁴ Thus, it looks that I need to resurrect that course.

More generally, as a politologist I compare and contrast different types of democracies and dictatorships. I do so not only as an end in itself, although that, too, has value, but for the important purpose of seeing if I can arrive at generalities strong enough to qualify as “laws of politics.”¹⁵ In a few words,

By *democracy*, I understand a regime in which members of the legislature and the executive—the policy-making arms of the state—are chosen by a broad electorate from among competing political parties or candidates who are free to take their message to the public by whatever means available. This necessarily requires a political climate characterized by freedom of speech, press, and assembly, as well as a procedure for honestly counting votes that is acceptable to competing parties and the public. . . .

[B]y autocracy [another word for dictatorship], I mean any regime in which free competition among parties to fill the policy-making offices of the state is either absent or highly restricted; at best, a domesticated opposition is allowed to occupy a few seats in a “rubber-stamp” legislature. There are varieties of dictatorship . . . but in none is the ruling elite chosen in competitive elections (2015a, 415).

Democracy, as the definition specifies, means at least two parties, each free to compete for office. This requires institutional guarantees of free speech, press, association and assembly, and this, in turn, implies enforcement by an independent judiciary. As I have shown in the article cited and subsequent publications (2017, 2019, 2022a, 2022b), not only in the United States but in democracies from around the world two parties or coalitions of parties alternate in office once per decade, on average. This

should result in a wider range and variety of inputs into policymaking, and a more diverse ruling class, compared to what one observes in dictatorships. Also, compared to communist or neofascist regimes, democracies have a freer market economy, one more attuned to satisfying the needs and wants of the population than those of socialists suffering from what Hayek called the “fatal conceit” that they can do better.¹⁶ Also, they allow a broad space for what is known as “civil society,” the whole array of institutions, associations, and groups engaged in all kinds of activities, be they geared toward religion, study, leisure, charities and other good works, and so on.

Constitutionally, democracies differ according to two dimensions: unitary vs. federal, and parliamentary vs. presidential. In federalism, states or provinces enjoy constitutional standing, which means that they are integral parts of the overall structure with considerable independent authority of their own. A presidential system is one where the chief executive is elected separately from the legislature whereas in a parliamentary system it is a creature of the representative assembly. The U.S. is federal and presidential (like Mexico and Brazil), Canada is federal and parliamentary (like Australia, Germany, and India), the United Kingdom is unitary and parliamentary (like most other European democracies), and France is unitary and semi-presidential. A number of parliamentary democracies also include a monarch or a president, but neither acts as the chief executive of the government, but rather as head of state, exercising ceremonial and in some cases limited political responsibilities, such as appointing or dismissing the prime minister following an election or a parliamentary vote.

Another difference among democracies has to do with the electoral rules for filling the policy-making offices of the state. Legislators may be elected from single member districts by simple plurality (as in the U.S. and U.K.), or by majority vote (as in France), the latter requiring a run-off between the two top vote getters if no candidate receives at least 50% + 1 of the vote. Or, from multi-member districts by proportional representation (of which there are multiple variations), as in most continental parliamentary democracies. Or, by a mixture of the two, with some by one method and the rest by the other, as in Germany and Japan. If a presidential system, the winner may be elected by plurality (as in Mexico) or majority vote (as in Brazil and France). The U.S. method, by an Electoral College, is unique. (Periodically it comes under criticism, but I defend it.¹⁷) Each of these variations has its advantages and disadvantages. It all depends on what criteria or yardstick of evaluation one wishes to employ.

Democracies differ, as well, on the size and scope of the state. Taking the most recent data on general government as a percent of Gross Domestic Product as my measure, among several of the countries mentioned above it ranges from 44% in Australia and 48% in the U.S. to 52% in the U.K. and 62% in France. (Source: [OECD](#).) Whether there is some limit on how high this percentage can go before the stresses on democracy become too great is an open question. Many years ago, I read in a source I can no longer remember that it was thought that 25% was the limit. By now, most developed democracies have crossed that threshold, and while none has collapsed, they are showing signs of strain. Whether or how much the size of the public sector has something to do with that is a difficult question to answer. Hayek¹⁸ would say it has quite a bit to do with it.

There is also variety in dictatorships. Here I will distinguish between totalitarian and non-totalitarian types. There is greater variety in the latter category, which includes relatively long- and short-lived military regimes (El Salvador or Paraguay and Argentina or Uruguay, respectively), single or dominant party regimes (the Institutional Revolutionary Party (PRI) in Mexico), and one-man dictatorships without parties (rare in modern times). The type that is of greatest interest to this Civics Initiative is the totalitarian type. Thus, I will discuss it at some length next, concentrating on the communist variant and focusing on Cuba in particular. That is because, according to one of its foremost students,¹⁹ fascism was a phenomenon mostly of the inter-war years, those sandwiched between the two world wars, and more characteristic of movements than of regimes. Only Hitler's National Socialist German Workers' Party and Mussolini's National Fascist Party achieved and exercised state power for a considerable period, and only the former came close to the totalitarian maximum. By contrast, most communist regimes emerged in two waves, the principal one, the Soviet Union, during World War I and others, in Europe or Asia, during or in the wake of World War II. Still others sprouted out of anti-colonial wars of independence in Africa and Asia. Cuba, which I will take up shortly, is a special case.

At its core, communism includes several key elements²⁰:

- A pseudo-scientific ideology whose adherents believe or pretend to believe that it holds the key to understanding the course of human history as one of “class struggle”
- a monopolistic, hierarchical political party that aims at subsuming all institutions within itself

- a propaganda apparatus plastering society with images and incessantly hammering simplistic slogans promoting the latest twist and turn of the party line
- an omnipresent police state that represses all voices of dissent, criticism, or opposition to the party
- internationalism, a type of imperialism, a tendency to intervene in other countries, either in support of like regimes or of revolutionary movements seeking to establish them

As noted earlier, fascism espoused a different ideological program while using the same instruments of party, propaganda, and police employed by the communists to drill it into the population. Also, they contributed other elements to the totalitarian mix, namely a strident nationalism; the making of a “New Man” capable of overcoming social or other obstacles by extraordinary deeds, especially in war; exaltation of violence, war, and death in the service of the cause; the *Führerprinzip* (Leadership Principle), or cult of personality of the leader.²¹ Like Stalin, Castro made use of the cult, and like Mao, Castro romanticized violent revolution, viewing politics in terms of war to the death, as in his endlessly repeated slogan, “fatherland or death, we shall triumph.” Which shows that despite their mutual antagonisms, there are elements of fascism in communist movements and regimes—and vice-versa. Which should not be surprising, since they are members of the same totalitarian “genus.”

Communism offers a rosy vision of a Utopian future or end-state. The abolition of private property and the placing of all productive assets “temporarily” in the hands of the party state, we are told, will eventually result in a classless society of equality,

abundance, and freedom. This contrasts markedly with the wasteland, hardships, and quasi-slavery which the populations ruled by “real” or “actual existing socialism” everywhere experience. The ideology serves as something of a religion, a hallucinatory narcotic to distract from the reality of life under the regime, the party as something of a church, its cadres as catechists of its secular dogmas demanding that the population affirm what are evident lies and delusions.

Which brings me back to Castro’s communist regime, the reason why I am here today.²² Fidel Castro’s antecedents are, if not humble, certainly obscure and, at least by the standards of the times when he was growing up, shameful. His father, Angel Castro, hailed from a poor family in a remote village in Galicia, Spain. Having little education, as a young man he worked as a day laborer. In 1898, he enlisted in the Army and was shipped to Cuba, then a Spanish colony going through the throes of a struggle for independence that culminated in the Spanish-American War. After Cuba became independent, Angel settled in Oriente province, the farthest from the capital city of Havana. This was the most rugged part of the Island, the cradle of many a political rebellion. Starting as a day laborer for the United Fruit Company, by dint of hard work, shrewd investments, and harsh management (he packed a revolver when in the field supervising his workers), Angel made himself a rich man without, however, shedding his rustic ways. His rambling country house was built on stilts, in the style of an army barracks. Underneath was a shelter for farm animals. Married to a schoolteacher who bore him several children, Angel subsequently took as mistress one of the servant girls, Lina Ruz. Fidel Castro was born out of that illegitimate union. After divorcing the first wife, Angel married Lina, but several years would go by before the children were baptized. This unconventional family background would haunt Fidel Castro for years to

come. Nevertheless, his father's money enabled him to enroll at the most prestigious secondary school in the country, the Belen Jesuit Preparatory School, founded in Havana by the Crown in mid-19th century, while Cuba was a colony of Spain. Known for its demanding program of academic excellence, it graduated the scions of the Cuban elite, including a president and diplomats. An indifferent student, Castro excelled at sports, rising to captain of the basketball team.

For a decade, from 1940, when a freely elected assembly proclaimed a new Constitution, through 1951, Cuba ranked among the more democratic countries in Latin America.²³ Its democracy was semi-presidential. That is, the executive powers were divided between a president elected separately from the congress and a prime minister responsible to the congress. The congress was bicameral, with half of the membership of the lower house renewed every other year. The elections were vigorously contested among several parties, the three main ones being the *Auténticos*, the *Ortodoxos*, and the Liberals. The communists, named *Partido Socialist Popular* (PSP), and other smaller parties, were free to operate. The PSP elected several members of the congress and even served in one president's cabinet (Batista's, as it happened). Three different men from two different parties occupied the presidency between 1940 and 1952, each elected with 57% of the vote (Batista, Liberal), 55% (Grau, *Auténtico*), and 46% (Prío, *Auténtico*). In each case, 75% of the electorate turned out to vote. These figures are about what one would expect of any democracy (Cuzán 2015a, 2022a).

During this period, while in Law School, Castro, stymied in his efforts to be elected to a position in student government, joined one of the action groups that were a bane of the campus. Twice he was suspected of having murdered a rival. Still, he

married into a prominent political family, the Díaz Balart's. (A generation later, two of them have served in the U.S. Congress from South Florida.) Upon graduation, Castro joined the left-wing Ortodoxo Party, the leadership of which, however, kept him at arms' length. Undeterred, in 1951-52 he campaigned for the party's nomination for one of the congressional seats from Havana province, even as in private he had expressed contempt for democracy and admiration for Curzio Malaparte's *Coup D'etat: The Technique of Revolution*, as well as Hitler's and Mussolini's writings. When the Ortodoxo Party's leader, Eduardo Chibás, died of a self-inflicted wound, Castro proposed to José Pardo Llada, a leading member of the party in charge of the funeral, to divert the large procession from the cemetery toward the presidential palace, whereupon Pardo Llada would proclaim himself president and appoint Castro chief of the military. Although nauseated by the suggestion, Pardo Llada subsequently learned that Castro's insight was correct: President Prío had given strict instructions to the soldiers not to fire on the crowd if it attempted to storm the building, saying that he preferred to resign the presidency than ignite a civil war.

In 1952, Fulgencio Batista, who served as the first freely elected president under the 1940 Constitution, seeing that his hopes for being elected to the office again in 1952 were fading, strangled Cuba's young democracy in a bloodless *coup d'etat* only a few months before the voters went to the polls. Batista's usurpation changed the rules of the political game, from one based on the counting of votes to one of violence and war. This biased the political struggle in the direction of the most aggressive and daring of men. Fidel Castro fit the bill perfectly. Frustrated in his attempt to exercise leadership at the university and within the Ortodoxo party, Batista's *coup* handed Castro the excuse to break out of the legal constraints under which his violent temperament had long chafed.

The following year he gambled his life and that of his followers on an ill-fated attack on the Moncada Barracks in Santiago de Cuba, the second-largest city in the country. (Castro had attended elementary school in that city.) Dozens of his followers lost their lives. This macabre baptism in blood for his 26th of July organization, named after the day of what turned out to be a massacre for many of his men, won him instant national recognition. Taken prisoner and put on trial, in imitation of Hitler's conduct after *his* failed putsch of November 1923 Castro acted as his own defense counsel, using the occasion to launch a tirade against the dictatorship. Some time later, now in prison, where he was benignly treated, he wrote a manifesto on his political goals, what in the mythology of the revolution became his "History Will Absolve Me" speech, the concluding peroration echoing Hitler's own at his 1924 trial.²⁴ Whatever it was that Castro actually said in court, he was found guilty and sentenced to 15 years behind bars, of which he served less than two.

In 1955 Batista, newly inaugurated for a four-year term after holding an election the outcome of which was never in doubt, for the main opposition party boycotted it, had the congress enact an amnesty for the *Moncada* prisoners. Upon his release, Castro, now a celebrity of sorts among certain circles, including *Bohemia*, Cuba's leading weekly magazine, resumed his public campaign against the dictator. But as the government, in retaliation, tightened the screws of censorship, and the Ortodoxo Party leaders continued to shun him, Castro left the country for Mexico. There he recruited men, raised money (making two trips to the U.S. for the purpose), purchased weapons, was briefly jailed when these were discovered, and bought a yacht, the *Granma*, with money from, among others, former president Prío.

Late in 1956, Castro sailed for Cuba, squeezing 82 men, weapons, and munitions aboard the vessel, designed to carry far fewer passengers. The landing was a failure. Most of the men were captured or killed and almost all the weapons and equipment were lost. However, Castro and some two dozen expeditionaries made their way to the rugged mountains of the *Sierra Maestra*, at the easternmost tip of the Island. Holed up there, for most of the next two years he carried on a war of skirmishes and, importantly, of propaganda. The latter began with an interview with *New York Times* reporter Herbert Matthews, who was presumably taken in by Castro's ruses and assurances. Matthews' articles turned Castro into an international sensation.²⁵ Other journalists from the U.S. and around the world climbed the *Sierra* to interview him. Resources poured from the country and from abroad into Castro's hands, including hefty contributions from wealthy donors, like the CEO of Bacardí, the distillery company.²⁶ The propaganda coup obscured the fact that other groups were carrying on their own independent struggle against the dictatorship. These included a civic opposition, a Student Revolutionary Directorate that in 1957 launched a spectacular if unsuccessful attack on the presidential palace in the hope of assassinating Batista (something that boomeranged, as it elicited sympathy for the dictator) and subsequently established themselves as a guerrilla group in central Cuba, and insurrectionist members of the military.

When, in the second half of 1958, the political situation got worse, the U.S. cut off arms shipments to Cuba and Washington sent an emissary to try to persuade Batista to resign in favor of a five man junta that would form a provisional government, a proposal the dictator roundly rejected.²⁷ On New Year's Eve, Batista, along with members of his

family and a few members of his government, took flight to the Dominican Republic and thence to Spain.

Following Batista's departure, that January 1959 Fidel Castro became the man of the hour, lionized by vast multitudes during his week-long trek to and upon arrival in Havana. Denying that he had any political ambitions, while still in the Sierra he had taken it upon himself extra-constitutionally to appoint a provisional government composed of people including a few who, though respected, had no or weak political bases of their own, beginning with retired judge Manuel Urrutia. Urrutia was one of those who had successfully lobbied the U.S. government to suspend arms shipments to Batista's government. The "president" appointed Castro as commander in chief of all police and military forces of the country with absolute discretion to reorganize them. Castro and his brother Raul quickly dissolved the old army, executing many of its officers and men, and replaced it with a new one loyal to himself. Six weeks later, Castro became "prime minister." Within a year Castro had discarded the provisional government, made his brother Raul minister of defense, brought communists aboard his cabinet (all other pre-1959 democratic political parties having been disbanded),²⁸ introduced Soviet "advisers" into the country, purged his own 26th of July organization and the *Directorio* of anti-communists, incorporating them, along with the PSP, into the Integrated Revolutionary Organizations, a first step toward folding all "revolutionaries" into a single party, the Communist Party of Cuba, and proceeded to remake the entire country in his own image, all the while ruthlessly repressing all dissent. In the first decade of the regime, hundreds of thousands of Cubans abandoned the country while an equal number cycled through a vastly expanded system of prisons, now with the addition of forced labor camps. Thousands were executed. Henceforth, even as with

almost every passing year more of his subjects emigrated and those who remained had less to eat, endured greater hardships, and enjoyed fewer amenities, Castro went on accumulating power and the titles to adorn it like no man in Cuba's history, and none in Latin America, had ever attained. Not to be neglected are Castro's international adventures, from thrusting himself into the Cold War in the October Missile Crisis, to attempting to turn the Andes Mountain Chain into another *Sierra Maestra*, which wreaked havoc from Argentina to Venezuela, to waging wars in Africa, where Cuban troops incurred anywhere from 2,000 to 10,000 casualties in Angola alone.

The foregoing account of the development of Castro's communist regime displays a three-stage progression like those of Eastern Europe went through. (Nicaragua, too, would track the same path, although only partially. It never consolidated as a full-fledged communist dictatorship.)²⁹ The three-stage process proceeds as follows. The old regime having been displaced by revolution, as in Cuba and Nicaragua or invasion and occupation by foreign troops, as in Eastern Europe, a provisional government is formed that in all appearances consists of a genuine coalition of various ideological and political tendencies. Even at this stage, however, all the coercive instruments, the police and military, are firmly in control of the communists, even if their respective ministries are at first nominally in the hands of non-communists. In this period, there is a good deal of freedom of speech, press and, to some extent, of association. In the second stage, most of the non-communist members of the government resign or are purged, some jailed or exiled. Censorship is imposed and freedom of assembly comes under attack. In the third and final stage,

There is a single communist-managed “front,” with one hierarchy, one centralised discipline and one organization. An important feature of this stage is the enforced fusion of the well-purged social democrats with the communists in a United Workers Party. . . . [A]ll opposition is suppressed, and its leaders either escape abroad or are arrested as “spies of the Western imperialists” and either executed or sentenced to long prison terms.³⁰ (British spelling in the original.)

In Cuba, the first stage was completed within the first few weeks, when Castro and his brother Raúl assumed control of all police and military powers under the nominal control of a provisional government appointed by himself. Then, on February 16th, a mere six weeks after arriving in Havana, Castro, who had said that he had no political ambitions,³¹ assumed the post of prime minister.

In July, in a televised speech, he denounced President Urrutia, who had expressed opposition to communist infiltration, while a mob at the palace shouted threats. The hapless president resigned and sought asylum in the Venezuelan embassy. Castro replaced him as figurehead with Oswaldo Dorticós, a member of the communist party. In October, Castro dealt the same treatment to Hubert Matos, one of this *comandantes*. Matos had had the temerity to resign his post as military governor of Camaguey province over communist infiltration in the government. Castro put him on trial for treason, attacked him from the witness stand, and had him sentenced to 20 years in prison. Other anti-communists in the 26th of July movement, labor unions, professional associations, schools, the university, the judiciary, the clergy, and so on through every entity of the state and civil society fell victim to a wide-ranging purge. In

the meantime, attacks on the independent press grew.³² First to fall were the newspapers that were tarred as belonging to or that had unconditionally served Batista. Without any judicial procedure of any kind, their plant and equipment were seized by publications and publishing houses controlled by Castro's followers, including *Revolución* (whose turn, as well as that of the communist newspaper *Hoy*, ironically would come in time). Next, Castro charged against the satirical weekly *Zig-Zag*, a magazine that had been critical of the previous regime, on account of a caricature that depicted him as climbing a mountain followed by a train of unprincipled opportunists. The newspaper guilds, of journalists, printers, graphic arts, etc., like other labor unions, were taken over by members or associates of the PSP. Then, one newspaper after another, one radio and television station after another, fell like dominoes, their editors having come under attack as "traitors" and "counter-revolutionaries." Their "crimes" consisted in calling for an end to the show trials, the summary executions, the restoration of the Constitution of 1940 and the holding of free elections, promises that Castro had made during his propaganda war against Batista. Pursuing a policy of economic strangulation, enterprises confiscated by the regime did not advertise with them, and those that remained in private hands were pressured to follow suit. In the case of the print media, their distributors were terrorized. As if borrowing a page from the Nazi brown shirts or Mussolini's black shirts, a mob would assemble in front of the offices of the offending media organs to shout insults and threats against the lives of their owners and editors while other groups would symbolically bury them. Inside a newspaper, a group of employees, usually a minority, some wearing militia uniforms and carrying weapons, would demand the right to insert "corrections" to editorials critical of the regime. If the editors balked, the employees would forcibly occupy the

plant. Owners and editors of the expropriated media sought asylum in embassies and escaped abroad. By May 1960, that is, in a little over a year, about the same time that it took Hitler to bring to heel the German press, every media organ not under the control of “the Revolution,” i.e., the regime, that is, of Fidel Castro, had disappeared or come under communist control.³³ The dictatorship had monopolized the instruments of information—and propaganda.³⁴ The second stage was complete.

In July 1961, in the third and final stage, the PSP, the Revolutionary Directorate, and the 26th of July Movement, having undergone purges (more were to come), were joined into the Integrated Revolutionary Organizations. The following year the organization became the United Party the Socialist Revolution, and in 1965, the Communist Party of Cuba (PCC). In 1976, in a new “constitution” adopted by the regime, the PCC was designated as “the superior leading force of the society and the State, organizing and guiding the common efforts aimed at the highest goals of the construction of socialism and advancement toward the communist society.”³⁵ As in all communist-ruled countries past or present, there is no other party allowed to compete freely for votes in the farcical electoral rituals staged by the regime every five years or so.

But what about the “achievements of the Revolution?” Didn’t Castro’s regime at least teach Cubans how to read and write and give them “free” health care, which made for an unprecedented reduction in infant mortality?³⁶ This speaks to the power of propaganda that even people who should know better take at face value. In the first place, contrary to the distorted caricature painted by the regime, in the 1950s Cuba’s standard of living was comparable to that of Italy; its level of consumption was similar to that of Finland or Ireland. Today it has descended to the level of Guatemala.³⁷ Before

Castro, Cuba's infant mortality was lower than in any other Latin American country except Argentina and Uruguay. Today the regime boasts that at 4/1,000 live births Cuba's infant mortality is one of the lowest in the world. But this statistic needs to be taken with a grain of salt, not least because its abortion rate (25/1,000 women) is one of the highest in the world. Ironically, under General Pinochet's 17-year long dictatorship, infant mortality was slashed by almost 70%, from 67 to 18, but it would be difficult to find someone who would use that statistic to balance against the regime's repression. As for literacy, nearly 80% of Cubans were literate before Castro, about the same as in Chile, with the difference that, in contrast to today's wasteland, "the Cuban people were among the most informed in the world, living in an uncharacteristically large media market for such a small country. Cubans had a choice of 58 daily newspapers during the late 1950s, according to the UN statistical yearbook. Despite its small size, this placed Cuba behind only Brazil, Argentina, and Mexico in the region. . . ."38 As well, at 160 radio and 23 television broadcasting stations, Cuba's total on both media was higher than most or all other Latin American countries, and even many European ones.39

In fact, then, the one indisputable "achievement of the 'Revolution'," is that it made Fidel Castro and international power player, a celebrity even, feted the world over. At his funeral, hundreds of dignitaries, not excluding from some democracies, paid their respects.40

CONCLUSION

Fidel Castro ruled Cuba from 1959 until his retirement in 2008, one year short of half a century. He holds a record for the longest ruling dictator of the 20th century. When he became ill, he kept the regime in the family, passing the presidency and the top

post of the party to his brother, Raul, who all this time had been head of the military. Now he, too, has retired from both posts. Last year the regime was shaken by a spontaneous outburst of protest marches demanding “Patria y Vida” (“Fatherland and Life”), thus turning the first half of Castro’s slogan (“Fatherland or Death”) against itself. More than 1,000 of the demonstrators were arrested, and hundreds remain in prison.⁴¹ The situation for Cubans is as grim as it has ever been. How long this awful regime will continue to exist is impossible to tell.

The Cuban story is a tragic one. Fidel Castro seized control at a time when the country enjoyed a relatively high and improving standard of living compared not only to most of Latin America but even many European countries. Moreover, he was able to do so by fraud, deceiving the people into believing that all he wanted was to restore the constitutional democracy that the usurper Batista had displaced. Today Cuba is a basket case while many of those who managed to flee, some after enduring all kinds of insults, beatings, even time in a forced labor camp, have prospered, many while making contributions in the arts, education, entertainment, politics, science, and sports in the countries that welcomed them as refugees.⁴² If there is a silver lining to this tragedy, it is that if and when the Cuban communist regime is no more, these people or their descendants will have the opportunity to contribute to the reconstruction of the country.⁴³

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¹ Prepared for presentation on Day 2 of the Florida Department of Education “Civics Literacy Excellence Initiative” for K-12 teachers, Jacksonville, FL, June 23, 2022. In composing this text, I have drawn from several papers, especially Cuzán (1999 and 2015b).

² A source includes 63 transcripts or reports of speeches or interviews Castro gave in Cuba in 1959. That averages 5 per month, or more than one a week. This included several television appearances running four to six hours long. Not included in the total are those during visits abroad in the first months of the year, from Buenos Aires, Caracas, and the United States. “Castro Speech Data Base,” Latin American Network Information Center. <http://lanic.utexas.edu/project/castro/1959/>

³ The perceptive observer then as now will note that green was notably absent from the symbol of his organization, the “26th of July Movement,” a red and black flag.

⁴ But as we shall see, in only a few months the course of events was such that anyone

with an elementary knowledge of political history would have “smelled the coffee,” as Ann Landers used to say, long before the end of the year.

⁵ For those unfamiliar with them, “the specter of communism” is borrowed from *The Manifesto of the Communist Party*, by Karl Marx’s and Frederick Engels, and “darkness at noon” from the eponymous title of Koestler’s great novel.

⁶ The “iron curtain” is a phrase Winston Churchill used in a speech delivered at Westminster College in Fulton, Missouri, on March 5, 1946. Churchill titled it “[Sineews of Peace](#)” but it has come to be known as his “Iron Curtain” speech.

⁷ An aunt, the widow of my father’s favorite brother, Luis, who had settled in Connecticut many years earlier, vouched for us.

⁸ The bi-weekly paper originated as [The Times of Havana](#), the creation of two brothers, [Carl E. Moore](#) and [Clarence W. Moore](#). After their paper was seized by the regime in 1960, they joined the mass exodus out of Cuba and resurrected it with the new name first in Miami and then in Washington, D.C. In the 1980s, on a phone conversation with one of them (probably Carl, but it may have been Clarence), remarking on the time he spent on what was a labor of love, he joked that his wife regarded the paper as his “mistress.” After Carl died the paper was sold to a commercial company, which made a botch of it, and it soon folded.

⁹ On my analyses of Nicaragua, see Cuzán (1989, 1990, 1991, 1992, 1993).

¹⁰ Richard Overy, *Dictators: Hitler’s Germany, Stalin’s Russia* (Reprint edition. New York: W. W. Norton & Company, 2006).

¹¹ Karl Marx and Frederick Engels, *Communist Manifesto* (Eastford, CT: Martino Fine Books, 2020). First published 1888 by Charles H. Kerr & Company, Chicago.

¹² V. I. Lenin, *What Is to Be Done? Burning Questions of Our Movement* (Mansfield

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¹³ Jean Francois Revel, *The Totalitarian Temptation* (Penguin Books, 1978).

¹⁴ Joseph Loconte, "J. R. R. Tolkien's Lesson About Evil for Our Time," *The Wall Street Journal*, June 10th, 2022, online edition.

¹⁵ Cuzán (2015, 2017, 2019, 2022a, 2022b).

¹⁶ Friedrich A. Hayek, *The Fatal Conceit: The Errors of Socialism* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1991).

¹⁷ See my [In Defense of the Electoral College](#)." First published under the title "The Electoral College works for the United States" in *Pensacola News Journal*, November 1, 2017, p. 10 C.

¹⁸ F.A. Hayek, *The Road to Serfdom. Text and Documents. The Definitive Edition*. Edited by Bruce Caldwell (The University of Chicago Press, 2007).

¹⁹ Stanley G. Payne, *Fascism. Comparison and Definition* (The University of Wisconsin Press, 1980).

²⁰ This list is partly borrowed and adapted from Overy, *Dictatorships*, and Carl J. Friedrich and Zbigniew K. Brzezinski, *Totalitarian Dictatorship and Autocracy* (New York: Frederick A. Praeger, Publisher, 1961).

²¹ This list is partly borrowed and adapted from Payne, *Fascism*, p. 7.

²² Much of what follows is drawn from several of my writings (1999, 2015b, 2017, 2022).

²³ "Fitzgibbon Survey of Scholarly Images of Latin America. Rankings 1945 to 2005."

²⁴ For the definitive account, see Antonio Rafael de la Cova, *The Moncada Attack: Birth of the Cuban Revolution* (Columbia, S.C.: University of South Carolina Press, 2007).

²⁵ Anthony DePalma, *The Man Who Invented Fidel: Castro, Cuba, and Herbert L.*

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²⁶ Tom Gjelten, *Bacardi and the Long Fight for Cuba: The Biography of a Cause* (New York, NY: Viking. Published by the Penguin Group), p. 195.

²⁷ Geoffrey Warner, "Review: Eisenhower and Castro: US-Cuban Relations 1958-60," *International Affairs*, 1999, 75 (4): 803-817.).

²⁸ Kenneth Janda, *Political Parties: A Cross-National Survey* (New York, NY: The Free Press, 1980), pp. 595-597. <https://www.janda.org/ICPP/ICPP1980/Book/PART2/4-CentralAmerica/41-Cuba/Cuba.htm>.

²⁹ Cuzán (1989, 1992, 1993).

³⁰ Hugh Seton-Watson, *The East European Revolution* (New York, NY: Prager 1956), p. 171.

³¹ This disingenuous claim was belied by the number of speeches and interviews he gave: at least 15 in January, 9 in February. That adds up to a minimum of 24 in 56 days, or almost one every other day. And some of them were quite lengthy (although they would get even longer, lasting four or five hours).

³² In what should have been a tell-tale sign, on June 7, 1959, in a speech at a banquet of newspaper editors on a day honoring Freedom of the Press, the "prime minister" gave a speech that was all about defending the "revolution" against its enemies while nary a word was included about freedom of the press. Fidel Castro. "Discurso Pronunciado por el Comandante Fidel Castro Ruz, Primer Ministro del Gobierno Revolucionario en el Banquete de los Editores de Periódicos con Motivo del Día de la Libertad de Prensa." Transcript of Speech delivered in Havana, June 7, 1959.

<http://www.cuba.cu/gobierno/discursos/1959/esp/fo70659e.html>.

³³ See Humberto Medrano, “Como fue suprimida en Cuba la libertad de prensa,” in Humberto Medrano, *Sin Patria Pero Sin Amo* (Miami: Service Offset Printers, 1963), 432-455. See also José Ignacio Rivero, *Contra Viento y Marea. Periodismo y Mucho Más. 1920-2004* (Miami: Ediciones Universal, 2004), 141-233. Medrano was assistant director of *Prensa Libre* and Rivero was director of *Diario La Marina*. These were, respectively, the largest circulation daily and the oldest newspaper in pre-Castro Cuba. Medrano and Rivero, besieged from within and without their newspapers, under continuous verbal assault, not excluding veiled threats of imprisonment and death (the latter was arrested but released within 24 hours), waged a courageous, if ultimately unsuccessful defense of the right of a free press in Cuba that ended in the military occupation of their enterprises, asylum in an embassy, and exile.

³⁴ Most of this paragraph is taken verbatim from my “Totalitarianism in the Tropics. Cuba’s ‘Padilla Case’ Revisited” (2012). See, also, Kelsey Vidaillet, “Violations of Freedom of the Press in Cuba: 1952-1969,” *Cuba in Transition*, 2006, 16: 285-300.

³⁵ Constitute Project. “Cuba’s Constitution of 1976 with Amendments through 2002. Historical.” Translated by Pam Falk, Milagros M. Gavilan and Anna I. Vellve Torras (Oxford University Press, Inc.).

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³⁶ Another claim is that Castro rid the country of *Mafiosos*. On the “Mob Myth,” see Frank Argte-Fryere, “The Myth of Mafia Rule in 1950s Cuba: Origins, Relevance, and Legacies,” *Cuban Studies*, 2020, 49: 263-288, 405.

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³⁹ United Nations, Statistical Office of the United Nations, Department of Economic and Social Affairs, *Statistical Yearbook* (New York, New York: 1959), 583-584.

⁴⁰ Wikipedia, “[Death and State Funeral of Fidel Castro.](#)”

⁴¹ Amnesty International, “Cuba 2021.”

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⁴² In the U.S.A. alone, see the list of prominent Cuban-American individuals

<https://cubansinamerica.us/> and organizations <https://cri.fiu.edu/cuban-america/org-institutes/>

⁴³ For my own modest contribution to the making of a better Cuba, see Cuzán (2000 and 2022a, Ch. 17).