The New York Times | http://nyti.ms/2g1IaMO

Fidel Castro, Cuban Revolutionary Who Defied U.S., Dies at 90

Mr. Castro brought the Cold War to the Western Hemisphere, bedeviled 11 American presidents and briefly pushed the world to the brink of nuclear war.

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By ANTHONY DePALMA NOV. 26, 2016

Fidel Castro, the fiery apostle of revolution who brought the Cold War to the Western Hemisphere in 1959 and then defied the United States for nearly half a century as Cuba's maximum leader, bedeviling 11 American presidents and briefly pushing the world to the brink of nuclear war, died on Friday. He was 90.

Cuban state television announced the death but gave no other details.

In declining health for several years, Mr. Castro had orchestrated what he hoped would be the continuation of his Communist revolution, stepping aside in 2006 when a serious illness felled him. He provisionally ceded much of his power to his younger brother Raúl, now 85, and two years later formally resigned as president. Raúl Castro, who had fought alongside Fidel Castro from the earliest days of the insurrection and remained minister of defense and his brother's closest confidant, has ruled Cuba since then, although he has told the Cuban people he intends to resign in 2018.

Fidel Castro had held on to power longer than any other living national leader except Queen Elizabeth II. He became a towering international figure whose importance in the 20th century far exceeded what might have been expected from the head of state of a Caribbean island nation of 11 million people.

He dominated his country with strength and symbolism from the day he triumphantly entered Havana on Jan. 8, 1959, and completed his overthrow of Fulgencio Batista by delivering his first major speech in the capital before tens of thousands of admirers at the vanquished dictator's military headquarters.

A spotlight shone on him as he swaggered and spoke with passion until dawn. Finally, white doves were released to signal Cuba's new peace. When one landed on Mr. Castro, perching on a shoulder, the crowd erupted, chanting: "Fidel! Fidel!" To the war-weary Cubans gathered there and those watching on television, it was an electrifying sign that their young, bearded guerrilla leader was destined to be their savior.

Most people in the crowd had no idea what Mr. Castro planned for Cuba. A master of image and myth, Mr. Castro believed himself to be the messiah of his fatherland, an indispensable force with authority from on high to control Cuba and its people.

He wielded power like a tyrant, controlling every aspect of the island's existence. He was Cuba's "Máximo Lider." From atop a Cuban Army tank, he directed his country's defense at the Bay of Pigs. Countless details fell to him, from selecting the color of uniforms that Cuban soldiers wore in Angola to overseeing a program to produce a superbreed of milk cows. He personally set the goals for sugar harvests. He personally sent countless men to prison.

But it was more than repression and fear that kept him and his totalitarian government in power for so long. He had both admirers and detractors in Cuba and around the world. Some saw him as a ruthless despot who trampled rights and freedoms; many others hailed him as the crowds did that first night, as a revolutionary hero for the ages.

Even when he fell ill and was hospitalized with diverticulitis in the summer of 2006, giving up most of his powers for the first time, Mr. Castro tried to dictate the details of his own medical care and orchestrate the continuation of his Communist revolution, engaging a plan as old as the revolution itself.

By handing power to his brother, Mr. Castro once more raised the ire of his enemies in Washington. United States officials condemned the transition, saying it prolonged a dictatorship and again denied the long-suffering Cuban people a chance to control their own lives.

But in December 2014, President Obama used his executive powers to dial down the decades of antagonism between Washington and Havana by moving to exchange prisoners and normalize diplomatic relations between the two countries, a deal worked out with the help of Pope Francis and after 18 months of secret talks between representatives of both governments.

Though increasingly frail and rarely seen in public, Mr. Castro even then made clear his enduring mistrust of the United States. A few days after Mr. Obama's highly publicized visit to Cuba in 2016 — the first by a sitting American president in 88 years — Mr. Castro penned a cranky response denigrating Mr. Obama's overtures of peace and insisting that Cuba did not need anything the United States was offering.

To many, Fidel Castro was a self-obsessed zealot whose belief in his own destiny was unshakable, a chameleon whose economic and political colors were determined more by pragmatism than by doctrine. But in his chest beat the heart of a true rebel. "Fidel Castro," said Henry M. Wriston, the president of the Council on Foreign Relations in the 1950s and early '60s, "was everything a revolutionary should be."

Mr. Castro was perhaps the most important leader to emerge from Latin America since the wars of independence in the early 19th century. He was decidedly the most influential shaper of Cuban history since his own hero, José Martí, struggled for Cuban independence in the late 19th century. Mr. Castro's revolution transformed Cuban society and had a longer-lasting impact throughout the region than that of any other 20th-century Latin American insurrection, with the possible exception of the 1910 Mexican Revolution.

His legacy in Cuba and elsewhere has been a mixed record of social progress and abject poverty, of racial equality and political persecution, of medical advances and a degree of misery comparable to the conditions that existed in Cuba when he entered Havana as a victorious guerrilla commander in 1959.

That image made him a symbol of revolution throughout the world and an inspiration to many imitators. Hugo Chávez of Venezuela considered Mr. Castro his ideological godfather. Subcommander Marcos began a revolt in the mountains of southern Mexico in 1994, using many of the same tactics. Even Mr. Castro's spotty performance as an aging autocrat in charge of a foundering economy could not undermine his image.

But beyond anything else, it was Mr. Castro's obsession with the United States, and America's obsession with him, that shaped his rule. After he embraced Communism, Washington portrayed him as a devil and a tyrant and repeatedly tried to remove him from power through an ill-fated invasion at the Bay of Pigs in 1961, an economic embargo that has lasted decades, assassination plots and even bizarre plans to undercut his prestige by making his beard fall out.

Mr. Castro's defiance of American power made him a beacon of resistance in Latin America and elsewhere, and his bushy beard, long Cuban cigar and green fatigues became universal symbols of rebellion.

Mr. Castro's understanding of the power of images, especially on television, helped him retain the loyalty of many Cubans even during the harshest periods of deprivation and isolation when he routinely blamed America and its embargo for many of Cuba's ills. And his mastery of words in thousands of speeches, often lasting hours, imbued many Cubans with his own hatred of the United States by keeping them on constant watch for an invasion — military, economic or ideological — from the north.

Over many years Mr. Castro gave hundreds of interviews and retained the ability to twist the most compromising question to his favor. In a 1985 interview in Playboy magazine, he was asked how he would respond to President Ronald Reagan's description of him as a ruthless military dictator. "Let's think about your question," Mr. Castro said, toying with his interviewer. "If being a dictator means

governing by decree, then you might use that argument to accuse the pope of being a dictator."

He turned the question back on Reagan: "If his power includes something as monstrously undemocratic as the ability to order a thermonuclear war, I ask you, who then is more of a dictator, the president of the United States or I?"

After leading his guerrillas against a repressive Cuban dictator, Mr. Castro, in his early 30s, aligned Cuba with the Soviet Union and used Cuban troops to support revolution in Africa and throughout Latin America.

His willingness to allow the Soviets to build missile-launching sites in Cuba led to a harrowing diplomatic standoff between the United States and the Soviet Union in the fall of 1962, one that could have escalated into a nuclear exchange. The world remained tense until the confrontation was defused 13 days after it began, and the launching pads were dismantled.

With the dissolution of the Soviet Union in 1991, Mr. Castro faced one of his biggest challenges: surviving without huge Communist subsidies. He defied predictions of his political demise. When threatened, he fanned antagonism toward the United States. And when the Cuban economy neared collapse, he legalized the United States dollar, which he had railed against since the 1950s, only to ban dollars again a few years later when the economy stabilized.

Mr. Castro continued to taunt American presidents for a half-century, frustrating all of Washington's attempts to contain him. After nearly five decades as a pariah of the West, even when his once booming voice had withered to an old man's whisper and his beard had turned gray, he remained defiant.

He often told interviewers that he identified with Don Quixote, and like Quixote he struggled against threats both real and imagined, preparing for decades, for example, for another invasion that never came. As the leaders of every other nation of the hemisphere gathered in Quebec City in April 2001 for the third Summit of the Americas, an uninvited Mr. Castro, then 74, fumed in Havana, presiding over ceremonies commemorating the embarrassing defeat of C.I.A.-backed exiles at the Bay of Pigs in 1961. True to character, he portrayed his exclusion as a sign of

strength, declaring that Cuba "is the only country in the world that does not need to trade with the United States."

Personal Powers

Fidel Alejandro Castro Ruz was born on Aug. 13, 1926 — 1927 in some reports — in what was then the eastern Cuban province of Oriente, the son of a plantation owner, Ángel Castro, and one of his maids, Lina Ruz González, who became his second wife and had seven children. The father was a Spaniard who had arrived in Cuba under mysterious circumstances. One account, supported by Mr. Castro himself, was that his father had agreed to take the place of a Spanish aristocrat who had been drafted into the Spanish Army in the late 19th century to fight against Cuban independence and American hegemony.

Other versions suggest that Ángel Castro went penniless to Cuba but eventually established a plantation and did business with the despised, American-owned United Fruit Company. By the time Fidel was a youngster, his father was a major landholder.

Fidel was a boisterous young student who was sent away to study with the Jesuits at the Colegio de Dolores in Santiago de Cuba and later to the Colegio de Belén, an exclusive Jesuit high school in Havana. Cuban lore has it that he was headstrong and fanatical even as a boy. In one account, Fidel was said to have bicycled head-on into a wall to make a point to his friends about the strength of his will.

In another often-repeated tale, young Fidel and his class were led on a mountain hike by a priest. The priest slipped in a fast-moving stream and was in danger of drowning until Fidel pulled him to shore, then both knelt in prayers of thanks for their good fortune.

A sense of destiny accompanied Mr. Castro as he entered the University of Havana's law school in 1945 and almost immediately immersed himself in radical politics. He took part in an invasion of the Dominican Republic that unsuccessfully tried to oust the dictator Rafael Trujillo. He became increasingly obsessed with

Cuban politics and led student protests and demonstrations even when he was not enrolled in the university.

Mr. Castro's university days earned him the image of rabble-rouser and seemed to support the view that he had had Communist leanings all along. But in an interview in 1981, quoted in Tad Szulc's 1986 biography, "Fidel," Mr. Castro said that he had flirted with Communist ideas but did not join the party.

"I had entered into contact with Marxist literature," Mr. Castro said. "At that time, there were some Communist students at the University of Havana, and I had friendly relations with them, but I was not in the Socialist Youth, I was not a militant in the Communist Party."

He acknowledged that radical philosophy had influenced his character: "I was then acquiring a revolutionary conscience; I was active; I struggled, but let us say I was an independent fighter."

After receiving his law degree, Mr. Castro briefly represented the poor, often bartering his services for food. In 1952, he ran for Congress as a candidate for the opposition Orthodox Party. But the election was scuttled because of a coup staged by Mr. Batista.

Mr. Castro's initial response to the Batista government was to challenge it with a legal appeal, claiming that Mr. Batista's actions had violated the Constitution. Even as a symbolic act, the attempt was futile.

His core group of radical students gained followers, and on July 26, 1953, Mr. Castro led them in an attack on the Moncada barracks in Santiago de Cuba. Many of the rebels were killed. The others were captured, as were Mr. Castro and his brother Raúl. At his trial, Mr. Castro defended the attack. Mr. Batista had issued an order not to discuss the proceedings, but six Cuban journalists who had been allowed in the courtroom recorded Mr. Castro's defense.

"As for me, I know that jail will be as hard as it has ever been for anyone, filled with threats, with vileness and cowardly brutality," Mr. Castro declared. "I do not

fear this, as I do not fear the fury of the miserable tyrant who snuffed out the life of 70 brothers of mine. Condemn me, it does not matter. History will absolve me.”

Mr. Castro was sentenced to 15 years in prison. Mr. Batista then made what turned out to be a huge strategic error. Believing that the rebels’ energy had been spent, and under pressure from civic leaders to show that he was not a dictator, he released Mr. Castro and his followers in an amnesty after the 1954 presidential election.

Mr. Castro went into exile in Mexico, where he plotted his return to Cuba. He tried to buy a used American PT boat to carry his band to Cuba, but the deal fell through. Then he caught sight of a beat-up 61-foot wooden yacht named Granma, once owned by an American who lived in Mexico City.

The Granma remains on display in Havana, encased in glass.

Man of the Mountains

During Mr. Castro’s long rule, his character and image underwent several transformations, beginning with his days as a revolutionary in the Sierra Maestra of eastern Cuba. After arriving on the coast in the overloaded yacht with Che Guevara and 80 of their comrades in December 1956, Mr. Castro took on the role of freedom fighter. He engaged in a campaign of harassment and guerrilla warfare that infuriated Mr. Batista, who had seized power in a 1952 garrison revolt, ending a brief period of democracy.

Although his soldiers and weapons vastly outnumbered Mr. Castro’s, Mr. Batista grew fearful of the young guerrilla’s mesmerizing oratory. He ordered government troops not to rest until they had killed Mr. Castro, and the army frequently reported that it had done so. Newspapers around the world reported his death in the December 1956 landing. But three months later, Mr. Castro was interviewed for a series of articles that would revive his movement and thus change history.

The escapade began when Castro loyalists contacted a correspondent and editorial writer for The New York Times, Herbert L. Matthews, and arranged for him

to interview Mr. Castro. A few Castro supporters took Mr. Matthews into the mountains disguised as a wealthy American planter.

Drawing on his reporting, Mr. Matthews wrote sympathetically of both the man and his movement, describing Mr. Castro, then 30, parting the jungle leaves and striding into a clearing for the interview.

“This was quite a man — a powerful six-footer, olive-skinned, full-faced, with a straggly beard,” Mr. Matthews wrote.

The three articles, which began in The Times on Sunday, Feb. 24, 1957, presented a Castro that Americans could root for. “The personality of the man is overpowering,” Mr. Matthews wrote. “Here was an educated, dedicated fanatic, a man of ideals, of courage and of remarkable qualities of leadership.”

The articles repeated Mr. Castro’s assertions that Cuba’s future was anything but a Communist state. “He has strong ideas of liberty, democracy, social justice, the need to restore the Constitution, to hold elections,” Mr. Matthews wrote. When asked about the United States, Mr. Castro replied, “You can be sure we have no animosity toward the United States and the American people.”

The Cuban government denounced Mr. Matthews and called the articles fabrications. But the news that he had survived the landing breathed life into Mr. Castro’s movement. His small band of irregulars skirmished with government troops, and each encounter increased their support in Cuba and around the world, even though other insurgent forces in the cities were also fighting to overthrow the Batista government.

It was the symbolic strength of his movement, not the armaments under Mr. Castro’s control, that overwhelmed the government. By the time Mr. Batista fled from a darkened Havana airport just after midnight on New Year’s Day 1959, Mr. Castro was already a legend. Competing opposition groups were unable to seize power.

Events over the next few months became the catalyst for another transformation in Mr. Castro’s public image. More than 500 Batista-era officials were brought

before courts-martial and special tribunals, summarily convicted and shot to death. The grainy black-and-white images of the executions broadcast on American television horrified viewers.

Mr. Castro defended the executions as necessary to solidify the revolution. He complained that the United States had raised not a whimper when Mr. Batista had tortured and executed thousands of opponents.

But to wary observers in the United States, the executions were a signal that Mr. Castro was not the democratic savior he had seemed. In May 1959, he began confiscating privately owned agricultural land, including land owned by Americans, openly provoking the United States government.

In the spring of 1960, Mr. Castro ordered American and British refineries in Cuba to accept oil from the Soviet Union. Under pressure from Congress, President Dwight D. Eisenhower cut the American sugar quota from Cuba, forcing Mr. Castro to look for new markets. He turned to the Soviet Union for economic aid and political support. Thus began a half-century of American antagonism toward Cuba.

Finally, in 1961, he gave the United States 48 hours to reduce the staff of its embassy in Havana to 18 from 60. A frustrated Eisenhower broke off diplomatic relations with Cuba and closed the embassy on the Havana seacoast. The diplomatic stalemate lasted until 2015, when embassies were finally reopened in both Havana and Washington.

During his two years in the mountains, Mr. Castro had sketched a social revolution whose aim, at least on the surface, seemed to be to restore the democracy that Mr. Batista's coup had stifled. Mr. Castro promised free elections and vowed to end American domination of the economy and the working-class oppression that he said it had caused.

Despite having a law degree, Mr. Castro had no real experience in economics or government. Beyond improving education and reducing Cuba's dependence on sugar and the United States, his revolution began without a clear sense of the new society he planned, except that it would be different from what had existed under Mr. Batista.

At the time, Cuba was a playground for rich American tourists and gangsters where glaring disparities of wealth persisted, although the country was one of the most economically advanced in the Caribbean.

After taking power in 1959, Mr. Castro put together a cabinet of moderates, but it did not last long. He named Felipe Pazos, an economist, president of the Banco Nacional de Cuba, Cuba's central bank. But when Mr. Pazos openly criticized Mr. Castro's growing tolerance of Communists and his failure to restore democracy, he was dismissed. In place of Mr. Pazos, Mr. Castro named Che Guevara, an Argentine doctor who knew nothing about monetary policy but whose revolutionary credentials were unquestioned.

Opposition to the Castro government began to grow in Cuba, leading peasants and anti-Communist insurgents to take up arms against it. The Escambray Revolt, as it was called, lasted from 1959 to 1965, when it was crushed by Mr. Castro's army.

As the first waves of Cuban exiles arrived in Miami and northern New Jersey after the revolution, many were intent on overthrowing the man they had once supported. Their number would eventually total a million, many from what had been, proportionately, the largest middle class in Latin America.

The Central Intelligence Agency helped train an exile army to retake Cuba by force. The army was to make a beachhead at the Bay of Pigs, a remote spot on Cuba's southern coast, and instigate a popular insurrection.

Mr. Szulc, then a correspondent for The Times, had picked up information about the invasion, and had written an article about it. But The Times, at the request of the Kennedy administration, withheld some of what Mr. Szulc had found, including information that an attack was imminent. Specific references to the C.I.A. were also omitted.

Ten days later, on April 17, 1961, 1,500 Cuban fighters landed at the Bay of Pigs. Mr. Castro was waiting for them. The invasion was badly planned and by all accounts doomed. Most of the invaders were either captured or killed. Promised American air support never arrived. The historian Theodore Draper called the botched operation

"a perfect failure," and the invasion aroused a distrust of the United States that Mr. Castro exploited for political gain for the rest of his life.

Declaration or Deception?

The C.I.A., fighting the Cold War, had acted out of worries about Mr. Castro's increasingly open Communist connections. As he consolidated power, even some of his most faithful supporters grew concerned. One break had taken place as early as 1959. Huber Matos, who had fought alongside Mr. Castro in the Sierra Maestra, resigned as military governor of Camagüey Province to protest the Communists' growing influence as well as the appointment of Raúl Castro, whose Communist sympathies were well known, as commander of Cuba's armed forces. Suspecting an antirevolutionary plot, Fidel Castro had Mr. Matos arrested and charged with treason.

Within two months, Mr. Matos was tried, convicted and sentenced to 20 years in prison. When he was released in 1979, Mr. Matos, nearly blind, went into exile in the United States, where he lived until his death in 2014. Shortly after arriving in Miami and joining the legions of Castro opponents there, Mr. Matos told Worldview magazine: "I differed from Fidel Castro because the original objective of our revolution was 'Freedom or Death.' Once Castro had power, he began to kill freedom."

It was not until just before the Bay of Pigs invasion that Mr. Castro declared publicly that his revolution was socialist. A few months later, on Dec. 2, 1961, he removed any lingering doubt about his loyalties when he affirmed in a long speech, "I am a Marxist-Leninist."

Many Cubans who had willingly accepted great sacrifice for what they believed would be a democratic revolution were dismayed. They broke ranks with Mr. Castro, putting themselves and their families at risk. Others, from the safety of the United States, publicly accused Mr. Castro of betraying the revolution and called him a tyrant. Even his family began to raise doubts about his intentions.

"As I listened, I thought that surely he must be a superb actor," Mr. Castro's sister Juanita wrote in an account in Life magazine in 1964, referring to the December 1961 speech. "He had fooled not only so many of his friends, but his family as well." She recalled his upbringing as the son of a well-to-do landowner in eastern Cuba who had sent him to exclusive Jesuit schools. In 1948, after Mr. Castro married Mirta Díaz-Balart, whose family had ties to the Batista government, his father gave them a three-month honeymoon in the United States.

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"How could Fidel, who had been given the best of everything, be a Communist?" Juanita Castro wrote. "This was the riddle which paralyzed me and so many other Cubans who refused to believe that he was leading our country into the Communist camp."

Although the young Fidel was deeply involved in a radical student movement at the University of Havana, his early allegiance to Communist doctrine was uncertain at best. Some analysts believed that the obstructionist attitudes of American officials had pushed Mr. Castro toward the Soviet Union.

Indeed, although Mr. Castro pursued ideologically communist policies, he never established a purely Communist state in Cuba, nor did he adopt orthodox Communist Party ideology. Rather, what developed in Cuba was less doctrinaire, a tropical form of communism that suited his needs. He centralized the economy and flattened out much of the traditional hierarchy of Cuban society, improving education and health care for many Cubans, while depriving them of free speech and economic opportunity.

But unlike other Communist countries, Cuba was never governed by a functioning politburo; Mr. Castro himself, and later his brother Rául, filled all the important positions in the party, the government and the army, ruling Cuba as its maximum leader.

"The Cuban regime turns out to be simply the case of a third-world dictator seizing a useful ideology in order to employ its wealth against his enemies," wrote

the columnist Georgie Anne Geyer, whose critical biography of Mr. Castro was published in 1991.

In this view of Mr. Castro, he was above all an old-style Spanish caudillo, one of a long line of Latin American strongmen who endeared themselves to people searching for leaders. The analyst Alvaro Vargas Llosa of the Independent Institute in Washington called him “the ultimate 20th-century caudillo.”

In Cuba, through good times and bad, Mr. Castro’s supporters referred to themselves not as Communists but as Fidelistas. He remained personally popular among segments of Cuban society even after his economic policies created severe hardship. As Mr. Castro consolidated power, eliminated his enemies and grew increasingly autocratic, the Cuban people referred to him simply as Fidel. To say “Castro” was considered disloyal, although in later decades Cubans would commonly say just that and mean it. Or they would invoke his overwhelming presence by simply bringing a hand to their chins, as if to stroke a beard.

Global Brinkmanship

Mr. Castro’s alignment with the Soviet Union meant that the Cold War between the world’s superpowers, and the ideological battle between democracy and communism, had erupted in the United States’ sphere of influence. A clash was all but inevitable, and it came in October 1962. American spy planes took reconnaissance photos suggesting that the Soviets had exploited their new alliance to build bases in Cuba for intermediate-range nuclear missiles capable of reaching North America.

Mr. Castro allowed the bases to be constructed, but once they were discovered, he became a bit player in the ensuing drama, overshadowed by President John F. Kennedy and the Soviet leader, Nikita S. Khrushchev. Kennedy put United States military forces on alert and ordered a naval blockade of Cuba. The two sides were at a stalemate for 13 tense days, and the world held its breath.

Finally, after receiving assurances that the United States would remove American missiles from Turkey and not invade Cuba, the Soviets withdrew the missiles and dismantled the bases.

But the Soviet presence in Cuba continued to grow. Soviet troops, technicians and engineers streamed in, eventually producing a generation of blond Cubans with names like Yuri, Alexi and Vladimiro. The Soviets were willing to buy all the sugar Cuba could produce. Even as other Caribbean nations diversified, Cuba decided to stick with one major crop, sugar, and one major buyer.

But after forcing the entire nation into a failed effort to reach a record 10-million-ton sugar harvest in 1970, Mr. Castro recognized the need to break the cycle of dependence on the Soviets and sugar. Once more, he relied on his belief in himself and his revolution for solutions. One unlikely consequence was his effort to develop a Cuban supercow. Although he had no training in animal husbandry, Mr. Castro decided to crossbreed humpbacked Asian Zebus with standard Holsteins to create a new breed that could produce milk at prodigious rates.

Decades later, the Zebus could still be found grazing in pastures across the island, symbols of Mr. Castro's micromanagement. A few of the hybrids did give more milk, and one that set a milk production record was stuffed and placed in a museum. But most were no better producers than their parents.

As the Soviets settled in Cuba in the 1960s, hundreds of Cuban students were sent to Moscow, Prague and other cities of the Soviet bloc to study science and medicine. Admirers from around the world, including some Americans, were impressed with the way that health care and literacy in Cuba had improved. A reshaping of Cuban society was underway.

Cuba's tradition of racial segregation was turned upside down as peasants from the countryside, many of them dark-skinned descendants of Africans enslaved by the Spaniards centuries before, were invited into Havana and other cities that had been overwhelmingly white. They were given the keys to the elegant homes and spacious apartments of the middle-class Cubans who had fled to the United States. Rents came to be little more than symbolic, and basic foods like milk and eggs were sold in government stores at below production cost.

Mr. Castro's early overhauls also changed Cuba in ways that were less than utopian. Foreign-born priests were exiled, and local clergy were harassed so much that many closed their churches. The Roman Catholic Church excommunicated Mr. Castro for violating a 1949 papal decree against supporting Communism. He established a sinister system of local Committees for the Defense of the Revolution, which set neighbors to informing on neighbors. Thousands of dissidents and homosexuals were rounded up and sentenced to either prison or forced labor. And although blacks were welcomed into the cities, Mr. Castro's government remained overwhelmingly white.

Mr. Castro regularly fanned the flames of revolution with his oratory. In marathon speeches, he incited the Cuban people by laying out what he considered the evils of capitalism in general and of the United States in particular. For decades, the regime controlled all publications and broadcasting outlets and restricted access to goods and information in ways that would not have been possible if Cuba were not an island.

His revolution established at home, Mr. Castro looked to export it. Thousands of Cuban soldiers were sent to Africa to fight in Angola, Mozambique and Ethiopia in support of Communist insurgents. The strain on Cuba's treasury and its society was immense, but Mr. Castro insisted on being a global player in the Communist struggle.

As potential threats to his rule were eliminated, Mr. Castro tightened his grip. Camilo Cienfuegos, who had led a division in the insurrection and was immensely popular in Cuba, was killed in a plane crash days after going to arrest Huber Matos in Camagüey on Mr. Castro's orders. His body was never found. Che Guevara, who had become hostile toward the Soviet Union, broke with Mr. Castro before going off to Bolivia, where he was captured and killed in 1967 for trying to incite a revolution there.

Despite the fiery rhetoric from Mr. Castro in the early years of the revolution, Washington did attempt a reconciliation. By some accounts, in the weeks before he was assassinated in 1963, Kennedy had aides look at mending fences, providing Mr. Castro was willing to break with the Soviets.

But with Kennedy's assassination, and suspicions that Mr. Castro and the Cubans were somehow involved, the 90 miles separating Cuba from the United States became a gulf of antagonism and mistrust. The C.I.A. tried several times to eliminate Mr. Castro or undermine his authority. One plot involved exposing him to a chemical that would cause his beard to fall out, and another using a poison pen to kill him. Mr. Castro often boasted of how many times he had escaped C.I.A. plots to kill him, and he ordered information about the foiled attempts to be put on display at a Havana museum.

Relations between the United States and Cuba briefly thawed in the 1970s during the administration of President Jimmy Carter. For the first time, Cuban-Americans were allowed to visit family in Havana under strict guidelines. But that fleeting détente ended in 1980 when Mr. Castro tried to defuse growing domestic discontent by allowing about 125,000 Cubans to flee in boats, makeshift rafts and inner tubes, departing from the beach at Mariel. He used the opportunity to empty Cuban prisons of criminals and people with mental illnesses and force them to join the Mariel boatlift. Mr. Carter's successor, Reagan, slammed shut the door that Mr. Carter had opened.

In 1989, when frustrated veterans from Cuba's African ventures began rallying around Gen. Arnaldo Ochoa, who led Cuban forces on the continent, Mr. Castro effectively got rid of a potential rival by bringing the general and some of his supporters to trial on drug charges. General Ochoa and several other high-ranking officers were executed on the orders of Raúl Castro, who was then the minister of defense.

The United States economic embargo, imposed by Eisenhower and widened by Kennedy, has continued for more than five decades. But its effectiveness was undermined by the Soviet Union, which gave Cuba $5 billion a year in subsidies, and later by Venezuela, which sent Cuba badly needed oil and long-term economic support. Most other countries, including close United States allies like Canada, maintained relations with Cuba throughout the decades and continued trading with the island. In recent years, successive American presidents have punched big holes in the embargo, allowing a broad range of economic activity, though maintaining the ban on tourism.

End of an Empire

"I faced my greatest challenge after I turned 60," Mr. Castro said in an interview with Vanity Fair magazine in 1994. He was referring to the collapse of the Soviet empire, which brought an end to the subsidies that had kept his government afloat for so long. He had also lost a steady source of oil and a reliable buyer for Cuban sugar.

Abandoned, isolated, facing increasing dissent at home, Mr. Castro seemed to have come to the end of his line. Cuba's collapse appeared imminent, and Mr. Castro's final hours in power were widely anticipated. Miami exiles began making elaborate preparations for a triumphant return.

But Mr. Castro, defying predictions, fought on. He chose an unlikely weapon: the hated American dollar, which he had long condemned as the corrupt symbol of capitalism. In the summer of 1993, he made it legal for Cubans to hold American dollars spent by tourists or sent by exiled family members. That policy eventually led to a dual currency system that has fostered resentment and hampered economic development in Cuba.

Mr. Castro, the self-proclaimed Marxist-Leninist, was also willing to experiment with capitalism and free enterprise, at least for a time. Encouraged by his brother Raúl, he allowed farmers to sell excess produce at market rates, and he ordered officials to turn a blind eye to small, family-run kitchens and restaurants, called paladares, that charged market prices. Under Rául Castro, those reforms were broadened considerably, though they were sometimes met with public grumbling from his older brother.

But despite his apparent distaste for capitalism, and lingering memories of the 1950s Cuba that preceded his rule, Fidel Castro continued to foster Cuba's tourism industry. He allowed Spanish, Italian and Canadian companies to develop resort hotels and vacation properties, usually in association with an arm of the Cuban military.

For many years, the resorts were off limits to most Cubans. They generated hard cash, but a new generation of struggling young Cuban women were lured into prostitution by the tourists' money.

For a time, Mexican and Canadian investors poured money into the decrepit telephone company (owned by ITT until it was nationalized by Mr. Castro in 1960), mining operations and other enterprises, which helped keep Cuba's economy from collapsing. He declared an emergency during which he expected the Cuban people to tighten their belts. He called the United States embargo genocide.

All his efforts were not enough to keep dissent from sprouting in Havana, Santiago de Cuba and other urban areas during this period of hardship. Despite worldwide condemnation of his actions, Mr. Castro clamped down on a fledgling democracy movement, jailing anyone who dared to call for free elections. He also cracked down on the nucleus of an independent press, imprisoning or harassing Cuban reporters and editors.

In 1994, for the first time, demonstrators took to the streets of Havana to express their anger over the failed promises of the revolution. Mr. Castro had to personally appeal for calm. Then, in early 1996, he seized an opportunity to rebuild his support by again demonizing the United States.

A South Florida group, Brothers to the Rescue, had been flying three civilian planes toward the Cuban coast when two were shot down by Cuban military jets. Four men on board were killed. Mr. Castro raged against Washington, maintaining that the planes had violated Cuban airspace. American officials condemned the attack.

Until then, President Bill Clinton had been moving discreetly but steadily toward easing the United States embargo and re-establishing some relations with Cuba. But in the wake of the attack, and the virulent reaction from Cuban-Americans in Florida — a state Mr. Clinton considered important to his re-election bid — he reluctantly signed the Helms-Burton law, which allowed the United States to punish foreign companies that were using confiscated American property in Cuba.

The State Department's first warnings under the new law went to a Canadian mining company that had taken over a huge nickel mine, and a Mexican investment group that had purchased the Cuban telephone company. Despite protests from American allies, the United States maintained the Helms-Burton law as a weapon against Mr. Castro, although all its provisions have never been carried out.

But in Cuba, the American actions reinforced Mr. Castro's complaints about American arrogance and helped channel domestic dissent toward Washington. One of his strengths as a communicator — he considered Reagan his only worthy competitor in that regard — had always been to transform his anger toward the United States into a rallying cry for the Cuban people.

"We are left with the honor of being one of the few adversaries of the United States," Mr. Castro told Maria Shriver of NBC in a 1998 interview. When Ms. Shriver asked him if that truly was an honor, he answered, "Of course."

"For such a small country as Cuba to have such a gigantic country as the United States live so obsessed with this island," he said, "it is an honor for us."

Parallel Lives

As he grew older and grayer, Mr. Castro could no longer be easily linked to the intense guerrilla fighter who had come out of the Sierra Maestra. He rambled incoherently in his long speeches. He was rumored to be suffering from various diseases. After 40 years, the revolution he started no longer held promise, and Cubans by the thousands, including many who had never known any other life but under Mr. Castro, risked their lives trying to reach the United States on rafts, inner tubes and even old trucks outfitted with floats.

Although the revolution lost its luster, what never diminished was Mr. Castro's ability to confound American officials and to create situations to seize the advantage of a particular moment.

That was evident early in 1998 when Pope John Paul II visited Havana and met with Mr. Castro. The meeting was widely expected to be seen as a rebuke and an embarrassment to Mr. Castro. The aging anti-Communist pontiff stood beside the

aging Communist leader, who had abandoned his military uniform for the occasion in favor of a dark suit. The pope talked about human rights and the lack of basic freedoms in Cuba. But he also called Washington's embargo "unjust and ethically unacceptable," allowing Mr. Castro to claim a political if not a moral victory.

The next year, Mr. Castro converted another conflict into an opportunity to bolster his standing among his own people while infuriating the United States. A young woman and her 5-year-old son were among more than a dozen Cubans who had set out for Florida in a 17-foot aluminum boat. The boat capsized and the woman drowned, but the boy, Elián González, survived two days in an inner tube before being picked up by the United States Coast Guard and taken to Miami, where he was united with relatives.

Later, however, the relatives refused to release the boy when his father, in Cuba, demanded his return. The standoff between the family and United States officials created the kind of emotional and political drama that Mr. Castro had become a master at manipulating for his own purposes.

Mr. Castro made the boy another symbol of American oppression, which diverted attention from the deteriorating conditions in Cuba. After several months, American agents seized the boy from his Miami relatives and returned him to his father in Cuba, where he was greeted by Mr. Castro.

That episode carried great significance for Mr. Castro in the way it echoed one in his personal life.

Mr. Castro and his wife, Mirta Díaz-Balart, divorced in 1955, six years after the birth of their son, Fidelito.

In 1956, when Mr. Castro and Ms. Díaz-Balart were both in Mexico, Mr. Castro arranged to have the boy visit him before embarking on what he said would be a dangerous voyage, which turned out to be his invasion of Cuba. He promised to bring the boy back in two weeks, but it was a trick. At the end of that period, Mr. Castro placed Fidelito in the custody of a friend in Mexico City. He then sailed for Cuba with his fellow rebels on the yacht Granma.

The boy's mother, with the help of her family and the Cuban Embassy in Mexico City, found a team of professional kidnappers, who ambushed the boy and his guardians in a park and carried him off. Ms. Díaz-Balart took Fidelito to New York and enrolled him in a local school for a year. But after Mr. Castro entered Havana and grabbed control of the government, he persuaded his former wife to send the boy back. The younger Mr. Castro lived in Cuba until, years later, he was sent to the Soviet Union to study. He became a physicist, married a Russian woman and eventually returned to Cuba, where he was named head of Cuba's nuclear power program.

Details of Mr. Castro's personal life were always murky. He had no formal home but lived in many different houses and estates in and around Havana. He had relationships with several women, and only in his later years was he willing to acknowledge that he had a relationship of more than 40 years with Dalia Soto del Valle, who had rarely been seen in public. (Whether they were legally married was not clear.)

The two had five sons — Alexis, Alexander, Alejandro, Antonio and Ángel — all of whom live in Cuba. Mr. Castro also has a daughter, Alina, a radio host in Miami, who bitterly attacked her father on the air for years.

Mr. Castro had stormy relations with many of his relatives both in Cuba and the United States. He remained close to Celia Sánchez, a woman who was with him in the Sierra Maestra and who looked after his schedule and his archives devotedly, until she died in 1980. A sister, Ángela Castro, died at 88 in Havana in February 2012, according to The Associated Press, quoting her sister Juanita. And his elder brother Ramón died in February 2016 at 91.

Outlasting all his enemies, Mr. Castro lived to rule a country where the overwhelming majority of people had never known any other leader. Hardly anyone talked openly of a time without him until the day, in 2001, when he appeared to faint while giving a speech. Then, in 2004, he stumbled while leaving a platform, breaking a kneecap and reminding Cubans again of his mortality and forcing them to confront their future.

As Mr. Castro and his revolution aged, Cuban dissidents grew bolder. Oswaldo Payá, using a clause in the Cuban Constitution, collected thousands of signatures in a petition demanding a referendum on free speech and other political freedoms. (Mr. Payá died in a car crash in 2012.) Bloggers wrote disparagingly of Mr. Castro and the regime, although most of their missives could not be read in Cuba, where internet access was strictly limited.

A group of Cuban women who called themselves the Ladies in White rallied on Sundays to protest the imprisonment of their fathers, husbands and sons, whose pictures they carried on posters inscribed with the number of years to which they were sentenced as political prisoners.

After being made his brother's successor, Raúl Castro tried to control the fragments of the revolution that remained after Fidel Castro fell ill, including a close association with President Hugo Chávez of Venezuela, who modeled himself after Fidel. (Mr. Chávez died in 2013.)

Never as popular as his brother, Raúl Castro was considered a better manager, and in some ways was seen as more conscious of the everyday needs of the Cuban people, despite his reputation as the revolution's executioner. One of his first moves as leader was to replace the grossly overcrowded city buses, known as "camels," with new ones, many imported from China. He opened up the economy somewhat, allowing entrepreneurs to start businesses, and he eased restrictions on traveling, access to cellphones, computers and other personal items, and the buying and selling of property.

Still, Raúl Castro came under mounting pressure from Cubans demanding even more economic and political opportunity. He took more steps to open the economy and, in so doing, dismantled parts of the socialist state that his brother had defended for so long.

Lurking in the background as Raúl Castro embarked on that new course was the brooding visage of Fidel, whose revolution has been seen as a rebellion of one man. When President Obama and Raúl Castro simultaneously went on TV in their countries in 2014 to announce a prisoner exchange and the first steps toward

normalizing relations, Cubans and Americans alike expected to hear Fidel either accepting or condemning the moves.

Six weeks after the deal was announced, Mr. Castro, or someone writing in his name, finally reacted in a way that combined his own bluster and his brother's new approach.

"I do not trust the politics of the United States, nor have I exchanged a word with them, but this is not, in any way, a rejection of a peaceful solution to conflicts," Mr. Castro wrote near the end of a rambling letter to students on the commemoration of the 70th anniversary of his own time at the University of Havana.

Sounding more like his brother than his old self, he backed any peaceful attempts to resolve the problems between the two countries. He then took one final swipe at his old nemesis.

"The grave dangers that threaten humanity today have to give way to norms that are compatible with human dignity," the letter said. "No country is excluded from such rights. With this spirit I have fought, and will continue fighting, until my last breath."

In April 2016, a frail Mr. Castro made what many thought would be his last public appearance, at the Seventh Congress of the Cuban Communist Party. Dressed in an incongruous blue tracksuit jacket, his hands at times quivering and his once powerful voice reduced to a tinny squawk, he expressed surprise at having survived to almost 90, and he bade farewell to the party, the political system and the revolutionary Cuba he had created.

"Soon I will be like everybody else," Mr. Castro said. "Our turn comes to us all, but the ideas of Cuban communism will endure."

No one is sure if the force of the revolution will dissipate without Mr. Castro and, eventually, his brother. But Fidel Castro's impact on Latin America and the Western Hemisphere has the earmarks of lasting indefinitely. The power of his personality remains inescapable, for better or worse, not only in Cuba but also throughout Latin America.

"We are going to live with Fidel Castro and all he stands for while he is alive," wrote Mr. Matthews of The Times, whose own fortunes were dimmed considerably by his connection to Mr. Castro, "and with his ghost when he is dead."

Revisit notable deaths of 2016.

A version of this article appears in print on November 27, 2016, on page A1 of the New York edition with the headline: Fidel Castro Dies at 90; Cuban Revolutionary Who Defied the U.S.

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