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FIDEL CASTRO:
Brutal Dictator
or Visionary
Revolutionist?

Hosted by MICHAEL SERAPIO

 **NEWS
IN
REVIEW**

IN THIS ISSUE

Fidel Castro: Brutal Dictator or Visionary Revolutionist? (Duration 21:45)

The death of Fidel Castro in late November 2016 had Cubans mourning while expats were celebrating. He was a polarizing figure, larger than life and an enigma. He's been a long-time friend of Canada thanks to a friendship with former prime minister Pierre Trudeau, and an arch enemy of America — at least until former U.S. president Barack Obama tried to end that Cold War. Now incoming President Donald Trump will likely end any agreements made and Cuba's future is uncertain once again.

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(Feb 2015)

The Pope in Cuba: Church and State (Mar 1998)
Castro's Cuba, Fighting to Survive (Apr 1996)

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Resource Guide Writer: Jill Morris

Resource Guide Editor: Sean Dolan

Host: Michael Serapio

Packaging Producer: Marie-Hélène Savard

Associate Producer: Agathe Carrier

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VIDEO REVIEW

Before Viewing

Consider what you know about the word “revolution.” What beliefs do you hold about the nature and role of revolution in history and current political situations around the world? Working with a partner or in a small group, use the following quotes to prompt and direct your discussion. To what extent do you agree with each quote? Can you imagine revolution occurring in Canada? Why or why not? Take notes from your discussion and prepare to share your ideas with the class.

// We have it in our power to begin the world over again. //

– Thomas Paine (1737-1809),
English-American political theorist and revolutionary writing about the American Revolution

// I hold it that a little rebellion now and then is a good thing, and [is] as necessary in the political world as storms in the physical. //

– Thomas Jefferson (1743-1826),
American statesman and author of the American Declaration of Independence

// The great lesson to draw from revolutions is not that they devour humanity but rather that tyranny never fails to generate them. //

– Pierre Trudeau (1919-2000),
Canadian prime minister

// No real social change has ever been brought about without a revolution. Revolution is but thought carried into action. Every effort for progress, for enlightenment, for science, for religious, political, and economic liberty, emanates from the minority, and not from the mass. //

– Emma Goldman (1869-1940),
Lithuanian-American feminist, anarchist, author and activist

Viewing

1. What were the ramifications of Pierre Trudeau’s 1976 visit to Cuba?

2. Where did Castro live as a child and what happened to that property after the revolution was won?

3. What did Castro’s mother call him when he was born and how did that description carry through in his life as ruler of Cuba?

4. What examples from Castro's childhood indicate that he may have had a rebellious personality from a very young age?

5. What is the name of the mountain range where Castro's guerilla camp was located?

6. a) According to the interview captured by the CBC in 1958, what were Castro's political plans for Cuba?

b) How did he see his country's relationship with Canada?

7. Castro's former neighbour, Maria Estevez, seems to be conflicted in her feelings for Castro. Provide an example of what Estevez values about Castro and provide an example of something she is critical about when it comes to the Cuban leader.

8. Contrast Obama's relationship with Castro to Trump's opinion of Castro.

9. Where will Castro's ashes be interred and what is the significance of this location?

10. According to Ms. Robles, what did the revolution offer to her children and grandchildren?

11. How long did the mourning period for Castro last?

12. What promise does Raul Castro, Fidel's brother, make for his country?

After Viewing

Explore the Amnesty International page about censorship in Cuba at the following link:

amnesty.org/en/latest/campaigns/2016/03/six-facts-about-censorship-in-cuba/

How does knowledge of censorship in Cuba affect your understanding of news reports about that country? Explain your answer.

THE STORY

Minds On

// It is easy to blur the truth with a simple linguistic trick: ... Start your story with ‘Secondly,’ and the world will be turned upside-down. Start your story with ‘Secondly,’ and the arrows of the [indigenous] are the original criminals and the guns of the white men are entirely the victims. It is

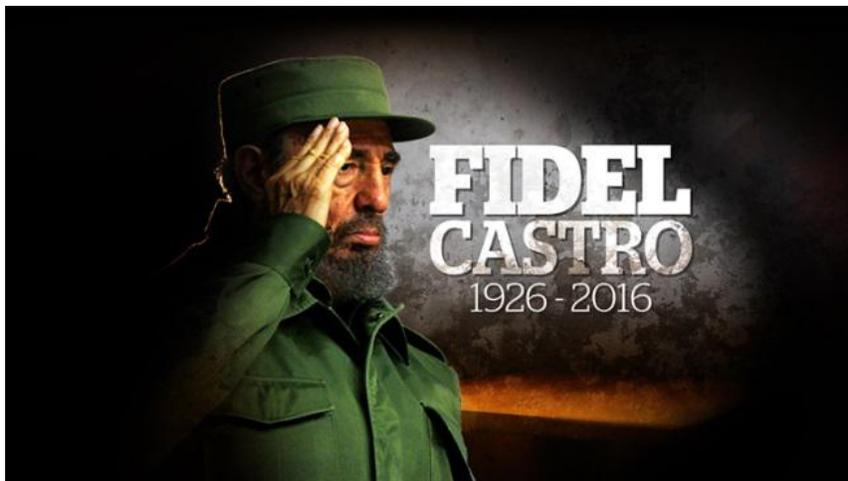
enough to start with ‘Secondly,’ for the anger of the black man against the white to be barbarous. Start with ‘Secondly,’ and Gandhi becomes responsible for the tragedies of the British. //

– Mourid Barghouti,
Palestinian poet and writer (from *I Saw Ramallah*)

Working with a partner, consider the quote from Barghouti. Be sure that you have a good understanding of what the poet is expressing. To what extent do you agree with the idea that our view of the world is shaped by the point where we choose to start a story? If Barghouti is suggesting that many actions should be understood as reactions, what impact might this have on the way that we think about history?

Se Fue – He is Gone

On November 26, 2016, Fidel Castro died peacefully at the age of 90 with his government, now administered by his brother Raul, still in power. And it was his government. Under Castro, Cuba had become an independent, international player — an example, for good or ill, of communism in practice, and an emblem of resistance to U.S. imperialism. But it had also become a nation of incongruous realities: offering fully funded education at all levels but suppressing dissent relentlessly, providing universal health care and but violating human rights.



Response to Castro’s Death

Upon news of his death, Prime Minister Justin Trudeau, noting “deep sorrow,” released a statement that described Castro as “a larger than life leader who served his people for almost half a century.” Acknowledging that Castro was a “controversial figure,” Trudeau went on to say that “both Mr. Castro’s supporters and detractors recognized his tremendous dedication and love for the Cuban people who had a deep and lasting affection for el Comandante.” Many responded to Trudeau’s comments with disbelief and swift condemnation. For those who were forced to flee Cuba, or had lost family members under the reign of Castro, Trudeau’s seemingly heartfelt sorrow was difficult to understand.

The Cuban-American population in Miami, Florida, celebrated in the streets, hopeful that Castro’s death marked a new opportunity for the island nation. In Cuba, the people observed nine days of mourning as the funeral procession of Castro’s body wound around the country. While it is impossible to say how much of the national display of grief was mandated and how much was genuine sorrow, the weight of Castro’s passing was undeniable.

Incongruous – Not in harmony with the surroundings or an accepted way of thinking.

Remembering Castro

Without question, Fidel Castro is a complicated and polarizing figure, which is why it so challenging to make sense of who he was and how he should be remembered. Much of what Canadians know of Fidel Castro has been filtered through the perspective of Cuba's tense and conflicted relationship with the United States. But there are other elements of Castro's story that also need to be considered.

Beginnings

In 1926, Fidel Castro was born in the small village of Biran, a place defined by the sugar plantations that surrounded it. As the illegitimate son of a successful landowner, Castro began his life with the same tension between power and outsider status that would mark his political legacy of over 50 years as the absolute ruler of Cuba.

He was intelligent, driven to learn, and competitive to the point of recklessness. From the beginning, he was an explosive combination of principled belief and relentless ego. As a youth, he was educated in a private Jesuit school where he was first exposed to principles of a Marxist worldview: a sharp critique of capitalism that highlights the impact of class hierarchy and prioritized equality. After completing his upper school education, Castro attended law school at the University of Havana, where he became an important figure in campus politics.

Hierarchy – A system that arranges people from top to bottom in order of importance with those at the top (the few) being in charge and those at the bottom (the many) following the directions of the leaders. A hierarchy can also be used to describe an organization of ideas with more important ideas at the top and less important ideas at the bottom.

In 1961, the United States sent a group of Cuban exiles, trained by the CIA, to attempt to overthrow Castro's government. Supported by air attacks, a boat carrying a force of 1 500 disembarked in an area known as the **Bay of Pigs**. The attack was a complete failure. Those who were not killed in the fighting were captured and put in prison. One year later, the Soviet Union installed nuclear missiles in Cuba in what came to be known as the **Cuban Missile Crisis**. For obvious reasons, the United States took issue with the placement of nuclear weapons roughly 100 miles from their country. After tense negotiations, the Soviet Union agreed to remove the missiles. This was likely the closest that the United States and the Soviet Union ever came to nuclear war.

In 1947, fueled by his increasing commitment to social justice, Castro travelled to the Dominican Republic to participate in an attempt to overthrow the dictator, Rafael Trujillo. Although the effort was unsuccessful, this experience — along with his time spent in Colombia taking part in anti-government rioting — helped to shape his perspective and approach to politics in Cuba.

Returning home, Castro committed himself to confronting the corruption of the Cuban government. At this point, he began reading about Marxist theory in earnest and was planning to run for a seat in congress when the former president, Fulgencio Batista, staged a coup in 1952. By establishing control of the country's military, and gaining the support of Cuba's wealthy class, Batista set himself up as dictator. Importantly, despite the glaring lack of democratic process, the United States formally recognized and legitimated Batista's leadership.

U.S. Imperialism

This was not the first time that the United States had influenced or interfered in the political fortunes of Cuba. As a result of the Spanish-American War (1898), the United States came to a series of agreements with the newly independent Cuba that assured the country's independence but also gave the U.S. the right to intervene in Cuba's affairs. The final agreement, called the Platt Amendment, remained in force until 1934. After 1934, U.S. influence continued through economic and diplomatic channels.

If there ever was in the history of humanity an enemy who was truly universal, an enemy whose acts and moves trouble the entire world, threaten the entire world, attack the entire world in any way or another, that real and really universal enemy is precisely Yankee imperialism. — Fidel Castro

Questions remain as to why the United States would choose to back Fulgencio Batista, a leader who achieved his power through force. When Batista faced opposition and revolt from his own people, the U.S. supplied him with weapons to try to put an end to the uprising.

Castro's Cuba

Castro's leadership of the resistance, and ultimately the defeat of Batista in 1959, can easily be viewed as heroic. Given his experience as the target of U.S.-supplied bombs on the mountain headquarters of his guerilla forces, his hatred of the United States could perhaps be seen as justified. Once he took power from Batista, Castro introduced reforms that were roundly welcomed by most Cubans — especially by the poorest people in the country. He increased wages, reduced rents and began a program of radical land reform. Coming after the years of repression and deprivation of Batista's regime, the new government had no significant problems generating popular support.

Although Castro had first organized around the ideals of social democracy, he soon established an alliance with the Cuban Communist Party. Within a year, all the "bourgeois elements" in the government were eradicated and media outlets critical of the revolution were systematically shut down. Within six years, all privately owned property had been expropriated and most of Cuba's middle class fled to Miami.

Expropriate – to take something away from its owner, usually by the state.

Exercising Control

Early on, Castro ordered the execution of at least 550 opponents of the revolution. Some reports indicate that this number could be closer to 2 000. Many of the people killed had been closely linked to Batista and the corruption of his regime.

After eliminating the vestiges of Batista's government, it appeared that the transition to Castro's rule, would not be — at least outwardly — particularly bloody. However, dissent was not tolerated and those who found themselves on the wrong side of Castro, and his plans for Cuba, were forced to choose between a dangerous ocean crossing to Miami and imprisonment. As his control deepened, the prison system in Cuba grew. A report issued by the International Centre for Prison Studies at Essex University in 2013, indicated that Cuba had the sixth largest per capita prison population in the world (Cuba, with a population of 11 million people, has 200 prisons that house 70 000 inmates). Political dissidents are reportedly subjected to the worst conditions while incarcerated.

Economic Limits

To achieve and maintain the communist system that Castro believed in, his control had to be absolute. Centralizing all economic activity made it difficult for the country to respond to

and survive in international markets. The U.S. economic embargo on Cuba further isolated the country from one of its closest and largest potential markets. An alliance with the USSR helped Castro to build Cuba's economy but the country needed to accept change after the collapse of the Soviet Union and the fall of the Berlin Wall. Castro oscillated between releasing control to permit limited capitalist activities and gathering up the reins to severely restrict economic ventures. Despite access to medical care and education, most Cubans continue to live in poverty.

It has been more than 60 years since Cuba has known even the promise of democratic elections. Ironically, Castro began his career protesting Batista's dictatorship and his denial of the democratic process. Eventually Castro became a dictator himself, fighting to maintain control using anything but democratic ideology and institutions. In the end, Castro could not deliver the Cuban nation that he promised. History will

judge whether his actions will ever be justified by his ideals. At the very least, Castro's life poses important questions about the principles of social justice and how they can — and cannot — be achieved.

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To Consider

1. Why was Prime Minister Justin Trudeau criticized after making comments following the death of Fidel Castro?
2. Look back at the notes you took about revolution. In what ways did Fidel Castro's actions fit with your thoughts and feelings about revolutionary actions?
3. In your opinion, could any of Castro's goals for social justice have been achieved without government repression? Explain your reasoning.
4. How do you think Cuba will change after Castro's death? Explain your conclusions.

ACTIVITY #1: MAPPING TIME



Try This!

Working with a partner, create a student account with an online timeline application such as Time Glider (timeglider.com/).

- Research the events leading up to, during and after the Cuban Revolution. Place the 10 most significant events on your timeline. Be prepared to justify your choice of events. In your research, find appropriate illustrations for each event you plot on your timeline.
- After completing this work, meet with another group in your class and compare timelines. Discuss the differences and similarities between your timelines.
- Finally, write down any questions you still have about the events surrounding the Cuban Revolution. Research your questions.

Here are some reputable sites you can use to begin your research:

Al Jazeera, English – Cuba: Timeline of a Revolution
aljazeera.com/focus/2009/07/2009726104942190404.html

BBC – Cuban Timeline
news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/americas/1203355.stm

ACTIVITY #2: RESISTANCE THROUGH ART

Watch the speech “Orwell, Spraypaint, and the Fight to Free Cuba” that the Cuban graffiti artist Danilo Maldonado delivered at the Oslo Freedom Forum in July 2016.

youtube.com/watch?v=IM61PEHvcis

Based on his speech, consider the following questions:

1. Why is art usually perceived as a threat to an authoritarian government?
2. What makes graffiti especially well-suited to the situation in Cuba?
3. Do you agree with Maldonado that art can help us to bring about the world we want? Explain your reasoning.

You may also want to check out this video of Maldonado’s art work. It offers great images of his graffiti art. Keep in mind that the video is narrated in Spanish: youtube.com/watch?v=t91DIc8aJEk