

Myths About Cuba Persist on the Left and Right

Recent debates over what to do about Cuba remain afflicted by myths, many going back to the origins of the Castros' Communist regime. There have generally been two conflicting accounts of how this regime was established and its relation to the Cuban past, and both may need to be corrected.

Some of the most childish beliefs about the regime persist on the left—not just the sort for whom apologizing for Communists remains almost an autonomic response, but even among otherwise moderate people. Pre-Castro Cuba is depicted as a desperately poor Third World country viciously exploited by Americans. Its people finally revolted against the evil tyrant Fulgencio Batista under the leadership of an originally non-Communist Fidel, only for Castro to be pushed from being a good-hearted democrat into the arms of the Soviets by the unthinking hostility of the Eisenhower and Kennedy administrations.

Hardly a word of this is true. In the 1950s, Cuba was [one of the richest, most advanced countries in Latin America](#) and the tropical world in general, with a higher standard of living than France or Spain at the time! The tragedy is that with a few reforms it would long ago have joined the ranks of first world countries. Even Batista, while bad even by Cuba's low standards, was not particularly nasty compared to many Latin American rulers. Castro and most of his men were middle class, stumbled into an unplanned for guerilla struggle, and recruited from the peasantry only when the fight was well advanced.

Castro was no reformer. He had been converted, no later than the early 1950s, to communism while a student. He was, in fact, a late Stalinist, *ideologically*, not organizationally a communist. He steered clear of the Cuban Communists until 1958

because he saw open membership in their ranks was a dead end politically, and he disagreed with their leaders on strategy and tactics. He was not “pushed” into an alliance with the Soviets; he never envisioned anything else. The Eisenhower administration had cut loose from Batista in March 1958. It did not particularly like or respect Castro but it was not hostile to him until late 1959, when the true nature of his regime became clear as he smashed all political opposition.

No sane American has any reason to feel anything but loathing for the regime that has ruled Cuba for 60 years. The Western world survived despite everything the Castro brothers and their followers tried to do; they contributed to endless suffering not only in Cuba, but in countries across Latin America and Africa, where Cuba supported guerrilla wars and conducted several interventions. Never mind the biggest crisis of the whole Cold War, during which Castro urged the Soviets to attack the USA.

Right now, however, it is probably the “anti-Communist” myth about Cuba, told by generations of Cuban exiles, that is adversely affecting our thinking. To listen to Cuban anti-Communists, one might imagine Castro was installed from without, against the overwhelming opposition of Cubans, and that he was the worst Communist tyrant of all times. Only the cowardice and stupidity of the Kennedy administration in handling the Bay of Pigs invasion prevented his justified overthrow by his suffering people, so the story goes. It is often suggested that Americans owe Cubans their liberation.

With all due respect to those who fought heroically at the Bay of Pigs and as anti-Castro guerillas—and due disrespect for the inept Kennedy administration—these statements won’t wash. Bad as the Cuban regime was and is, in its *domestic* aspects it is on the milder end of the Communist spectrum, even though economically its record may be the worst of all Communist regimes. However its overt opponents were remarkably few from the start.

Cuba was not Poland, Hungary, or North Korea. Castro was not installed by the Red Army. He got where he did because he enjoyed overwhelming popular support, and because of the incredible irresponsibility of Cubans, who welcomed, knuckled under, or simply fled his rule. Not a few Cuban “refugees” were just people who wanted to better themselves economically, and exploited American gullibility to get through the normal immigration barriers. Castro himself exploited that gullibility with the Mariel boatlift—in which many refugees fled Cuba—at considerable cost to the people of Florida. We should be worrying that we may be setting ourselves up for a repeat of that experience.

To be blunt, Cubans deserve less sympathy than other people who fell under Communist rule. Communist rule in places like Russia and China was forced upon the people only after prolonged and bloody civil wars. The fundamental blunder of the Kennedy administration was that it ignored the ample evidence that Castro enjoyed great popular support.

Perhaps not as obnoxious, but nevertheless dishonest, is the recent use by many on the right of a distorted version of how Castro clamped down on his people. We are told, for example, that he made Cubans into sheep by the nationalization of private enterprises and the encouragement of welfare dependency. This is utter nonsense. As in practically all other cases, the Communists in Cuba gave first priority to politics and eliminating political opposition. They also prioritized seizing control of Cuba’s labor unions over controlling business. Nationalization in Cuba was an unusually rushed process, and one which followed political conquest as it did in other Communist countries. There was no vast expansion of welfare to “buy” or anesthetize people. Castro did enact some such policies, but he hardly constructed a welfare state overnight.

Humanitarian aid and support for a post-Communist Cuba may be desirable, even necessary. After all, we should be primarily

influenced by present and future needs, rather than grudges. But it is worth remembering that Americans owe Cubans nothing. In fact, the debt may run in the other direction.

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