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Chapter Two

THE UNITED STATES AND CUBA



Our country was converted from a Spanish colony into a U.S. colony.... The geography books contained another flag, another color, but they did not represent an independent republic. No one was fooled. Not a real independent republic existed, but a colony where the U.S. ambassador gave orders.

—Cuban leader Fidel Castro,
speech before the United Nations, September 26, 1960

In the late 1950s and early 1960s, Cuba emerged as a key battleground in the Cold War. This Caribbean island nation, located ninety miles from the southern tip of Florida, had factored into U.S. foreign policy and national security interests since the 1800s. In the mid-twentieth century, however, a communist revolutionary named Fidel Castro (see biography, p. 110) gained control of the Cuban government and forged an alliance with the Soviet Union. The prospect of a communist stronghold so close to American shores alarmed U.S. leaders and set the stage for a showdown between the superpowers.

The U.S. Extends Influence over the Western Hemisphere

Even after the American colonies gained their independence from Great Britain in 1783, the newly formed United States was surrounded by territory held by European powers. U.S. leaders managed to expand the nation's borders by acquiring land from France (the Louisiana Purchase of 1803) and Spain (the Florida territory in 1819). The rapidly growing United States also watched with great interest as neighboring countries in Latin America managed to gain independence from Spain and Portugal. To ensure national security and maintain



The American battleship USS *Maine* arrives in Havana, Cuba, a few weeks before the start of the Spanish-American War.

American influence in the region, the United States wanted to prevent any other foreign powers from moving in to claim these fledgling nations as colonies.

President James Monroe outlined this policy, which became known as the Monroe Doctrine, in an 1823 message to Congress. He warned the countries of Europe that the United States would respond with military force if they tried to colonize any new territory in the western hemisphere. “It is impossible that the allied powers should extend their political system to any portion of either continent [North or South America] without endangering our peace and happiness,” he declared. “It is equally impossible, therefore, that we should behold such interposition in any form with indifference.”¹

Although the United States vowed not to interfere with existing colonies, it stepped in to assist revolutionary movements on several occasions. Cuba, for

instance, was held as a colony of Spain until 1898, when U.S. troops helped the island nation gain its independence in the Spanish-American War. After the Spanish colonial authorities left, however, U.S. forces continued to occupy Cuba for several years. The controversial Platt Amendment of 1901 set conditions under which the United States would withdraw its troops and allow Cuba to establish its own government. These conditions essentially made Cuba a U.S. protectorate and gave the United States the right to intervene in Cuban affairs. They also granted the United States a permanent naval base on the island at Guantanamo Bay.

Although Cuban leaders realized that these conditions imposed significant limits on their nation's sovereignty, they ultimately agreed to include them in their constitution. Cuba elected its first president and raised the Cuban flag over Havana on May 20, 1902. But the Platt Amendment remained in effect until 1934, when President Franklin D. Roosevelt finally released Cuba from most of its conditions. However, the United States still maintained a military base and detention facility at Guantanamo Bay. In 1948, at the beginning of the Cold War, the United States, Cuba, and thirty-three other independent nations in the western hemisphere formed the Organization of American States (OAS) "to promote their solidarity, to strengthen their collaboration, and to defend their sovereignty, their territorial integrity, and their independence."²

Cuba under Batista

Even after Cuba became an independent nation, it remained economically dependent upon the United States. As soon as the Spanish-American War ended, American companies rushed to purchase prime agricultural land on the island. By 1905 American citizens owned 10 percent of Cuban land, and by the 1920s they controlled two-thirds of the Cuban sugar industry. American investors also took over railroads, mines, cigar factories, and tropical fruit plantations. "Cuba was a resort land for Americans; we went over there by boat from Key West, Florida, [and] we kind of considered it part of the United States," remembered journalist Walter Cronkite. "As a matter of fact, it was a rather important economic asset to the United States. The sugar plantations there, the tobacco plantations there were all U.S. owned for the most part, the hotels were U.S. owned. The country was a little colony."³ Although many Cubans resented the foreign ownership of land and businesses, they also benefited from U.S. investment in the areas of education, sanitation, and public health.



Fidel Castro (1926-)

Premier of Cuba during the Cuban Missile Crisis

Fidel Alejandro Castro Ruz was born on August 13, 1926, in Oriente Province in southeastern Cuba. He was the third of seven children born to Angel Castro y Argiz, a sugar plantation owner, and Lina Ruz Gonzales. Angel Castro had come to Cuba from Galicia, Spain, to help Spanish colonial authorities trying to maintain control over the island during the Spanish-American War. After Cuba gained its independence with U.S. assistance in 1898, he remained there to grow sugarcane for American-owned processing mills.

From a young age, Fidel begged his illiterate parents to provide him with an education. At age six he was sent to a Jesuit boarding school in Santiago de Cuba. Later he enrolled at the Jesuit-run El Colegio de Belen in Havana. These schools stressed the values of honor, pride, charity, and generosity, and they warned against greed and materialism. Applying this message to his own life, Fidel helped organize a worker strike on his father's sugar plantation when he was just thirteen years old. Although he did not excel academically, Fidel was very intelligent and received high marks in history and debate. He also stood six feet, three inches tall and possessed strong athletic ability. A participant in track, baseball, and soccer during his school years, Castro was named Cuba's best all-around school athlete in 1944.

Becomes Politically Active

The following year Castro graduated from college and went on to attend law school at the University of Havana, where he also studied Cuban nationalism and socialism. The university was known as a hotbed of political activism, and Castro emerged as a public figure there. In 1947 he traveled to the Dominican Republic with a group of activists intent upon overthrowing dictator Rafael Trujillo. Although their mission proved unsuccessful, this experience ignited Castro's anti-imperialist sentiments and passion for reform. In 1948 he participated in the Bogotazo riots in Bogota, Columbia, which helped incite a popular revolt.

John F. Kennedy Tells the World about the Missiles

The world learned about the presence of Soviet nuclear weapons in Cuba on October 22, 1962. Millions of people watched on television or listened on the radio as President John F. Kennedy delivered the speech excerpted below. The president declares that the United States cannot tolerate “deliberate deception and offensive threats” on the part of the Soviet Union. Kennedy then explains his decision to establish a U.S. naval quarantine around Cuba. He also demands that Soviet leader Nikita Khrushchev remove the missiles in order to “move the world back from the abyss of destruction.”

Good evening my fellow citizens:

This Government, as promised, has maintained the closest surveillance of the Soviet Military buildup on the island of Cuba. Within the past week, unmistakable evidence has established the fact that a series of offensive missile sites is now in preparation on that imprisoned island. The purpose of these bases can be none other than to provide a nuclear strike capability against the Western Hemisphere.

Upon receiving the first preliminary hard information of this nature last Tuesday morning at 9 a.m., I directed that our surveillance be stepped up. And having now confirmed and completed our evaluation of the evidence and our decision on a course of action, this Government feels obliged to report this new crisis to you in fullest detail.

The characteristics of these new missile sites indicate two distinct types of installations. Several of them include medium range ballistic missiles capable of carrying a nuclear warhead for a distance of more than 1,000 nautical miles. Each of these missiles, in short, is capable of striking Washington, D.C., the Panama Canal, Cape Canaveral, Mexico City, or any other city in the southeastern part of the United States, in Central America, or in the Caribbean area.

Additional sites not yet completed appear to be designed for intermediate range ballistic missiles—capable of traveling more than twice as far—and thus capable of striking most of the major cities in the Western Hemisphere, ranging as far north as Hudson Bay, Canada, and as far south as Lima, Peru. In addition, jet bombers, capable of carrying nuclear weapons, are now being uncrated and assembled in Cuba, while the necessary air bases are being prepared.

This urgent transformation of Cuba into an important strategic base—by the presence of these large, long range, and clearly offensive weapons of sudden mass destruction—constitutes an explicit threat to the peace and security of all the

IMPORTANT PEOPLE, PLACES, AND TERMS

Arms race

A situation in which two countries compete to build large quantities of powerful weapons.

Back channel

An informal, unofficial, often secret method of communication between governments.

Batista, Fulgencio (1901-1973)

Military dictator of Cuba who was overthrown by Fidel Castro in 1959.

Bay of Pigs Invasion

A failed 1961 attempt to remove Fidel Castro from power in Cuba that was sponsored by the U.S. government.

Berlin

The capital of Germany, which was divided into communist East Berlin and democratic West Berlin from 1945 until the fall of the Berlin Wall in 1989.

Blockade

A barrier erected to prevent goods from traveling to and from a particular area.

Bundy, McGeorge (1919-1996)

U.S. national security advisor during the Cuban Missile Crisis.

Capitalism

A political and economic system in which individual citizens own businesses, compete for customers in free markets, and keep the profits they earn. The United States and its allies in the Western bloc supported capitalism during the Cold War.

CHRONOLOGY

1823

President James Monroe outlines the policy that becomes known as the Monroe Doctrine, which warns that the United States will use military force to prevent foreign powers from claiming new territory in the western hemisphere.

1898

The United States steps in to help Cuba gain its independence from Spain in the Spanish-American War.

1901

The Platt Amendment gives the United States the right to intervene in Cuban affairs and establish a naval base at Guantanamo Bay.

1902

May 20 – Cuba elects its first president as an independent nation.

1914

World War I begins in Europe.

1917

The Bolsheviks overthrow the Russian imperial ruler in the Russian Revolution.

1918

World War I ends.

1922

The Bolsheviks establish the Soviet Union as the world's first communist state.
Dictator Joseph Stalin becomes leader of the Soviet Union.

1934

The United States releases Cuba from most provisions of the Platt Amendment of 1901 but maintains its naval base at Guantanamo Bay.

1939

The Soviet Union signs a nonaggression pact with Nazi Germany.
Germany invades Poland to start World War II.

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