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Fidel Castro: Leader, Revolutionary, Survivor

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Cuban revolutionary, leader, and philosopher Fidel Castro has faced down all kinds of challenges, from guerrilla wars, the difficulties of statesmanship, exploding cigars, to murderous mollusks – and lived to 88 to tell the tale. He has been one of the most controversial figures of the last century, and one of the most strident, outspoken leaders in the world for decades. He has survived hundreds of assassination attempts, while playing a vital role in Cuba's transition to socialism. On the streets of Havana, Castro is sometimes jokingly referred to as being utterly indestructible. Like the Cuban nation, nothing seems to weigh Castro down – no matter what the odds. In Cuban society as a whole, he is a rock – solid, dependable, and sturdy. This is no less true on his 88<sup>th</sup> birthday, which is commemorated across Cuba on August 13.

### **From Sugar Farm Heir to National Liberator**

The only thing about Castro more surprising than his accomplishments are his beginnings.

Born to a middle-class sugar cane farmer in Cuba's south, Castro grew up among relatively affluent, yet somberly Catholic surroundings. Castro's modest grades yet occasionally rebellious attitude made him an enigmatic figure among his peers. Yet even in his school days, Castro was fiercely political and riled against the oppressive status quo. He became a well known student activist, and was highly critical of government corruption. His face first landed on the front page of Cuban newspapers in 1946, after he gave an impassioned speech for an end to the corrupt practices of the Grau regime. The speech and others like that one put him on a collision course with the repressive government.

Young Castro was first arrested in 1947, after he joined an ill-fated campaign to overthrow the military junta in the Dominican Republic. His reaction to this initial loss heralded things to come. Instead of backing down, Castro became even more outspoken after the defeat. Throughout his political life, Castro repeatedly bounced back from

failures – coming back fiercer and more determined. When Fulgencio Batista seized presidency of Cuba in March 1952, Castro was immediately one of his most strident opponents. By then he was a qualified lawyer and fought against Batista with the only weapon he had – the law. Castro argued the Batista regime had violated the Cuban constitution and repeatedly tried to mount a legal case against the government. However, Cuban courts were already under Batista's sway, and the cases were dismissed over and over again. Facing a judicial brick wall, Castro knew he had to go back to the drawing board.

The following year, Castro made his first attempt to overthrow Batista by force. He and his brother Raul began secretly plotting the downfall of the dictatorship. The brothers gathered a force of around 1200 supporters, mostly from the poor – who suffered the most under Batista. In July, 1953, the Castro brothers and their band of revolutionaries struck the Moncada barracks outside Santiago. The plan was simple – surprise the barracks, raid the armory and throw the weapons to the masses. Once armed, Castro was sure the poor would rise up against Batista.

Around 150 of Castro's supporters descended on the barracks on July 25, with orders to empty the armory without unnecessary violence. However, the well laid plan quickly fell apart. Castro's forces were routed, and the two brothers were captured.

Castro was released from prison in 1954, after Batista held elections viewed by most Cubans as a charade. A year later, he departed for Mexico. There, he met Argentine doctor and revolutionary Ernesto "Che" Guevara, and gathered his supporters to prepare for a full scale guerrilla war. The Castros, Che, and their revolutionaries set sail for Cuba in 1956 on board a rusted, leaky boat called the Granma. Their landing in a swampy bog was the first move in a guerrilla war that would last four grueling years. The band of fighters were attacked by Batista's forces almost immediately, and struggled on a daily basis to survive in the harsh Sierra Maestra mountain range.

When the revolutionaries finally overthrew Batista in 1959, Castro formed a government unlike anything Cuba had seen before. As a leader, Castro was a fervent believer in speaking directly to the masses. During his speeches he would pose questions to the crowd, asking Cubans how they wanted their country to be run. Through broadcast media, Castro would also encourage debate and questioning. Both at home and abroad, he liked to seek out the opinions of ordinary people. When Castro first began traveling abroad as prime minister in 1959, he quickly became known for diverging from his official duties to speak with people on the streets.

He also was constantly calling for world revolution. While USSR leaders were skeptical of supporting liberation movements in the third world, Castro openly welcomed revolutionaries from across the globe to visit Cuba.

Castro's love of mingling with the public contributed to his popularity, but it also exposed him to hundreds of assassination attempts. Along with plots to gun down Castro during his regular walks through the streets of Havana, the CIA also tried scores of less tried-and-tested methods to get rid of the Cuban leader. Some of the most unusual plots involved exploding cigars, fungus-lined diving suits, and toxic pens. In one particularly strange plot, the CIA planned to take advantage of Castro's love of diving to murder him with a mollusk packed with explosives – a kind of underwater landmine. The rigged mollusk would then be painted brightly and planted in the Caribbean for Castro to find. The plan never went ahead.

Today, Castro spends less time diving in the Caribbean, wandering the streets of Havana and trotting the globe to fan the flames of revolution. In 2006 Castro began handing over his political duties and now spends most of his time writing. He pens a regular column for Cuba's most popular newspaper, *Granma*, and makes the occasional public appearance or television interview. While no longer at the helm of the government, Castro nonetheless remains a cornerstone of the Cuban revolution. His life has been an inspiration for fighters for justice and socialism across the world, and remains the face of Cuban dignity and freedom.