

This Day in History... October 19, 1960

U.S. Places Embargo on Cuban Goods

On October 19, 1960, President Dwight D. Eisenhower established the first embargo on Cuba.

The US and Cuba have had a long and tumultuous shared history. The Spanish first settled Cuba in 1511. Colonists grew sugar cane and tobacco on large plantations, relying on the forced labor of native peoples.

Cuba's Spanish settlers became increasingly dissatisfied with Spain's rule and many revolutionary groups were formed. By the mid-1800s, many Americans favored making Cuba part of the United States. Southern states in particular supported the idea, as Cuba, with nearly half a million enslaved people, would increase their power in Congress. The US government under President James K. Polk made an attempt to buy Cuba for \$100 million from Spain, but Spain refused saying they would "prefer seeing [Cuba] sunk in the ocean."

In 1851, a group of Americans and some Cuban emigres, took part in a failed filibuster. The leaders of the expedition were captured and executed. (Filibuster comes from the Spanish word filibustero meaning freebooter. Prior to referring to the political act it is known as today, the term was used to mean any of several unauthorized military expeditions into foreign countries to foster a political revolution. Most of these expeditions were funded by Southern plantation owners who sought to install governments that would seek to join the United States as slave states.)

The Cubans eventually took up arms against the Spanish due to a lack of political power and rising taxes. The first attempt, known as the Ten Years' War, was fought from 1868 to 1878. This was quickly followed by the Little War (1879-80). Then in 1895, the Cuban War of Independence began. By this time, many Americans wanted to intervene in the conflict. Following the explosion of the American battleship Maine in Havana Harbor on February 15, 1898, the US officially declared war on Spain. By August, the Spanish surrendered. The US emerged as a world power and gained the territories of Guam, Puerto Rico, and the Philippine Islands.



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After the Spanish-American War, the US established a military government in Cuba. Cuba adopted a constitution in 1901. The constitution contained provisions called the Platt Amendment, which allowed the US to intervene in Cuban affairs. It also allowed the US to buy or lease land for naval bases in Cuba. In 1903, the US received a permanent lease to build a naval base on Guantánamo Bay.

Over the next 50 years, Cuba was in a state of unrest, with new governments forming and frequent revolts by and against Fulgencio Batista. Among those opposed to Batista's dictatorship was Fidel Castro. Castro circulated a petition calling for deposing the illegal Batista government. This proved ineffective.

On July 26, 1953, Castro attempted to start a revolution by leading an attack on the Moncada Army Barracks in Santiago de Cuba. This proved disastrous, but ultimately increased Castro's influence. Castro and many of his followers were imprisoned. During the trial, Castro successfully embarrassed the army and was able to get most of the defendants acquitted, though not himself. He renamed his revolutionary group the 26th of July Movement after the date of his Moncada. Castro was released from prison in 1955. He then took his group to Mexico, where they could organize safely.

In December 1956, Castro's forces landed in eastern Cuba. Most of Castro's rebels were quickly killed – but Castro and 11 others managed to escape into the Sierra Maestra Mountains. From the mountains they waged a guerrilla war against the Batista government.

Batista's increasingly unpopular dictatorship provided fertile ground for Castro's 26th of July Movement. The dictator's attempts to neutralize Castro and his men made the rebels more popular with the people. By mid-1958, public support for Batista was crumbling. On January 1, 1959, Batista fled Cuba.

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February, Castro was sworn in as prime minister. The US initially supported Castro's government, until American-owned properties in Cuba were seized. Castro set a per owner cap to land holdings of 993 acres, redistributing the land to around 200,000 low-income Cubans. Relations declined sharply.

In the spring of 1960, President Dwight D. Eisenhower approved a plan to embargo sugar, oil and guns. Then in June, US oil companies refused to refine oil in Cuba that had been delivered by the Soviet Union. Eisenhower then cut the Cuban sugar quota by 95 percent. None of this deterred Castro, who nationalized those industries. Castro continued seizing American business and commercial properties. As a result, President Eisenhower enacted a near-total trade embargo against Cuba on October 19, 1960.

Eisenhower's embargo outlawed all US exports to Cuba except medicine and some food. President Kennedy later expanded the embargo to include all US imports from Cuba.

On April 16, 1961, Castro declared Cuba a socialist state. A one-party Communist system was established. Castro pursued a close relationship with the Soviet Union and enacted many Soviet-styled, state-controlled agricultural and industrial reforms. The Soviet Union contributed a great deal of financial aid to Cuba and the island's economy grew very dependent upon this assistance.

As the revolution grew more radical, large numbers of Cubans fled their country. Once exiled in America, many of these exiles worked to undermine Castro's regime. In 1959, a group of anti-Castro exiles even hired US planes and flew over Cuba, dropping leaflets and small firebombs.

In the coming years, the Bay of Pigs Invasion and the Cuban Missile Crisis placed the nation in the international spotlight as people all over the world nervously anticipated nuclear war. Finally, the USSR agreed to remove the missiles. In return, the US promised not to attack Cuba. Defiant as ever, Castro protested this decision to the Soviets. Although the missiles were removed, thousands of Soviet troops remained in Cuba.

During the late 1980s, the Soviet Union and its satellite nations in Eastern Europe began to ease their political and economic restrictions. Castro criticized these efforts. In 1991, the Soviet Union ceased to exist – the end of an era in world history. This meant an end to Soviet financial aid to Cuba, worth about \$4-5 billion a year. However, Castro declared Cuba would remain Communist.

Cuba's economy was further damaged by increased economic restrictions from the US, enacted in 1992 and 1996. In response, Castro loosened some restrictions on the economy and allowed many Cubans to leave the country. Investment, especially in tourism, from Canada, Europe, and Latin America enabled Cuba to stage a modest economic recovery. Perhaps the most progressive of Castro's new policies was the opening of "free trade zones," where companies are allowed to import and export goods without seeking permission from the government.

On July 31, 2006, Fidel Castro underwent surgery and had to assign presidential power temporarily to his brother, Raúl Castro. Though his health reportedly improved somewhat after surgery, Fidel Castro decided to officially resign from the presidency in 2008 – his brother replaced him.

During his time as president of Cuba, Raúl Castro implemented many economic reforms – some even reversing laws put in place by his brother. One of the biggest achievements Raúl Castro made was in December 2014 when he and US President Barack Obama negotiated renewed diplomacy between the United States and Cuba. The two countries officially returned to full diplomatic relations on July 20, 2015. On March 20, 2016, President

Obama was the first sitting US president to visit Cuba in 88 years. Both countries also re-opened their embassies. While the embargo is still in place and the US has continued to issue some sanctions, many restrictions have also been lifted.



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1899 stamp picturing an allegorical representation of Cuba



Stamp pictures a worker in a sugar cane field. Sugar cane has been nicknamed "Cuban Grass."



1899 Special Delivery stamp

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