

The Virgin Islands Consortium

Fidel Castro, Cuba's Leader Since 1959, Is Dead At 90

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Fidel Castro, who initiated the revolution that led to the Cold War in 1959, lived through many assassination attempts, defied 11 U.S. presidents and brought the world to the brink of nuclear war, has died. Mr. Castro was 90.

His death was announced by Cuban state television.

Mr. Castro's health had been in decline for several years, and in 2006, he stepped aside after falling seriously early, ceding much of his power to his younger brother who now leads Cuba, Raul Castro. Raul Castro was at his brother's side from the onset of the insurrection, and remained Fidel Castro's closest confidant until his death. Raul Castro, who is also the country's defense minister, has told the Cuban people of his intention to

resign in 2018.

According to the New York Times, Fidel Castro had held on to power longer than any other living national leader except Queen Elizabeth II. He became a towering international figure whose importance in the 20th century far exceeded what might have been expected from the head of state of a Caribbean island nation of 11 million people.

The following excerpts are from The New York Times. Read the paper's full story on Fidel Castro [here](#).

Mr. Castro dominated his country with strength and symbolism from the day he triumphantly entered Havana on Jan. 8, 1959, and completed his overthrow of Fulgencio Batista by delivering his first major speech in the capital before tens of thousands of admirers at the vanquished dictator's military headquarters.

A spotlight shone on him as he swaggered and spoke with passion until dawn. Finally, white doves were released to signal Cuba's new peace. When one landed on Mr. Castro, perching on a shoulder, the crowd erupted, chanting "Fidel! Fidel!" To the war-weary Cubans gathered there and those watching on television, it was an electrifying sign that their young, bearded guerrilla leader was destined to be their savior.

Most people in the crowd had no idea what Mr. Castro planned for Cuba. A master of image and myth, Mr. Castro believed himself to be the messiah of his fatherland, an indispensable force with authority from on high to control Cuba and its people.

He wielded power like a tyrant, controlling every aspect of the island's existence. He was Cuba's "Máximo Líder." From atop a Cuban Army tank, he directed his country's defense at the Bay of Pigs. Countless details fell to him, from selecting the color of uniforms that Cuban soldiers wore in Angola to overseeing a program to produce a superbreed of milk cows. He personally set the goals for sugar harvests. He personally sent countless men to prison.

But it was more than repression and fear that kept him and his totalitarian government in power for so long. He had both admirers and detractors in Cuba and around the world. Some saw him as a ruthless despot who trampled rights and freedoms; many others hailed him as the crowds did that first night, as a revolutionary hero for the ages.

Even when he fell ill and was hospitalized with diverticulitis in the summer of 2006, giving up most of his powers for the first time, Mr. Castro tried to dictate the details of his own medical care and orchestrate the continuation of his Communist revolution, engaging a plan as old as the revolution itself.

By handing power to his brother, Mr. Castro once more raised the ire of his enemies in Washington. United States officials condemned the transition, saying it prolonged a dictatorship and again denied the long-suffering Cuban people a chance to control their own lives.

But in December 2014, President Obama used his executive powers to dial down the decades of antagonism between Washington and Havana by moving to exchange prisoners and normalize diplomatic relations between the two countries, a deal worked out with the help of Pope Francis and after 18 months of secret talks between

representatives of both governments.

Mr. Castro was perhaps the most important leader to emerge from Latin America since the wars of independence in the early 19th century. He was decidedly the most influential shaper of Cuban history since his own hero, José Martí, struggled for Cuban independence in the late 19th century. Mr. Castro's revolution transformed Cuban society and had a longer-lasting impact throughout the region than that of any other 20th-century Latin American insurrection, with the possible exception of the 1910 Mexican Revolution.

His legacy in Cuba and elsewhere has been a mixed record of social progress and abject poverty, of racial equality and political persecution, of medical advances and a degree of misery comparable to the conditions that existed in Cuba when he entered Havana as a victorious guerrilla commander in 1959.

But beyond anything else, it was Mr. Castro's obsession with the United States, and America's obsession with him, that shaped his rule. After he embraced Communism, Washington portrayed him as a devil and a tyrant and repeatedly tried to remove him from power through an ill-fated invasion at the Bay of Pigs in 1961, an economic embargo that has lasted decades, assassination plots and even bizarre plans to undercut his prestige by making his beard fall out.

Mr. Castro's defiance of American power made him a beacon of resistance in Latin America and elsewhere, and his bushy beard, long Cuban cigar and green fatigues became universal symbols of rebellion.