In reality, Cuban society and politics saw little change between 1934 and 1959. The futility of the electoral system was repeatedly demonstrated, as the perennial strongman (yesterday Machado, today Batista) worked his will. The honest opposition scrapped and struggled in vain. What had happened to the revolutionary fervor of 1933? Where was the coalition that had so frightened Washington? It had gone the way of all Cuban nationalist movements—rendered impotent by the unbreakable alliance of the Cuban elite, the political and military bandits, and Uncle Sam. If one had asked most Cubans in 1959 whether their little island had any chance of true independence, how many would have dared say yes? Very few. Most educated Cubans undoubtedly thought that the best their country could hope for was to win a few advantages at the margin. What else could one hope? A startling answer soon came forth.

In the meantime, America's power and presence exercised a dominating influence. Thousands of North Americans lived in Cuba, chiefly in Havana. They enjoyed pride of place, mingling with members of the Cuban elite, along with wealthy expatriates at the Havana Country Club, the Havana Yacht Club, the Miramar Yacht Club, and other exclusive social establishments. Many more Americans visited the island as tourists. Gambling and gangsterism became synonymous with the U.S. presence as Batista welcomed mobsters like Meyer Lansky and Santos Trafficante Jr. The gangsters in turn shared their earnings with the dictator and his henchmen. Prostitution spread to cater to North American sun and sex tourists.

U.S. films and music filled Cuban cinema and radio as young Cubans rushed to learn the latest dances and catch the most recent performances of John Wayne and Marilyn Monroe. English words were incorporated into Cuban Spanish: *joton* (home run) and *doble plei* (double play) illustrate not only the popularity of baseball on the island (introduced in the 1860s) but also the growth of a more recent phenomenon, "Spanglish."

By the 1950s, a North American—style consumer culture had taken hold in Havana and the larger provincial cities. Cuban elites bought U.S. automobiles and went on lavish shopping trips to Miami and New York, bringing the latest fashions and consumer durables. While their social betters lived in the style of the North American rich, middle-income Cubans struggled within a dependent economy to obtain the U.S. consumer goods demanded by their precarious social position.

Fidel Castro and the Batista Regime

Born in 1927, Fidel Castro was the son of a successful Spanish immigrant, and he represented an old Cuban tradition—the heir of a peninsular who had "made America," as the Spaniards put it in the sixteenth century. But this immigrant's son was not interested in enjoying the comfortable life his background and training might have promised. He wanted to make a different America.

Fidel had followed the classic path—primary and secondary education with the Jesuits, then a law degree. He plunged into the turbulent world of student politics. He proved to be strong-minded, articulate, and ambitious. Passionately nationalist, he steered clear of the communists, who were the best organized of the student groups.

Soon after graduation, Fidel began traveling in Latin America, meeting other radical nationalists and learning about other political realities. His most dramatic experience came in Bogotá in 1948, when the colossal urban riot of the *bogotazo* turned the city upside down for two days. The triggering event had been the assassination of a young and progressive politician named Jorge Elícer Gaitán. The populace rose as one and took over a city whose authorities had abdicated in terror. Fidel was swept up into the wave of popular outrage and, in the process, acquired a glimpse of the possibilities of popular mobilization.

Fidel Castro's first assault on Batista's state came straight out of the tradition of romantic Latin American revolutionaries. It was an attack on the 26th of July 1953, against the provincial army barracks at Moncada in the southeastern city of Santiago. Fidel led a band of 165 youths who stormed the garrison. The government reaction was swift and ruthless. The police began slaughtering suspects. Fidel and his brother Raúl were captured, tried, and sentenced to fifteen years in prison. During the trial Fidel gave a long, impassioned, rambling speech ("History Will Absolve Me"), little noticed at the time but later to become a sacred text of the revolution.

The Castro brothers were lucky. They stayed in prison only eleven months before Batista granted amnesty in an attempt to court public opinion and to improve his political image. Given his freedom, Fidel immediately fled to Mexico to begin organizing a new revolutionary force.

In 1956 Fidel set out with a new band of revolutionaries in the *Granma*, an ancient yacht. With him once again was his brother Raúl, more politically radical than Fidel. Also aboard was Ernesto ("Che") Guevara, a twenty-seven-year-old Argentine physician who had personally witnessed the CIA-conducted overthrow of radically anti-American Guatemalan president Jacobo Árbenz in 1954. After a harrowing voyage, Fidel and his fellow survivors fled into the Sierra Maestra in eastern Cuba. From this forsaken outpost, Fidel rebuilt his rebel band and renewed his war against Batista.

Fidel and his top lieutenants knew that a key to toppling Batista would be the erosion of the dictator's foreign support, especially from the United States. Fidel's contacts found the perfect vehicle: Herbert Matthews, a veteran foreign correspondent of the *New York Times*. Matthews was smuggled up to Fidel's mountain hideout and from there wrote a series of stories which exploded on the front page of the most prestigious newspaper in the United States. Matthews' dramatic dispatches portrayed Fidel as an idealistic reformer and gave the rebels international status overnight. Suddenly Batista was on the defensive in world public opinion. He was in that most dangerous of realms—seen to be both brutal and impotent.

As their ranks increased, Fidel's youthful followers encountered the harsh and difficult world of Cuba's peasantry. The rebels took a strong interest in these people's fate. It was the first principle of the guerrilla: retain the sympathy of the local residents, not only for supplies but also so they will not betray you to the authorities.
The rebel band was still, however, primarily middle class. A few peasants joined the rebels, but they never came in large numbers, and they never held positions of leadership. This is hardly surprising. Most revolutions in history have been led by a counterelite. This is not to say that participation and support from peasants was unimportant. But the Fidelista phenomenon was middle class in origin and leadership. Its later directions were another matter.

Guerrilla warfare is a lonely and dangerous business. Month after month through 1957, the rebels managed the essential—to survive. But they failed to score seriously against the enemy.

Early 1958 brought more encouraging signs. In February the Cuban bishops issued a pastoral letter calling for a government of national unity. In March the U.S. government, under pressure for supplying arms to the repressive Batista regime, placed an embargo on arms shipments to both sides. This move amounted to a partial withdrawal of legitimacy for the established government. After a general strike failed in April 1958, Fidel decided to become more aggressive. Batista’s army launched a “liquidation campaign” that resulted in disaster. By August the army had withdrawn from the mountains, defeated by their own poor leadership and faulty training and by superior intelligence and dedication on the rebel side.

Through the rest of 1958, a savage guerrilla war raged on. There were never any set battles. It was a war of hit-and-run, with bombings, sabotage, and harassment. Batista’s response was counterterror. Since he could seldom catch the guerrillas, he sent his thugs against the students and the middle class suspected of having links to the 26th of July Movement. In so doing, Batista was rapidly enlarging the support for Fidel. Ironically, the repression ended up attracting new recruits to the rebel cause.

Support for Batista began to evaporate. As dictator his greatest card to play had always been his ability to keep order. Now even that was disappearing. Batista and his army were unprepared for the kind of underground that could elude their network of regular informants. Torture and execution only sparked popular outrage.

By late 1958 Batista had no desire to fight a losing cause to the end. He could see that his power was shrinking daily. His army and police had become both hated and derided. He had lost the all-important support from Washington. And the country had become so convinced of his fall that the economy was increasingly disrupted as businessmen and bankers waited for the inevitable. Suddenly, on New Year’s Eve, he called his aides together, designated a successor president, and took off with a plane load of relatives for the Dominican Republic. The way was now clear for Fidel’s triumphal entry into Havana.

THE CUBAN REVOLUTION

Euphoria is the only word to describe the country’s mood in the early days of 1959. Fidel had achieved genuine heroic status. The question now occupying the minds of the middle class, workers, peasants, foreign investors, the U.S. embassy, and other observers was, What kind of revolution would this be?

Fidel entered a political vacuum. The civil war had not only discredited Batista; it had besmirched the entire political class, all of its members, to greater or lesser degree, compromised by the dictator. The momentum now lay with the guerrillas in the green fatigue uniforms. The rebel army was to remain the key political institution thereafter.

Fidel’s greatest asset, aside from his own formidable leadership gifts, was the desperate desire for change among his fellow Cubans. The most underprivileged, the rural poor, had never counted for anything in the electoral system. Working classes in the cities and towns had precious little more weight.

The most restless and most important social sector was the middle class, which was ready to receive a new political message. Its members were first of all disgusted by the old political cadre. Second, they were moved by appeals for greater social justice. Third, they longed for a more independent Cuba. That meant a Cuba freer of the United States. Yet any assertion of Cuban national dignity was bound to collide with the Yankee presence.

1959 was a year of drama for the Revolution. The first major political crisis arose over what to do with the captured Batista officials who had been responsible for the worst of the repression. The revolutionaries resorted to arbitrary procedures in trying their victims, appealing to sentiments of “ordinary justice” to legitimize their executions. Within six months, about 550 were put to death, following trials by various revolutionary courts. These executions, punctuated by cries of patraón! (to the wall!), worried moderates in Cuba and their sympathizers abroad, especially in the United States.

In April 1959 Fidel set out for New York, where he was to visit the UN headquarters. He managed to project the image of a nationalist reformer, strongly opposed to foreign intervention, but also not a communist. He was careful to maintain only distant contact with the U.S. government while skillfully cultivating elite centers of opinion with, for example, a triumphal appearance in Harvard Stadium.

Fidel returned to Cuba to carry out his most radical measure to date: the Agrarian Reform Law of May 17, 1959. The law eliminated the giant estates, expropriating farmlands over 1000 acres, with compensation to be paid in Cuban currency bonds. No foreigners would henceforth be allowed to own agricultural land. The expropriated lands would be turned over to small private holders and cooperatives. A National Institute of Agrarian Reform (INRA) was created to implement these far-reaching measures. Critics in Cuba and abroad, especially in the United States, began to raise the alarm. Was this not the first step to communism? Hadn’t Fidel appointed a communist as the operating head of INRA?

Political polarization heightened throughout the year. Fidel announced the discovery of a plot against the Revolution. Noncommunists among the supporters of Batista’s overthrow became increasingly alarmed. A former president of the Senate attacked the agrarian reform and called for the elections which Fidel had promised. The commander of the air force resigned in protest over alleged communist influence in the military. In July Fidel staged what was to become a recurrent
PART TWO • CASE STUDIES: CHANGE OVER TIME

Batista had repudiated by his coup of 1952. The problem was a classic one: how to carry out fundamental economic and social change when existing government institutions were set up to maintain the status quo. Fidel resolved this dilemma with authoritarian efficiency, asserting revolutionary control over key institutions of the “bourgeois” social order—the media, courts, unions, universities, and schools.

Though the old legal system remained in place, there was never any attempt to elect a new legislature. The 26th of July Movement could hardly provide an institutional base. It had never developed into a tightly knit organization, and it was far from a political party. From the start, Fidel relied on the most responsive and popular institution at hand: the revolutionary army.

Late in 1960 the government created an important new institution: Committees for the Defense of the Revolution (CDRs). Locally based citizens’ groups, they were organized primarily for civil defense. The constant threat of invasion necessitated such a measure. Since the Revolution also had enemies at home, the CDRs also had the task of monitoring the population for counterrevolutionary opinions or behavior.

The Revolution set out to create new institutions in place of the old. Fidel seemed to be everywhere. Mobilization was the inexorable theme: mobilization against invaders, mobilization against social and economic problems at home. To achieve this goal, a huge militia was created: by the end of 1960 it totaled 500,000 out of a total population of 6.7 million. And none could doubt the identity of the commander-in-chief.

The only political party to survive the revolutionary transition was the Cuban Communist Party. Never a member, Fidel had carefully avoided any personal identification with the party. But he made it clear that antimperialism would be considered counterrevolutionary. He also entrusted party members with such programs as agrarian reform.

What most Cubans cared about was not political structure but how the Revolution would change their lives. On this score, Fidel and his guerrilla companions kept their eyes fixed on the poor, especially in the countryside. The revolutionary armies were determined to attack the legacy of the corrupt, capitalist Cuba: illiteracy, disease, malnutrition, and dilapidated housing. A yearlong crusade cut illiteracy rates in half (Cuba’s illiteracy rate was already low by Latin American standards), and illiteracy has virtually disappeared since then. Sensing the direction of the Revolution, the rich (and many from the middle class) began to flee, and the government acquired a windfall: the refugees’ abandoned assets—homes, offices, farms—that the state could now distribute.

The number of defectors steadily grew. Most attacked the guerrillas for betraying the hope of rapid elections. Instead, they charged, Fidel and his clique were leading Cuba toward communist totalitarianism. Most probably were sincere. Others also thought it the best tactic to arouse the United States.

drama: he resigned the premiership in the midst of what he described as conspiracies against the Revolution. There followed massive rallies, where the carefully primed multitudes called for Fidel to return to the premiership. He bowed to their will and, in so doing, announced a lengthy moratorium on elections.

There was now brewing a case that would for many become a hallmark of the Revolution’s radicalization. Major Hubert Matos, one of Fidel’s oldest political allies and a longtime revolutionary, chose to break with the Fidelista line. He resigned from the armed forces and issued a letter attacking the growth of communist influence. Fidel’s response was swift. He jailed Matos and mobilized a huge propaganda campaign against him as a traitor to the Revolution. For the next decade and a half, Matos, locked away in prison, remained in the Fidelista regime the supreme symbol of revolutionary deviationism. For many foreign observers, Matos remained the quintessential victim of Stalinist-style repression.

The year 1960 proved to be even more decisive for the course of the Cuban Revolution. Four basic trends took hold: (1) the nationalization of the economy, (2) a sharp swing to the Soviet bloc, (3) the establishment of an authoritarian regime, and (4) the launching of an egalitarian socioeconomic policy.

It was inevitable that any Cuban government attempting to reassert Cuban control over its economy would collide with the United States. The first major clash came over oil. When Fidel had discovered that he could buy crude oil cheaper from the Russians than from Venezuela, he ordered the U.S.-owned oil refineries located in Cuba to process the Russian crude. Although an oil law obligated them to comply, they refused. Fidel promptly confiscated the U.S. oil companies. Partially in retaliation, President Eisenhower suspended the Cuban sugar quota in the United States.

The Cuban government now followed by seizing virtually all the rest of U.S. property. That included electricity and telephone companies (another prime irritant to the nationalists), sugar mills, and nickel mines. Washington reacted by embargoeing all trade to Cuba, except medicines and foodstuffs. This embargo would later be tightened in 1962—and remain in place for decades to come.

The swing to the Soviet bloc was neither a cause nor an effect of the clash with the United States; it was part and parcel of the same process. Initially it was a question of how far the Soviets might be willing to commit themselves in Cuba. The Russians proved bolder than almost anyone expected. In February 1960, well before the full economic break with the United States, the Soviets signed a trade agreement with Cuba, granting $100 million credit to buy equipment and promising to purchase 4 million tons of sugar in each of the coming four years. Fidel was now developing an alternative source of technology and equipment, and the Soviets were getting ready to integrate Cuba as a “socialist” ally in the Third World.

Revolutionary Cuba’s state was emerging in a piecemeal, ad hoc fashion. Fidel began by proclaiming his commitment to the 1940 constitution, which
FRAMING U.S. POLICIES

The Cuban Revolution was utterly unacceptable to the United States. After all, U.S. policymakers had long claimed to have a "special relationship" with Cuba—which, in effect, meant control of the island's destiny. As John Quincy Adams put it so famously in 1823, "There are laws of political as well as physical gravitation; and if an apple severed by the tempest from its native tree cannot choose but fall to the ground, Cuba, forcibly disjoined from its own unnatural connection with Spain, and incapable of self-support, can gravitate only towards the North American Union, which by the same law of nature cannot cast her off from her bosom." (In the end, racial prejudice prevented outright annexation of the island—how could the United States absorb such a substantial black population?) But the basic consensus was clear; one way or the other, as either a state or a protectorate, Cuba rightfully belonged to the United States.

In this spirit, Republicans and Democrats vociferously denounced Fidel Castro's upstart regime. The notion that this small-sized plantation society could challenge Wall Street's investments and Washington's authority was deemed to be absolutely galling. It challenged conventional wisdom about the benevolence of U.S. power, about the solidarity of the Western Hemisphere, and about the forces of historical change. Given the dynamics of the Cold War, something had to be done.

The U.S. government developed antirevolutionary policies in stages over time. As Fidel and his followers were still fighting in the mountains, the Eisenhower administration began searching for an alternative—preservation of the status quo under another pro-American autocrat, under the formula of "Batistanismo without Batista." The dictator's sudden departure at the end of 1958 brought that option to an end.

After the triumph of the Revolution, Castro's nationalization of American-owned enterprises offered grounds for governmental overthrow (as in Guatemala in 1954). While diplomatic hostilities intensified, U.S. political leaders feared what they saw as the leftward drift of this erstwhile protectorate, only ninety miles off the Florida coast, into the orbit of the Soviet Union. Washington could simply not abide a "communist beachhead" within the Western Hemisphere. This was the thinking that prompted the Eisenhower administration to sever diplomatic relations with Cuba in January 1961, and to accelerate planning for an effort to overthrow the Castro government.

The most obvious strategy for Washington was to support an exile invasion of Cuba. That was how José Martí had returned to the island back in 1895, and it was the standard strategy in Caribbean exile politics. In July 1960, the CIA convinced President Eisenhower to approve the training of an invasion force.

The "toughness" of U.S. policy toward revolutionary Cuba became an issue in the 1960 presidential campaign, which featured Eisenhower's vice president, Richard Nixon, and the relatively unknown senator from Massachusetts, John Fitzgerald Kennedy. In their first televised debate, Kennedy took a more aggressive stance toward Cuba than Nixon—who knew of the invasion plan, but was unable to acknowledge it in public.

It was Kennedy, the ostensibly tougher candidate, who won the presidency and inherited the "Cuban problem." Eisenhower broke diplomatic relations in January 1961, in response to Fidel's demand that the United States drastically reduce its embassy in Havana. In April, Kennedy found himself pressured to approve an exile invasion of Cuba. Wanting to do his anticommunist duty, but fearful of the possible effect on world opinion, the new president demanded that there be no identifiable U.S. involvement. It proved to be an ironic and fatal concern.

The Bay of Pigs

As rumors mounted, an invasion force headed for Cuba in April 1961. The operation proved a misadventure from the beginning. After strenuous debate, President Kennedy reduced the exile pilot air cover and vetoed the use of any U.S. planes. The invaders foundered on an ill chosen bit of southern coast, on the Bay of Pigs. The hoped-for uprisings, which would supposedly paralyze the Cuban defenders, never materialized. The Cuban defenses proved more than adequate. The invasion brigades were quickly captured. They never had a chance to adopt their fallback procedure—head for the mountains and mount a guerrilla operation.

The Bay of Pigs could not have been a greater triumph for Fidel and the revolutionaries. The United States had finally shown its intentions to be what Fidel had always said they were: a desire to turn the clock back in Cuba. Although the CIA had tried to screen out the more unsavory ex Batista types, the invaders included more than a few who had served the dictator, Fidel and his supporters seized on those names to prove that the United States wanted to restore the discredited tyrant.

The Missile Crisis

The failed invasion marked a watershed in U.S.-Cuban relations. Washington's most obvious strategy had failed. What options were left for the United States?

The issue now shifted to the level of the superpowers. In 1960 Nikita Khruushchev had rattled Soviet missiles in defense of Cuban socialism. The Soviets thereafter decided they must back up their threat by putting missiles in Cuba itself, and by October 1962 they were installing intermediate range rocket bases in Cuba. This was an unprecedented challenge to the balance of military power. The United States demanded that the Soviets withdraw their missiles from Cuba, under sanction of a naval quarantine on all Soviet military shipments to Cuba. The world seemed to balance on the edge of nuclear war. After a fateful interval, Khruushchev complied. The missiles were withdrawn.

The superpower confrontation in the Caribbean had fatal implications for Cuba. First, Fidel himself was not consulted at any stage. The result was to make Cuba, in Latin American eyes, into a Soviet satellite in essential security matters. Second, the Soviets withdrew their missiles only because Washington (secretly)
promised it would not invade Cuba. The Soviets had forced the United States to allow the socialist experiment in Cuba to proceed.

The Hardening of U.S. Policy
The survival of Cuba’s revolutionary government not only intensified U.S. hostility. It also affected Washington’s policy toward Latin America as a whole. The central premise became: no more Cubas. No more socialist experiments, no Soviet puppets, no anti-American ideologies. In the context of the Cold War, the United States could not and would not permit any such forms of political deviation. This conviction provided the underpinning for subsequent overt or covert U.S. interventions in Brazil (1964), the Dominican Republic (1965), Chile (1973), Grenada (1983), and Central America (the 1980s). In the eyes of Washington, Cuba became an object lesson for the hemisphere.

As for Cuba, the U.S. goal was simple—bringing down the regime. Toward this end, American policymakers pursued a variety of tactics—removal of Fidel Castro, support for refugees and dissidents, and strangulation of the Cuban economy. These policies remained in place for decades to come.

The first strategy was rather primitive: assassinate Castro. At the behest of the White House, the CIA orchestrated multiple schemes and attempts. Such plots included an exploding cigar, a fungal-infected driving suit, and a gangland-style shooting. (German Mafia bosses had lost control of profitable businesses in Havana as a result of the Revolution, so they were as eager as the politicians to remove Castro from the scene.) Accordingly to one of Fidel’s former security guards, in fact, the CIA took direct or indirect part in 638 assassination attempts against him over the years! As Castro is reported to have said, “If surviving assassination attempts were an Olympic event, I would win the gold medal.”

The reasoning behind these attempts was as flawed as the execution. The predominant assumption was that Cuba’s revolutionary movement was Fidel’s personal creation: through the force of his character—untrustworthy, ruthless, and megalomaniacal—he had taken his country away from its proper historical path. Eliminate him and everything would change. What this logic failed to acknowledge, however, were the factors behind the revolution: inequality, frustration, long-simmering resentment of U.S. domination, and popular support for programs of radical change. This approach also got the U.S. government into the distasteful business of attempting to assassinate foreign heads of state, a tactic that was later declared unlawful by an act of Congress.

The second broad strategy was to embrace Fidel’s opponents. From the time of Batista’s departure in late 1958, the United States welcomed Cuban exiles and refugees with open arms. And they came by the thousands, settling for the most part in the Miami area—where they formed a vibrant and successful community, eventually transforming what had been a sleepy beachside resort into a multilingual “capital of Latin America.” The U.S. government hailed all dissidents as freedom fighters (remember, the Bay of Pigs operation was carried out by anti-Castro Cubans) and proclaimed that their exodus provided unmistakable proof of the superiority of capitalism over communism. For practical intents and purposes, Washington regarded the anti-Fidelista community in Miami as a government in exile.

This long-term reliance on Cuban dissidents would have fateful implications. One was to give the Cuban American community in Miami inordinate influence over U.S. policy toward the Castro regime. As their numbers grew and prosperity swelled, the exiles formed a powerful political force within the state of Florida. And through a right-wing organization known as the Cuban American National Foundation, their leaders bitterly—and effectively—opposed any relaxation of hostilities toward the revolutionary government. To a considerable extent, Cuban Americans in Miami managed to tie the hands of elected politicians in Washington.

An additional consequence was entirely unintentional: the U.S. policy enabled Castro to export his opposition. Over time, Fidel’s most vociferous critics were obliged (or encouraged) to leave the country. As a result, the most resourceful center of dissidence was nowhere to be found within Cuba; it was in Miami. Ironically, this process provided Castro with a political safety valve. It also allowed him to target his opponents as unprincipled traitors of the fatherland, as opportunistic gusanos (worms) rather than loyal cubanos. Words were important weapons in the struggles over Cuban destiny.

U.S.-Cuban relations took an unexpected turn in 1980. After anti-Castro dissidents stormed the Peruvian embassy in hopes of gaining political asylum, the Cuban government retaliated (against Peru) by withdrawing its security guard around the diplomatic compound. Word suddenly spread that the embassy was unguarded, and within twenty-four hours 10,800 Cubans rushed onto the embassy grounds. The Castro government announced that they would all be allowed to emigrate, along with anyone else who cared to inform authorities. The total exodus eventually climbed to 125,000 people (including criminals and deadbeats). Departing from the port of Mariel, most went via small craft provided by the Cuban American community in what became known as the “Mariel boatlift.” After that, the Castro government prohibited unauthorized emigration from Cuba to the United States.

The third and final pillar of U.S. policy toward Cuba was an economic embargo. In late 1960 President Eisenhower imposed a partial trade embargo on Cuba, excluding food and medicine. The Foreign Assistance Act of 1961 prohibited aid to Cuba and authorized the president to impose “a total embargo upon all trade” with Cuba, which John Kennedy did in response to Castro’s expropriations of U.S.-owned properties (notably, those belonging to the United Fruit Company and International Telephone and Telegraph). This took place in February 1962—months before the missile crisis of that year.

The embargo has remained in place ever since. In 1992 it was codified into law for the stated purpose of “bringing democracy to the Cuban people.” In 1996 Congress passed the Helms-Burton Act, further restricting U.S. citizens from doing business in or with Cuba, and in 1999 President Bill Clinton amplified the
embargo by prohibiting foreign subsidiaries of U.S.-owned corporations from conducting trade with Cuba. In large part, continuation and extension of the embargo reflected the electoral power of the Cuban American community in the all-important state of Florida. The result was perpetuation of the most enduring trade embargo in modern history.

The idea behind this policy appears to be that strangulation of the Cuban economy would generate widespread discontent that would result in a popular uprising against the Castro regime, which would lead to its eventual downfall. As of early 2009, after nearly half a century, nothing of the kind had taken place. One reason, mentioned earlier, was that the most resourceful opposition to Castro was not in Cuba but in Florida: the exile leadership was absent. Moreover, the embargo (or bloqueo, as it is known in Spanish, i.e., the "blockade") had enabled Castro and his colleagues to blame any and all economic setbacks and downturns on the U.S. government and its embargo. American policy thus became a useful scapegoat for the Cuban leadership.

POLICY EXPERIMENTATION AND REGIME CONSOLIDATION

After defeating the Bay of Pigs invasion in 1961, the revolutionaries could concentrate on the economic tasks facing the new Cuba. The central fact was that the Cuban economy revolved around exporting sugar, especially to the United States. The revolutionaries were determined to change that humiliating dependence. The chief architect was Ernesto "Che" Guevara, the Argentine physician-guerrilla who was the most creative theoretician among the revolutionaries. Guevara drew up a Four Year Plan which called for agricultural diversification (a de-emphasis on sugar) and industrialization (the manufacture of light consumer goods). Cuba launched this ambitious plan amid great fanfare.

By 1962 the results had already proved disappointing. In part, Guevara and his youthful planners were reaping the whirlwind of the shortsighted policies of 1959-60. Sugar production had taken a plunge. In 1961 the Cubans had produced 6.8 million tons of sugar, the second highest harvest in Cuban history. This output merely disguised the deliberate neglect the government was showing to sugar. In 1962 the harvest dropped to 4.8 million tons and in 1963 it was only 3.8 million tons, the smallest since 1945. The fall was disastrous for export earnings.

The industrialization drive was also going badly. Cuba lacked the raw materials and expertise to rush into industrialization. Since 1960 the United States had enforced an economic embargo against Cuba, pressuring all U.S. firms (and their Latin American and European subsidiaries) to cease trade with Cuba. This embargo forced Cuba to depend largely on the Soviets and the Eastern bloc for equipment. Direction was to come from highly centralized planning bureaucracies, modeled after Soviet and Czech patterns. The effort was ineffective and expensive. Even the Russians seemed uneasy about underwriting a socialist utopia in the Caribbean.

In mid-1963 the Soviets put their foot down. The Cubans must slow down the industrialization drive and improve their planning. They must recognize Cuba's comparative advantage: sugar. Che Guevara resigned, confessing his errors. Fidel, ever on the initiative, now embraced sugar, which he had so recently spurned. In 1963 he announced that in 1970 (later labeled the "Year of the Decisive Endeavor") Cuba would break all records for sugar production: it would harvest 10 million tons. Like other plantation societies, Cuba thus fell into the trap of reliance on a single export crop.

Debate continued over strategies for economic development and political consolidation. Still active in the regime, Che Guevara argued for an "idealistic" strategy, a Maoist approach that would totally eliminate the market and material incentives. The economy would be fully collectivized and directed by a centralized planning authority. A radical break with the capitalist past would require a "new man," a Cuban who would work for moral rewards (decorations, public praise) and thus reflect a new, higher level of political consciousness. Here the Cuban leaders were going through the familiar dilemma of communist regimes: how to reconcile Marxist idealism with a pragmatic economic policy.

Guevara's idealists further argued that the construction of socialism at home required the aggressive promotion of revolution abroad. They wanted to prove that a guerrilla strategy could work throughout Latin America and perhaps the entire Third World.

Guevara's main opponent in this debate was Carlos Rafael Rodriguez, an economist and longtime Communist Party member. Rodriguez took a practical approach. He favored a more measured use of central planning, partial reliance on market mechanisms, and autonomy left to the individual enterprises. He thought state firms should have to account for their expenses and earnings. In short, Rodriguez and his allies proposed a more conventional path, relying on material incentives instead of moral ones. They favored also a strong party and a "flexible" policy toward Latin America. This meant a willingness to deal with regimes that Guevara saw only as targets for revolutionary opposition.

While the arguments went on, Cuba was returning to sugar. Economic production was nonetheless disappointing. The year 1964 yielded a 9 percent growth rate for most of the economy, but that was primarily a catch-up from the declines of 1961-63. In 1965 the figure slipped to 1.5 percent, less than the rate of population growth, and in 1966 became negative again (-3.7 percent). Indecision in basic policymaking was not building a dynamic socialism.

At this point Fidel brought the debate to an end by endorsing Che Guevara's idealism. Cuba would make a gigantic collective effort accompanied by moral incentives. This immediately increased Fidel's own power, since he himself took charge of the now strengthened central planning apparatus. He and his trusted lieutenants plunged into the minutiae of economic management. The atmosphere recalled the early romantic days of the Revolution—endless rhetoric, euphoric dreams, celebration of the selfless "new man."