Fulgencio Batista (1901-1973)
He was called El Hombre, "the Man," and for three decades he was one of Cuba's most controversial leaders. It would take Fidel Castro and the Cuban Revolution to unseat him.

Humble Origins
Fulgencio Batista Zaldívar was born in Cuba's Oriente province on January 16, 1901, in Banes, only miles away from the Castro family plantation, Las Manacas. A mulatto of humble origins, he joined the army as a private, and in 1932 he became a military tribunal stenographer with the rank of sergeant.

Strong Man
The villain of pre-Castro Cuba, Batista began his political career as a hero. As a young sergeant in 1933, he led non-commissioned officers in a rebellion against dictator Gerardo Machado in alliance with students and labor leaders. Later, he conspired with the U.S. ambassador, Sumner Welles, to force the resignation of provisional president Ramón Grau San Martín. By then a colonel, Batista became the strongman behind a succession of puppet presidents until he was elected president himself in 1940.

Coalition Builder
Under Batista's rule a new constitution was drafted which was, by all standards, a progressive document. It called for government intervention in the economy and provided a social safety net. In the late 1930s Batista legalized the Cuban Communist Party (P.S.P.). In 1940, taking advantage of the P.S.P.'s ability to keep labor in check, he brought the party into his government.

Retiree
In 1944 Batista, respecting the electorate's choice of the opposition coalition, stepped aside and the same man he had deposed in 1933, Ramón Grau, became president. Batista left Cuba to live in Daytona Beach, Florida.

Power Grabber
For the next eight years, Cuba's Partido Auténtico presided over corruption and irresponsibility in government. Corruption had been widespread since 1902, but the public was shocked that the "pure" revolutionaries of 1933 -- Grau, then Carlos Prio -- participated in it. But democracy survived. As new elections approached in 1952, Batista saw an opportunity to return to government, running for the presidency, alongside the Auténticos and the Ortodoxos, the party to which Fidel Castro belonged. As election day approached, Batista was a distant third. Then, on March 10, 1952, he seized the government in a coup d'état -- taking by force what Cuban voters were about to deny him.

Status Seeker
Batista's return to power did not herald a return to progressivism. He became obsessed with gaining the acceptance of Cuba's upper classes, who had denied him membership into their exclusive social clubs. Increasingly, his energies were devoted to amassing an even greater fortune. Batista opened Havana to large scale gambling, announcing that his government would match, dollar for dollar, any hotel investment over $1 million, which would include a casino license. American mobster Meyer Lansky placed himself at the center of Cuba's gambling operation. At the same time, Batista sponsored massive construction projects -- the Havana-Varadero highway, the Rancho Boyeros airport, train lines, an underwater tunnel.

Brutal and Unpopular
As he delayed plans to step down from office, Batista faced growing opposition, and eventually, a popular challenge. In the wake of Fidel Castro's Moncada assault, in 1953, Batista suspended constitutional
guarantees and increasingly relied on police tactics in an attempt to frighten the population through open displays of brutality. Though he made some political concessions between 1954 and 1956 -- lifting press censorship, releasing political prisoners (including Fidel Castro and his brother Raul), allowing exiles to return -- his unpopularity continued to grow.

Instability
As popular unrest in Cuba intensified, Batista's police proved adept at torturing and killing young men in the cities. But his army proved singularly inept against Fidel Castro's rebels, who were based in the mountains.

Fighting Guerrillas
Batista had Castro after Moncada, and let him get away with his life. He had him prisoner at Isle of Pines and released him in a general amnesty. He could have destroyed him after the disaster of the rebels' Granma landing, and let him get away. "Batista committed a huge strategic blunder," when the rebels returned, in the judgment of writer Norberto Fuentes. "You push landings back to sea. But Batista pushes Fidel Castro into the Sierra Maestra with the words 'in the Sierras no one survives.'" A more indicting observation is that of author Carlos Alberto Montaner: "Batista does not finish Fidel out of greed... His is a government of thieves. To have this small guerrilla band in the mountains is to his advantage, so that he can order special defense expenditures that they can steal." By spring 1958 when Batista sent 10,000 soldiers against the rebel army, Castro was too deeply entrenched and Batista's army too rotten from within for the offensive to succeed.

U.S. Rejection
Faced with Batista's military ineptness and growing unpopularity, the United States began to seek an alternative to Batista and to Fidel Castro. But Batista was determined to hold on. On December 11, 1958, U.S. ambassador Earl Smith visited Batista at his lavish hacienda, Kuquines. There he informed Batista the United States could no longer support his regime. Batista asked if he could go to Daytona Beach, where he had a house. The ambassador said no, and suggested instead that he seek exile in Spain.

Flight
On New Year's Eve 1958, Fulgencio Batista left Cuba before the break of dawn, with one hundred and eighty of his closest associates, having amassed a fortune of as much as to $300 million. Batista lived the rest of his life in splendor in Spain and in Portugal. He died on August 6, 1973 in Marbella, Spain, two days before a team of assassins from Castro's Cuba could carry out a plan to kill him.

Pre-Castro Cuba
On the eve of Fidel Castro's 1959 revolution, Cuba was neither the paradise that would later be conjured by the nostalgic imaginations of Cuba's many exiles, nor the hellhole painted by many supporters of the revolution, who recall Cuba as "the brothel of the Western hemisphere" -- an island inhabited by a people degraded and hungry, whose main occupation was to cater to American tourists at Havana's luxurious hotels, beaches and casinos. Rather, Cuba was one of the most advanced and successful countries in Latin America.

Success by the Numbers
Cuba's capital, Havana, was a glittering and dynamic city. In the early part of the century the country's economy, fueled by the sale of sugar to the United States, had grown dynamically. Cuba ranked fifth in the hemisphere in per capita income, third in life expectancy, second in per capita ownership of automobiles and telephones, first in the number of television sets per inhabitant. The literacy rate, 76%, was the fourth highest in Latin America. Cuba ranked 11th in the world in the number of doctors per capita. Many private clinics and hospitals provided services for the poor. Cuba's income distribution compared favorably with that of other Latin American societies. A thriving middle class held the promise of prosperity and social mobility.
Inequalities
There were, however, profound inequalities in Cuban society -- between city and countryside and between whites and blacks. In the countryside, some Cubans lived in abysmal poverty. Sugar production was seasonal, and the macheteros -- sugarcane cutters who only worked four months out of the year -- were an army of unemployed, perpetually in debt and living on the margins of survival. Many poor peasants were seriously malnourished and hungry. Neither health care nor education reached those rural Cubans at the bottom of society. Illiteracy was widespread, and those lucky enough to attend school seldom made it past the first or second grades. Clusters of graveyards dotted the main highway along the foothills of the Sierra Maestra, marking the spots where people died waiting for transportation to the nearest hospitals and clinics in Santiago de Cuba.

Two Worlds
Racism also blighted Cuban society. The island's private clubs and beaches were segregated. Even President Fulgencio Batista, a mulatto, was denied membership in one of Havana's most exclusive clubs. "One might best summarize the complex situation by saying that urban Cuba had come to resemble a Southern European country (with a living standard as high or surpassing that of France, Spain, Portugal and Greece) while rural Cuba replicated the conditions of other plantation societies in Latin America and the Caribbean," according to analyst Mark Falcoff.

Chaotic Political Scene
Cuba's social problems were compounded by a violent, chaotic and corrupt political history. Since achieving independence in 1902, Cuba had suffered what simply could be called bad government. A bloody and costly struggle to achieve independence from Spain had devastated Cuba's economy. The insurgent leaders, known as the mambises, had been decimated. José Martí, Cuba's George Washington, was killed in battle in 1895. On May 20, 1902, the birth date of the first Cuban republic, no leader had the power to harness the passions and ambitions unleashed by independence. The U.S. Congress passed the Platt Amendment, granting the U.S. the right to intervene militarily in Cuba to protect its interests there. The U.S. position further undermined the legitimacy of the government, as it placed the United States at the center of Cuban affairs. Invoking the Platt Amendment, the United States would occupy Cuba between 1906 and 1909, and continue to intervene in later years.

Democratic Hopes
All the tensions of the First Republic exploded in revolution in 1933. University students, labor unions, and disaffected army officers joined in rebellion against Cuba's fifth president, Gerardo Machado, a man who had taken corruption and repression to new heights. A university professor, Ramón Grau San Martín, took power at the head of a coalition. A nationalist, Grau called on "Cuba for all Cubans," but the U.S. ambassador, Sumner Welles, made a deal with Fulgencio Batista, an English-speaking army sergeant, who unseated Grau. Batista became Cuba's strongman behind a succession of presidents until 1940, when he was duly elected president. Batista surprised many, ushering in an era of hope in Cuba by sponsoring a progressive constitution, allowing the Cuban Communist Party to join the government, and stepping down in favor of his opponent, Grau, when his four-year term was over.

Plagued by Corruption
For the next twelve years Cuba enjoyed democracy, and free elections. But it was a democracy marred by corruption and political violence -- the work of "action groups" or gangs who shot their way through politics at the University of Havana and on the city streets. When in March 1952, Batista, in a coup d'etat, destroyed the democratic republic he had brought into existence, the stage was set for revolution. "Batista's coup opened a Pandora's box," explained writer Carlos Alberto Montaner. "Institutions no longer mattered. What mattered was audacity, the individual capable of violent action." That individual turned out to be a daring young lawyer named Fidel Castro.

Era of Change
Between 1952 and 1958, Cubans from all walks of life -- students, businessmen, mothers, politicians --
united in opposition against Batista. Author Carlos Alberto Montaner describes the mood: "the talk was about democracy, freedom and respect for human rights; the... objective was to restore the rule of law that had been swept aside by Batista."

**Hopes for Honest Government**

Even Castro -- a dynamic national figure following his failed Moncada assault of 1953 -- spoke in those terms. "Not Communism or Marxism is our idea. Our political philosophy is representative democracy and social justice in a well-planned economy." Many wealthy Cubans welcomed Castro's rebel triumph in January 1959. "My parents, my grandparents and my uncles went out and paid their back taxes," recalls Professor Marifeli Pérez Stable, "because finally, there was going to be an honest government in Cuba."

**Soviet Protection**

Castro's courtship of the Soviet Union began shortly after the revolution with a visit to Havana by Soviet Vice Premier Anastas Mikoyan. As he took on the United States he knew he needed Soviet protection in order to survive. The Soviets played a cautious game, but could not pass up an opportunity to gain a toehold in the Western Hemisphere, ninety miles from the United States. At the end of Mikoyan's visit, the Soviets agreed to buy Cuban sugar in exchange for Soviet oil. The United States, already concerned with Castro's anti-American rhetoric, saw the agreement as a betrayal, and asked U.S. companies in Cuba not to refine the Soviet crude. Relations began spiraling down, until their final break in January 1961.

**Nuclear Crisis**

In December 1961, only a few months after the U.S.-sponsored exile invasion at Bay of Pigs, Fidel Castro declared himself a Marxist-Leninist, obligating the Soviet Union to protect his new, vulnerable socialist nation. Shortly thereafter he asked the Soviet Union for weapons, advisers, and even Soviet soldiers. The Soviets proposed a different defense -- medium-range ballistic missiles. Castro agreed. When in October 1962 American U-2 spy planes photographed missile sites in Cuba, the world approached the brink of a nuclear confrontation. As the tensions of the Missile Crisis escalated, Castro wrote Soviet leader Nikita Khrushchev urging him to use the missiles and to sacrifice Cuba if necessary. Unbeknownst to the Cuban leader, Khrushchev had already reached an agreement with President John F. Kennedy to withdraw the missiles, without consulting Castro. The Cuban leader found out from a friend, the editor of the newspaper Revolución, Carlos Franqui. Castro was infuriated to discover that the Soviet Union would treat Cuba just as the United States had -- as an insignificant island in the middle of the Caribbean.

**Covert War**

In the end, Castro emerged a winner. President Kennedy secretly pledged to Khrushchev that the United States would not invade Cuba. Yet the Cuban revolution continued to face threats, as a U.S. covert war code-named Operation Mongoose proceeded. And the economic embargo the U.S. had imposed in 1961 continued unabated.

**Committed to World Revolution**

Castro was fiercely committed to creating his own revolutionary world and to fight imperialism whenever and wherever the opportunity arose -- in Africa, Asia, Latin America, the Middle East. "Any revolutionary movement, in any corner of the world, can count on the help of Cuban fighters," he told a audience of Third World revolutionary leaders in early 1966. When his revolutionary goals clashed with those of his Soviet benefactor he nevertheless pursued them. Among Kremlin officials he became known as "the viper in our breast."

**Defeat and Betrayal**

Castro's world revolution eluded him. His guerrilla armies were defeated by U.S. counterinsurgency and betrayed by Soviet-run Communist parties the world over. Most poignantly, in Bolivia, Che Guevara, Castro's chief instrument of world revolution, met his death in 1967.
Good Neighbors
As the Cold War settled into détente in the early 1970s, Fidel Castro, following the Soviet line, began to soften his own antagonistic rhetoric against the United States. "We are neighbors," he told reporter Barbara Walters in 1974, "and we ought to get along." Cuban and American officials met secretly at La Guardia Airport and at the Hotel Pierre to work out a rapprochement. When Secretary of State Henry Kissinger in 1975 announced the U.S. was ready to "begin a new relationship," the two nations stood on the brink of an agreement.

Castro's Choice
Then, fifteen years after the triumph of the Cuban revolution, Fidel Castro made what was perhaps the most important choice of his life, one which would determine the future of Cuba-U.S. relations into the 21st century. In 1974-75, just as the normalization of relations between the U.S. and Cuba seemed imminent, Fidel Castro saw an opportunity to rekindle his international revolution.

Angola
After five centuries as a colony of Portugal, Angola in West Africa was due to receive its independence in November 1975. The country edged toward civil war as three separate groups bid to rule the country. Cuba had been supporting the Movement for the Independence of Angola (M.P.L.A.) since the 1960s. The Marxist leader Agostinho Neto had close ties to Havana and was favored by the Cubans. Castro faced a choice: intervention in Angola or relations with the United States. On November 7, 1975, he personally saw the departure of an airlift taking Cuban special troops into Angola's capital, Luanda, followed by two passenger ships carrying regular troops into the field of battle. When Cuba took the initiative, Moscow followed with support. "They've made a choice which, in effect, and I do mean very literally, has precluded any improvement in our relations with Cuba," President Gerald Ford said.

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