

Fidel Castro: Was he David or Goliath?

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Story highlights

- Silvia Pedraza: Cubans are split about the legacy of Fidel Castro
- Castro's most enduring legacy will inevitably be one of David vs. Goliath, she writes

(CNN) Back in 1959, Fidel Castro departed Santiago de Cuba in a victorious caravan across his country to Havana. Almost six decades later, his remains were carried on the same journey, in reverse.

Castro's most enduring legacy will inevitably be one of David vs. Goliath. He was the young, bearded revolutionary from a small island who took on the enormous Goliath of US capitalism and American hegemony.

That is the stuff of dreams. But it wasn't a dream for everyone. And, indeed, not everyone would agree on whether Castro was David or Goliath.

The image of the Castro regime as David was first established during Cuban exiles' US-sponsored invasion of Cuba in the notorious 1961 Bay of Pigs fiasco. This image was reinforced time and again as Fidel lobbed verbal stones at his superpower neighbor against the backdrop of support from the Soviet Union and then Venezuela.

Silvia Pedraza

And it's an image that some Cubans -- those who succumbed to his charisma and passionate oratory which painted the suffering of the present as necessary stepping stones for a better future - - bought into, at least for a time. That was particularly true for those who benefited from the initial advances of the revolution and who lived through Cuba's phase of early civic glory.

Cubans who fought against Fulgencio Batista's dictatorship in the 1950s and risked their lives in that undertaking by and large remained attached to the revolution. They lived through Cuba's civic joy at the end of the dictatorship and they followed Fidel when he veered from a revolution originally fought to restore political democracy to a different revolution that sought to bring communism and socialism to the island.

To many of those who benefited from the expansion of education and public health services, Castro remained an admirably defiant figure. And these advances cannot and should not be overlooked, especially as they were the product of the tangible sacrifices the Cuban people were making day in and day out.

Many previously illiterate Cubans learned to read during a literacy campaign launched at the beginning of the revolution. Many poorer Cubans in rural areas, and those from working-class backgrounds in the cities, experienced a remarkable jump in social status on the back of improved literacy.



But to many Cubans, the David long ago morphed into an ugly Goliath. As Castro continued to blame all of Cuba's economic ills on the US embargo rather than taking responsibility for his own policies, some Cubans sought a new life in the United States.

Among the failed policies was Castro's attempt to mobilize all of Cuba's population to cut sugar cane. He exhorted everyone -- doctors and peasants alike -- to go to the countryside to cut sugar cane with the goal of a 10 million-ton sugar harvest, all the while insisting Cuba's honor was at stake. The enormous mobilization failed to accomplish his goal, leaving Cubans exhausted and humiliated.

Clearly to most of the Cuban population that today lives in the United States -- as well as the many more scattered all over the globe, particularly in Spain, Latin America, and Canada -- Fidel was no David. But this was also true to the many in the dissident movement inside of Cuba who valiantly risked their lives in the decades-long struggle to restore electoral democracy to Cuba, even in the face of government crackdowns.



The dissident movement in Cuba that developed among young people in the mid-1980s, including many that had studied in the Soviet Union and other Eastern European countries, grew out of their firsthand knowledge of communism and their attempts at *glasnost* and *perestroika* to reform communism from within.

Today, the dissident movement includes various groups: the *Movimiento Cristiano Liberacion*; the well-known Damas de Blanco, the ladies who march every Sunday throughout Havana, all clad in white, holding a flower in their hands, asking for the release of their husbands, sons, or brothers, who were imprisoned due to their dissent over a one-party, authoritarian society; and UNPACU (Patriotic Union of Cuba).

Ultimately, Cubans paid dearly for social advances under the Castro regime. Their meager salaries have plunged the vast majority of the population, including professionals, into poverty. Even the well educated are left struggling to put food on the table, to *resolver* -- make ends meet, legally or illegally.

Cubans also paid for Castro's achievements with a lack of liberty that constrained both their efforts and their souls, stunting the economic development of the island. Families were torn apart after this lack of economic growth and liberty pushed so many to leave their home country.

What difference will Castro's death make to his legacy? For a long time, Cuba has been like a slow-moving chess game where the pieces struggled to move. Now that the King has moved, other pieces have room to move, too. What moves they will make, though, remain to be seen.