

Two Visions of Democracy: U.S. vs. Fidel Castro

By Arnold August, April 2012

Technically speaking, the U.S. did not organize the March 10, 1952, military coup by Batista and did not even immediately recognize it. However, this situation did not last very long. A mere seventeen days after the coup, on March 27, the U.S. recognized the Batista regime because its goals were in complete alignment with U.S. policy for Cuba at the time. The U.S. assured this alliance before extending formal recognition. At the heart of the U.S.–Batista agreement was Batista's program to try and eliminate the revolutionary forces.

Documented evidence from original U.S. sources shows this very clearly. For example, in a formerly secret U.S. State Department Memorandum written by U.S. Ambassador in Cuba Willard Beaulac, on March 22, 1952 (twelve days after the coup), based on a conversation in Havana with Dr. Miguel Ángel de la Campa, minister of state of the Batista regime, Campa asked the U.S. Ambassador, as recorded by the latter,

why the United States hadn't recognized Cuba.... He said that an intolerable situation had developed in Cuba. Graft, gangsterism, and favoritism had made *a travesty of democracy*.... Batista once before had brought *order out of chaos* and Dr. Campa thought he was going to do it again.... I reminded Dr. Campa that our Government had not been consulted about the *coup d'état* and that Cuba could not expect automatic recognition from us.... I told Dr. Campa that I would transcribe faithfully what he said to the Department of State in Washington. I was sure our conversation would be helpful to my Government, and I hoped it would be to his.¹ (emphasis added)

The coup spokesperson declared in the above statement that the *raison d'être* of the coup was the lack of democracy in Cuba and that Batista had the talent to recover a state of order or, by implication, democracy.

On March 25, 1952, in the following formerly secret Memorandum written by Secretary of State Dean Acheson during Democratic President Harry Truman's administration, on the subject of continuing diplomatic relations with Cuba, Acheson wrote:

I recommend ... the continuation of diplomatic relations with the Batista Government in Cuba [for March 27].... On the early morning of Monday, March 10, General Fulgencio Batista with the support of a group of officers of the Cuban Army overthrew the duly constituted Government of President Carlos Prío Socarrás. Batista's revolution came as a complete surprise both in Cuba and in this country ... *with remarkable ease and over virtually no resistance*.... The Batista regime has formally requested our recognition and has made satisfactory public and private statements with regard to ... *its attitude towards private capital; its intentions to take steps to curtail international communist activities in Cuba*.... *We have no reason to believe that Batista will not be strongly anti-communist*.... The Department of State naturally deplored *the way in which the Batista coup was brought*.... [I] request your authorization to announce the continuation of diplomatic relations with Cuba on March 27.²

Note that the U.S. opposed “the way in which the Batista coup was brought [about],” but not the coup itself.

The U.S. had to make sure that Batista was really in favour of private capital and, above all, opposed to the communists and the revolutionary movement. It should be recalled that, as part of the U.S. co-optation policy in the 1930s and 1940s, Batista was fully collaborating with the U.S. to decorate U.S. domination with a “new face,” even to the extent of tolerating the Communist Party and allowing the progressive 1940 Constitution to be adopted.

It is also noteworthy that the Memorandum asserts that the coup took place with “virtually no resistance.” However, in the early hours of the coup in the dead of night, all transportation, radio transmitters, radios and banks fell under army control. Batista's military closed off access to and from Havana. U.S. historian Louis A. Pérez Jr. reveals, “Sites of potential protest demonstrations against the coup passed under military control.” Offices and headquarters of the opposition forces, anti-Batista unions and the Communist Party were occupied. Union leaders and political opponents were detained and arrested. The emblematic University of Havana was shut down and Congress dissolved. It should be noted that the PSP, the name by which the Communist Party was known at the time, had nine seats in lower house.³

The U.S. press, even the most “liberal,” played their historic role of assisting the government in blacking out this repression and

thus justifying its actions, such as supporting the Batista dictatorship. For example, *Time*, in a front-page April 1952 article (showing a cheerfully smiling Batista with the Cuban flag as backdrop), embellished Batista in their headline as “Dictator with the People.”

Relaxing on the awning deck in shorts, the Strong Man was in his best bluff humor. Once again he was undisputed dictator of Cuba.... Power and prestige are two things Batista understands and values. It has been said of him that he has *limitless ambition*, plenty of ability and no respect for his fellow men.... With or against the people, the Strong Man, at any rate, came from them. *The son of a poor farmer of mixed blood [mulato]*, he was born in 1901, while his country was still under U.S. occupation, at the eastern sugar town of Banes. Quitting Banes’ Quaker School at twelve, he worked as a tailor’s apprentice, bartender, barber, banana picker, cane cutter and railroad hand.... *Democracy must come from within, not from without*. It is up to Cubans, not the U.S., to make military coups obsolete. Meanwhile, so far as Latin America is concerned, the U.S. can only be the *Good Neighbor*, avoid undue interference.... The making of democracy takes, among other things, time.⁴ (emphasis added)

What stands out is co-optation (even to the extent of recruiting a willing *mulato* in overtly racist, pre-1959 Cuban society) combined with the use of an individual of “limitless ambitions” such as Batista. One can also notice the real nature of F.D.R.’s Good Neighbor Policy with its desire to avoid “undue” interference. In this case, it was meant to “avoid interfering in Cuba’s affairs” by recognizing Batista. As requested by Acheson, on March 27, 1952, the U.S. recognized the Batista regime.

Fidel Castro presented a brief (as a lawyer) to the Court of Appeals on March 24, 1952, regarding the Batista coup, at that time about to be diplomatically recognized by Washington. Castro said:

The nation, unable to act, witnessed a flood of military actions which demolished the Constitution, putting lives and property at the whims of bayonets.... The chief of the insurrectionists, assuming absolute power and arrogating to himself omnipotent functions, ordered the immediate

suspension of the elections scheduled for the first of June.... When Congress tried to meet in the usual fashion, it was dissolved by gunfire.... At present the total transformation of the republican system is being carried out, and they plan substituting the national constitution, a product of the people's will, with a juridical farce created in the barracks behind the back of popular opinion.⁵

The stage was being set for a democratic revolution against the dictatorship, rekindled by Fidel Castro and the new movement he initiated and led in 1953, continuing through to January 1, 1959.

During this period (1952–58), attempts to blunt the inevitable through more fraudulent elections could not hold back the revolt against the economic and political system. Presidential elections were to be held in 1954. Two issues can be examined: the roll of candidates as well as voter turnout, that is, the percentage of registered voters going to the polls. Registration was already very low in proportion to the population due to the disenfranchisement policy of the U.S. since the time of Wood in 1898. Jorge Domínguez, among the most skeptical, even writes that, in 1954 “Batista was ‘elected’ president without opposition,” because the other candidate pulled out due to a lack of confidence in the electoral system at the time. In addition, voter turnout of registered voters dropped from 79.5 percent in 1948 to 52.6 percent in 1954.⁶ Domínguez, who is rather critical of the Cuban Revolution, further states, “The presidential elections of 1958, a few months before Batista’s fall, had two opposition candidates, but the elections were so obviously fraudulent that they served, once again, to undermine the government rather than to strengthen it.”⁷

¹ Latin American Studies. 1952. “Memorandum of Conversation, by the Ambassador in Cuba (Beaulac).” (March 22). At <<http://www.latinamericanstudies.org/cable/cable-3-22-52.htm>>.

² Acheson, Dean. 1952. “Memorandum for the President, Subject: Continuation of Diplomatic Relations With Cuba.” Latin American Studies (March 25). At <<http://www.latinamericanstudies.org/embassy/R39-Memo-3-17-1952.pdf>>.

³ Pérez, Louis A., Jr. 1995. *Cuba: Between Reform and Revolution*. NY: Oxford University Press, p. 28–29.

⁴ Time. 1952. “Cuba: Dictator With the People.” (April 21). At <<http://www.time.com/time/magazine/article/0,9171,889465,00.html>>.

⁵ Castro Ruz, Fidel. 1972. "Al Tribunal de Urgencia." Brief presented on March 24, 1952, to the Court of Appeals of Havana. *Granma* (July 26, 1966). Translated and reproduced in Rolando E. Bonachea and Nelson P. Valdés, *Revolutionary Struggle 1947–58: Selected Works of Fidel Castro (Vol. 1)*. Cambridge, Massachusetts: The MIT Press, p. 149–50.

⁶ Domínguez, Jorge I. 1979. *Cuba: Order and Revolution*. Cambridge: The Belknap Press, Harvard University Press, p. 124.

⁷ Ibid.