

[Excerpts from an interview with Andrew George Fidel Castro in the Sierra Maestra in 1958](#)

ST. GEORGE: Dr. Castro, your death has been officially reported many times, but you look hearty. For fourteen months, you've waged a jungle-mountain war against the Cuban Army of some thirty thousand men with all its modern weapons. What have you accomplished?

CASTRO: In December, 1956, we were a dozen men in the bush. Now, one thousand strong, we rule a liberated zone of fifty people. Our army is kept small, mobile, combative; we turn down fifty volunteers for every one we take. Our doctors, who serve without pay, as do our soldiers, give these people medical care they've never had before. We also set up classes in captured areas whenever possible to teach children their first letters.

Most important, this year our movement has won the respect and affection of the Cuban people, long sunk in political apathy. They are revolted by the regime's increasing terrorism and corruption, the outright assassinations and atrocities. Recently, forty-seven simple farmers near here were rounded up and shot, and their deaths were announced as those of "rebels" killed in combat. These are only officially reported deaths.

The dictator has used every strategy against us--air strafing and bombing, infantry assaults, bombardment from the sea. Teams of assassins continually infiltrate our lines to murder me. But all these tactics have failed.

Now Batista says he'll starve us out, by ringing the Sierra Maestra with troops and stopping all incoming shipments of food and medical supplies. Rumors persist that he will also bomb us with mustard gas. This is risky business, since the U.S. naval base at Guantánamo is nearby.

ST. GEORGE: You say you will burn Cuba's entire sugar crop. The island's economic life depends on it. What can you gain by this?

CASTRO: Our intent is to burn the harvest to the last stalk, including my own family's large sugar-cane farm here in Oriente Province. It is a hard step. But it is a legitimate act of war. From sugar taxes, Batista buys bombs and arms, pays his newly doubled army. Only their bayonets now keep him in power. Once before, Cubans burned their cane, razed their very towns, to wrest freedom from Spain. During your revolution, didn't the American colonists throw tea into Boston Harbor as a legitimate defense measure?

ST. GEORGE: What do you rebels want, besides toppling Batista? And what of reports you will nationalize all foreign investments in Cuba?

CASTRO: First, we must overthrow the dictatorship, forced on us by the military coup d'état in 1952 when Batista saw he would lose any free election. Next, we'll set up a provisional government, whose heads are to be elected by some 60 Cuban civic bodies, like the Lions, Rotarians, groups of lawyers and doctors, religious organizations. Within a year, this caretaker regime would hold a truly honest election. In a manifesto issued last July, we called for the temporary government to free immediately all political prisoners, restore freedom of the press, reestablish constitutional rights.

We must eventually root out the fearful corruption that has plagued Cuba so long; set up an adequately paid civil service beyond the reach of politics and nepotism; wage a war against illiteracy, which runs as high as 49 per cent in rural areas; speed industrialization, and thus create new jobs. For in this little nation of six million, a million work only four months a year, under an antiquated, one-crop economy.

Our 26th of July Movement has never called for nationalizing foreign investments, though in my twenties I personally advocated public ownership of Cuba's public utilities. Nationalization can never be as rewarding as the right kind of private investment, domestic and foreign, aimed at diversifying our economy. I know revolution sounds like bitter medicine to many businessmen. But after the first shock, they will find it a boon--no more thieving tax collectors, no plundering army chieftains or bribe-hungry officials to bleed them white. Our revolution is as much a moral as a political one.

ST. GEORGE: Will you run for President? And have you thought of negotiating a compromise with Batista, who has promised he will not run in the next Presidential elections?

CASTRO: Under our constitution, I am far too young to be a candidate. As for Batista, did President Roosevelt think of compromising with Hitler just before D-day?

ST. GEORGE: Charges have been made that your movement is Communist-inspired. What about this?

CASTRO: This is absolutely false. Every American newsman who has come here at great personal peril--Herbert Matthews of the New York Times, two CBS reporters and yourself--has said this is false. Our Cuban support comes from all classes of society. The middle class is strongly united in its support of our movement. We even have many wealthy sympathizers. Merchants, industrial executives, young people, workers are sick of the gangsterism that rules Cuba. Actually, the Cuban Communists, as your journalist John Gunther once reported, have never opposed Batista, for whom they have seemed to feel a closer kinship.

ST. GEORGE: What do you expect of Americans?

CASTRO: Your public opinion should know more about Latin American movements that are democratic and nationalist. Why be afraid of freeing the people, whether Hungarians or Cubans?

Why is it assumed that outmoded dictators are the best guardians of our rights, and make your best allies? And what is the difference between dictatorship by a military caste, like Batista's, and the Communist or Fascist dictatorships you say you abhor? To any North American, it would be absurd, outrageous, if an army officer or police chief deposed or disposed of the governor of a state and then declared himself governor. Who would recognize him as such? Yet this happens all too frequently in Latin America. By furnishing arms to these usurpers of power--the men of the infamous "international of sabers" --tyrants like Pérez Jiménez of Venezuela, exiled Rojas Pinilla of Colombia, Trujillo of the Dominican Republic--you kill the democratic spirit of Latin America. Do you think your tanks, your planes, the guns you Americans ship Batista in good faith are used in hemispheric defense? He uses them to cow his own defenseless people. How can he contribute to "hemispheric defense"? He hasn't even been able to subdue us, even when we were only a dozen strong!

I firmly believe that the nations of Latin America can achieve political stability under representative forms of government, just as other nations have. We need material progress, first, to raise low living standards; we need a climate of freedom, in which we can develop democratic habits. This is never possible under tyranny.

Efforts at self-government in many Latin nations are far from perfect, I realize. But we can cure ourselves of these ills--unless dictators step in and strangle this natural political evolution, and are given aid and recognition by other countries. I repeat, by arming Batista you are really making war against the Cuban people.

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