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JORGE I. DOMÍNGUEZ

# Fidel Castro's footprints



AP PHOTO

A Cuban flag hangs on a facade with sculptures of revolutionary heroes, Ernesto "Che" Guevara, right, Camilo Cienfuegos, center, and Julio Antonio Mella, a day after the death of Cuban leader Fidel Castro, in Havana.

By **Jorge I. Domínguez** | NOVEMBER 26, 2016

Time and again during his long tenure, from January 1959 until he entered a hospital and retired from government posts in the summer 2006, Fidel Castro mattered for the world.

On October 26, 1962 in the midst of the so-called missile crisis, Cuban Prime Minister Fidel Castro recommended that the Soviet Union launch a first-strike nuclear weapons attack on the United States in the event that the United States was to invade Cuba with conventional forces. It was the closest that the world had come to nuclear war since nuclear bombs were dropped on Japan at the end of World War II. Castro may have unwittingly abetted the Soviet government into agreeing with President John F. Kennedy to withdraw the Soviet missiles and nuclear warheads already stationed in Cuba.

In 1963, he sent tank troops to fight a war on Algeria's side against Morocco. He sent Ernesto "Che" Guevara to fight fruitless insurrectionary wars in the Congo in 1965 and in Bolivia in 1967. From the mid-1970s to the end of the 1980s, he deployed 300,000 Cuban troops to wars elsewhere in the world, principally in Angola and in Ethiopia. At one time or another under his rule, Cuban civilians and military served in dozens of countries. Altogether, he defied 10 presidents of the United States and their efforts to stymie his worldwide ambitions, overthrow his government, and, in

the early years of his rule, assassinate him.

In 1983, when US forces invaded the little island of Grenada, the US Admiral of the Fleet reported his estimate that several thousand Cuban troops were defending Grenada's government, so fierce was their resistance; it turned out Cuba had mainly construction workers, trained as military reservists, and only a few troops, altogether fewer than 800 — none defected to the United States following their surrender, loyal to their commander-in-chief even as US prisoners of war.

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Relative to its population, Cuba deployed for 15 years more troops than the United States deployed to Vietnam during the peak year of the Vietnam War. Cuba turned out to be the most competent military ally of the Soviet Union. Bulgarians and Poles did not serve in war in Angola and Ethiopia, but Cubans did. The Soviet Union could not win the war its troops went to fight in Afghanistan, nor did the United States win the Vietnam War. But Cubans won the three wars they fought in Africa, twice defeating South African invasions of Angola and once defeating a Somali invasion of Ethiopia.



## Miami's Cuban exiles celebrate Castro's death

The seemingly eternal vigil for the death of a man who had profoundly changed the lives of hundreds of thousands of people here was over. Finally.

**In 1962, did a mistake save the world?**

At home, Castro molded his people into a nation. He believed in modernity as a state policy as fiercely as he believed in independence from the United States. His government's investments in education, health care, and sports transformed the collective sense of self. Universal access to these services would by 1980 erase differences by skin color in the likelihood of mortality at birth and in primary school completion rates. He systematically implemented equality-inducing policies.

At home, however, he was also a dictator who abused public power and committed crimes in the name of the revolution, the homeland, national sovereignty, and socialism. Especially during the 1960s, he imprisoned tens of thousands of political prisoners and held them in jail, often under appalling conditions, for much longer than would be

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 policies in the 1960s bankrupted the economy and, following the end of Soviet economic support for Cuba, in the 1990s and early 2000s delayed adopting policies that might have led to economic prosperity.

His policies at different times and in different ways would also send over a million Cubans to migrate to the United States. That emigration would feature in the 2016 US presidential election (two Republican presidential candidates), just as it has in electing Cuban-American members of Congress from Florida for many years.

Fidel Castro mattered for the world and for his people. For some, he was a demon; for others, a hero. He once compared himself to Don Quixote, righting wrongs, fighting against giants. Some of those giants, for him as for Don Quixote, were imaginary. Many of those efforts led to senseless death and cruelty. Many of those endeavors also stopped South African apartheid and sent health care personnel to serve without charge in Haiti. He mattered above all because it is difficult to render a single, simple assessment of his worth as a human being.

## Fidel Castro's Cuba

Fidel Castro, who defied the US for 50 years, has died at 90. Castro came to power after an armed revolution in 1959.

**Oct. 1960** US bans exports to Cuba, other than food and medicine

**April 16, 1961** Castro declares Cuba is a socialist state

**April 17, 1961** 1,297 CIA-supported Cuban exiles invade at Bay of Pigs; attack collapses two days later

**Oct. 1962** President John F. Kennedy blockades Cuba to force removal of Soviet nuclear missiles

**April 1980** Refugee crisis starts at Mariel port as Cuba says it will let anyone leave; some 125,000 flee by end of September

**Dec. 1991** Soviet Union's collapse ends extensive aid to and trade with Cuba

**Aug. 1994** Castro declares he will not stop Cubans from leaving; 40,000 flee to the US

**June 23, 2001** Castro faints briefly while giving a speech

**Dec. 16, 2001** US food arrives in Havana's harbor, first direct sale in decades

**March 18, 2003** Cuban government announces crackdown on dissidents it accuses of working with American officials; 75 of Castro's most vocal critics are sentenced to prison

**Oct. 20, 2004** Castro falls after speech, shattering his left kneecap and breaking his right arm

**July 31, 2006** Castro temporarily relinquishes power to his brother Raul due to illness

**Nov. 25, 2016** Castro dies at 90

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