

## Fidel Castro: "History Will Absolve Me"

**Excerpts from his own defense, delivered at his trial, October 1953. Thanks to Professor Richard Slatta for permission to reproduce this translation from his web site.**

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- We have fomented a rebellion against one single power, an illegal power, which has usurped and merged into a single whole both the Legislative and Executive Powers of the nation, and has thus destroyed the entire system that was specifically safeguarded by the Code now under our analysis. As to the independence of the Judiciary after the 10th of March, I shall not allude to that for I am in no mood for joking. [10 March 1952 was the date when Fulgencio Batista launched his coup d'etat and took over the government.]
- They [Batista's military dictatorship] have tried to establish the myth that modern arms render the people helpless to overthrow tyrants. Military parades and the pompous display of the machines of war are used to perpetuate this myth and to create in the people a complex of absolute impotence. But no weapon, no violence, can vanquish the people once they have decided to win back their rights. Both past and present are full of examples. Most recently there has been a revolt in Bolivia, where miners with dynamite sticks laid low the Regular Army regiments. But, fortunately, we Cubans need not look for examples abroad. No example is as inspiring as that of our own land. During the war of 1895, there were nearly half a million armed Spanish soldiers in Cuba, many more than the Dictator counts upon today to hold back a population five times greater. . . . This is how the people fight when they want to win their liberty; they throw stones at airplanes and overturn tanks!

### **The Many Problems of Cuba**

- I stated that the second consideration on which we based our chances for success was one of social order because we were assured of the people's support. When we speak of the people we do not mean the comfortable ones, the conservative elements of the nation, who welcome any regime of oppression, any dictatorship, any despotism, prostrating themselves before the master of the moment until they grind their foreheads into the ground. When we speak of struggle, the people means the vast unredeemed masses, to whom all make promises and whom all deceive; we mean the people who yearn for a better, more dignified and more just nation; who are moved by ancestral aspirations of justice, for they have suffered injustice and mockery, generation after generation; who long for great and wise changes in all aspects of their life; people, who, to attain these changes, are ready to give even the very last breath of their lives--when they believe in something or in someone, especially when they believe in themselves. In stating a purpose, the first condition of sincerity and good faith, is to do precisely what nobody else ever does, that is, to speak with absolute clarity, without fear. The demagogues and professional politicians who manage to perform the miracle of being right in everything

and in pleasing everyone, are, of necessity, deceiving anyone about everything. The revolutionaries must proclaim their ideas courageously, define their principles and express their intentions so that no one is deceived, neither friend nor foe.

- The people we counted on in our struggle were these:
    - Seven hundred thousand Cubans without work, who desire to earn their daily bread honestly without having to emigrate in search of livelihood.
    - Five hundred thousand farm laborers inhabiting miserable shacks, who work four months of the year and starve for the rest of the year, sharing their misery with their children, who have not an inch of land to cultivate, and whose existence inspires compassion in any heart not made of stone.
    - Four hundred thousand industrial laborer and stevedores whose retirement funds have been embezzled, whose benefits are being taken away, whose homes are wretched quarters, whose salaries pass from the hands of the boss to those of the usurer, whose future is a pay reduction and dismissal, whose life is eternal work and whose only rest is in the tomb.
    - One hundred thousand small farmers who live and die working on land that is not theirs, looking at it with sadness as Moses did the promised land, to die without possessing it; who, like feudal serfs, have to pay for the use of their parcel of land by giving up a portion of their products; who cannot love it, improve it, beautify it or plant a lemon or an orange tree on it, because they never know when a sheriff will come with the rural guard to evict them from it.
    - Thirty thousand teachers and professors who are so devoted, dedicated and necessary to the better destiny of future generations and who are so badly treated and paid.
    - Twenty thousand small business men weighted down by debts, ruined by the crisis and harangued by a plague of filibusters and venal officials.
    - Ten thousand young professionals: doctors, engineers, lawyers, veterinarians, school teachers, dentists, pharmacists, newspapermen, painters, sculptors, etc., who come forth from school with their degrees, anxious to work and full of hope, only to find themselves at a dead end with all doors closed, and where no ear hears their clamor or supplication.
  - These are the people, the ones who know misfortune and, therefore, are capable of fighting with limitless courage!
  - To the people whose desperate roads through life have been paved with the bricks of betrayals and false promises, we were not going to say: "we will eventually give you what you need, but rather -- Here you have it, fight for it with all your might so that liberty and happiness may be yours!"
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- The problems concerning land, the problem of industrialization, the problem of housing, the problem of unemployment, the problem of education and the problem of the health of the people; these are the six problems we would take immediate steps to resolve, along with the restoration of public liberties and political democracy. Perhaps this exposition appears cold and theoretical if one does not know the shocking and tragic conditions of the country with regard to these six problems, to say nothing of the most humiliating political oppression.
- 85% of the small farmers in Cuba pay rent and live under the constant threat of being dispossessed from the land that they cultivate. More than half the best cultivated land belongs to foreigners. In Oriente, the largest province, the lands of the United Fruit Company and West Indian Company join the north coast to the southern one. There are two hundred thousand peasant families who do not have a single acre of land to cultivate to provide food for their starving children. On the other hand, nearly three hundred thousand caballerías [1 caballería equals 33.3 acres] of productive land owned by powerful interests remains uncultivated.
- Cuba is above all an agricultural state. Its population is largely rural. The city depends on these rural areas. The rural people won the Independence. The greatness and prosperity of our country depends on a healthy and vigorous rural population that loves the land and knows how to cultivate it, within the framework of a state that protects and guides them. Considering all this, how can the present state of affairs be tolerated any longer?
- With the exception of a few food, lumber and textile industries, Cuba continues to be a producer of raw materials. We export sugar to import candy, we export hides to import shoes, we export iron to import plows. Everybody agrees that the need to industrialize the country is urgent, that we need steel industries, paper and chemical industries; that we must improve cattle and grain products, the technique and the processing in our food industry, in order to balance the ruinous competition of the Europeans in cheese products, condensed milk, liquors and oil, and that of the Americans in canned goods; that we need merchant ships; that tourism should be an enormous source of revenue. . . .
- Just as serious or even worse is the housing problem. There are two hundred thousand huts and hovels [One of these thatched huts, called *bohíos* in Spanish, is shown in the picture at the right, although this one stood in Puerto Rica, not Cuba]; four hundred thousand families in the country and in the cities lived cramped into barracks and tenements without even the minimum sanitary requirements; two million two hundred thousand of our urban population pay rents which absorb between one fifth and one third of their income; and two million eight hundred thousand of our rural and suburban population lack electricity.
- If the State proposes lowering rents, landlords threaten to freeze all construction; if the State does not interfere, construction goes on so long as the landlords get high rents, otherwise, they would not lay a single brick even though the rest of the population should

have to live exposed to the elements. The utilities monopoly is no better: they extend lines as far as it is profitable and beyond that point, they don't care if the people have to live in darkness for the rest of their lives. The State folds its arms and the people have neither homes nor electricity.

- Our educational system is perfectly compatible with the rest of our national situation. Where the *guajiro* [peasant] is not the owner of his land, what need is there for agricultural schools? Where there are no industries what need is there for technical or industrial schools? Everything falls within the same absurd logic: there is neither one thing nor the other. In any small European country there are more than 200 technical and industrial arts schools; in Cuba, there are only six such schools, and the boys graduate without having anywhere to use their skills. The little rural schools are attended by only half the school-age children--barefoot, half-naked and undernourished--and frequently the teacher must buy necessary materials from his own salary. Is this the way to make a nation great?
- Only death can liberate one from so much misery. In this, however, --early death--the state is most helpful. 90% of rural children are consumed by parasites which filter through their bare feet from the earth. Society is moved to compassion upon hearing of the kidnapping or murder of one child, but they are criminally indifferent to the mass murder of so many thousands of children who die every year from lack of facilities, agonizing with pain. Their innocent eyes--death already shining in them--seem to look into infinity as if entreating forgiveness for human selfishness, as if asking God to stay his wrath.
- When the head of a family works only four months a year, with what can he purchase clothing and medicine for his children? They will grow up with rickets, with not a single good tooth in their mouths by the time they reach thirty; they will have heard ten million speeches and will finally die of misery and deception. Public hospitals, which are always full, accept only patients recommended by some powerful politician who, in turn, demands the electoral votes of the unfortunate one and his family so that Cuba may continue forever the same or worse. With this background, is it not understandable that from May to December over a million persons lost their jobs.

## **Castro's Proposed Revolutionary Changes**

- The First Revolutionary Law would have returned power to the people and proclaimed the Constitution of 1940 the supreme Law of the State. . . . The revolutionary movement, as the momentous incarnation of this sovereignty, the only source of legitimate power, would have assumed all the faculties inherent in it, except that of modifying the Constitution itself: in other words it would have assumed the legislative, executive and judicial powers.
- The Second Revolutionary Law would have granted property, non-mortgageable and non-transferable, to all planters, non-quota planters, lessees, sharecroppers, and squatters who held parcels of five *cabellerías* [about 160 acres] of land or less, and the State would

indemnify the former owners on the basis of the rental which they would have received for these parcels over a period of ten years.

- The Third Revolutionary Law would have granted workers and employees the right to share thirty per cent of the profits of all the large industrial, mercantile and milling enterprises, including the sugar mills.
- The Fourth Revolutionary Law would have granted all planters the right to share fifty-five per cent of the sugar production and a minimum quota of forty thousand *arrobas* [one *arroba*= 25 pounds] for all small planters who have been established for three or more years.
- The Fifth Revolutionary Law would have ordered the confiscation of all holdings and ill-gotten gains of those who had committed frauds during previous regimes, as well as the holdings and ill-gotten gains of all their legatees and heirs.
- Furthermore, it was to be declared that Cuban policy in the Americas would be one of close solidarity with the democratic peoples of this continent, and that those politically persecuted by bloody tyrants opposing our sister nations would find generous asylum, brotherhood and bread in the land of Martí; not the persecution and treason they find today. Cuba should be the bulwark of liberty and not a shameful link in the chain of despotism.
- These laws would have been proclaimed immediately. . . . They would have been followed by another series of laws, and the fundamental measures, such as the Agrarian Reform, the integral Reform of Education, electric power nationalization of the trust and the telephone trust, refund to the people of the illegal excessive rates this company has charged, and payment to the Treasury of all taxes brazenly evaded in the past. . . . The greatness and prosperity of our country depends on the healthy and vigorous rural population that loves the land and knows how to till it, within the framework of a State that protects and guides them.

## **Conclusion/ Summation**

- When you judge a defendant for robbery, Your Honors, do you ask him how long he has been unemployed? Do you ask him how many children he has, which days of the week he ate and which he didn't, do you concern yourselves with his environment at all? You send him to jail without further thought. But those who burn warehouses and stores to collect insurance do not go to jail, even though a few human beings should have happened to [be cremated with the property insured]. The insured have money to hire lawyers and bribe judges. You fail the poor wretch who steals because he is hungry; but none of the hundreds who steal from the Government has ever spent a night in jail; you dine with them at the end of the year in some elegant place and they enjoy your respect.
- Cuba could easily provide for a population three times as great as it now has, so there is no excuse for the abject poverty of a single one of its present inhabitants. The markets should be overflowing with produce, pantries should be full, all hands should be working.

This is not an inconceivable thought. What is inconceivable is that anyone should go to bed hungry, that children should die for lack of medical attention; what is inconceivable is that 30% of our farm people cannot write their names and that 99% of them know nothing of Cuba's history. What is inconceivable is that the majority of our rural people are now living in worse circumstances than were the Indians Columbus discovered living in the fairest land that human eyes had ever seen.

- To those who would call me a dreamer, I quote the words of [José] Martí [hero of Cuban independence]: "A true man does not seek the path where advantage lies, but rather, the path where duty lies, and this is the only practical man, whose dream of today will be the law of tomorrow, because he who has looked back on the upheavals of history and has seen civilizations going up in flames, crying out in bloody struggle, throughout the centuries, knows that the future well-being of man, without exception, lies on the side of the duty."
- I know that imprisonment will be as hard for me as it has ever been for anyone--filled with cowardly threats and wicked torture. But I do not fear prison, just as I do not fear the fury of the miserable tyrant who snuffed life out of 70 brothers of mine. Condemn me. It does not matter. History will absolve me.