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## NINETY YEARS OF FIDEL CASTRO

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Fidel Castro, around 1960. Castro, who turns ninety on Saturday, has relinquished control in Cuba, but still makes his presence

felt. PHOTOGRAPH BY GILBERTO ANTE / ROGER VIOLLET / GETTY

Fidel Castro is turning ninety on Saturday. It has been a long life, and a most eventful one. He was born on August 13, 1926, three years before the Great Crash and the start of the global depression. Feature films were still silent; commercial air travel was in its infancy; most people who moved around the globe did so by ship; many navies still used sailing ships. The telephone existed, but for instant global communication and news, the telegram was still the thing. Most cars still had to be started with a hand crank.

Calvin Coolidge was the President of the United States, which at the time had a population of a hundred and seventeen million—a third of its present size—and there were forty-eight states. The United States was not a superpower. The country had few paved roads, and less than ten per cent of the rural population had access to electricity. A Sharia-style ban on the consumption of alcohol, known as Prohibition, had been in force since 1920 (and would last until 1933). Cuba had been an independent republic for a mere twenty-four years. It was the last of Spain's colonies in the New World to be relinquished, but only after intervention by American forces, in 1898, had ended decades of bloody warfare with Cuban nationalists. Cuba had then fallen under U.S. military administration; it gained its independence in 1902, but only after it had agreed to have the so-called Platt Amendment embedded in its new constitution. This provision granted the U.S. control in perpetuity over Guantánamo Bay, as well as the right to intervene in Cuba whenever it saw fit. For decades thereafter, Cuba remained a virtual American colony, a period that Fidel has always referred to as the "*pseudo-republica*." The U.S. Marines intervened repeatedly, and the Presidents were of the pliant variety.

Fidel, and his younger brother Raúl, grew up in Birán, then, as now, a provincial backwater of eastern Cuba, an area dominated in those days by carpetbagging U.S. agribusinesses like United Fruit, which had swooped in and bought up most of the productive land in the halcyon days that followed the Spanish-American War. Fidel's father, Ángel Castro, had

emigrated from a godforsaken corner of Galicia, in Spain, as a teen-ager, and stayed, eventually becoming a kind of peasant overlord with a large and prosperous *finca* on which he harvested sugarcane with Haitian laborers that was sold to the United Fruit Company.

By the time Fidel was sent to Havana for a private Jesuit education, and from there to Havana University, to study law, he had become an ardent nationalist, a fervent admirer of the country's nineteenth-century national-independence hero, José Martí—a poet and journalist who had joined the war against the Spaniards and died heroically when he charged the enemy on horseback in his first day on the battlefield. He was an admirer of other historic men of action as well, including Robespierre, Julius Caesar, and Napoleon Bonaparte.

By the age of twenty-one, Fidel had begun to entertain political ambitions of his own, and was becoming known to Cuban authorities as a hothead with political aspirations and a penchant for the dramatic gesture. In 1947, he joined a boat expedition with other would-be revolutionaries planning to violently unseat the neighboring Dominican Republic's dictator, Rafael Trujillo. The expedition was intercepted by Cuban troops before it ever made it off a remote Cuban cay, but the next year, while Fidel was in Bogotá, Colombia, for an anti-imperialist youth congress, the popular Liberal politician Jorge Eliécer Gaitán was assassinated, sparking massive rioting; Fidel participated. Back in Cuba, in 1949, Fidel helped organize a protest in front of the U.S. Embassy after an incident in which American sailors clambered onto a statue of José Martí in a prominent plaza in Old Havana and urinated on it; Fidel got a police beating for his troubles.

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By 1953, aged twenty-seven, Fidel's ambition was no less than the seizure of power in Cuba, which by then was in the hands of an especially corrupt dictator, Fulgencio Batista. In July, he led a full-frontal assault with several fellow-armed youngsters against the Moncada army barracks in Cuba's second city of Santiago. It was an unmitigated disaster. A number of rebels died in the fighting, and dozens more were executed, some after being brutally tortured. Fidel survived, and when he was put on trial he defended himself with an impassioned piece of oratory that took him four hours to read out, in which he declared, "History will absolve me." He was convicted and sentenced to fifteen years in prison, but the proceedings solidified his position as a national figure.

Nearly two years into Fidel's imprisonment, in an ill-advised act of magnanimity, Batista signed an amnesty that freed Fidel from prison. He immediately went into exile in Mexico, where, with his brother Raúl, who

had recruited a young Argentine named Ernesto (Che) Guevara to their cause, he began planning for a guerrilla war against Batista. Within a year and a half, he and his followers had begun that war, and by New Year's Day, 1959, Batista had fled, and Fidel and his rebels had won. Then followed the big stuff of history: the U.S.-backed Bay of Pigs invasion; the [Cuban Missile Crisis](#); the creation of a one-party state presided over by the Cuban Communist Party; myriad attempts by the C.I.A. to kill or oust Fidel, and his remarkable ability to survive, and to stay in power; his support for guerrilla struggles in dozens of other countries; the great exodus of Cubans who fled the island, mostly to Florida, some for economic reasons and others in search of political freedom. The Soviet Union collapsed, but Fidel remained in power until 2006, when he fell ill and [handed the job over](#) to Raúl.

When Fidel came to power, Dwight D. Eisenhower was President. Today it is Barack Obama, an African-American, who [visited the island](#) last March at the invitation of Raúl, after the two leaders restored diplomatic relations, in 2014. Fidel was not part of the official visit, nor did he appear in public, but his presence was felt. Over the past decade, as Fidel has adapted to his role as Cuba's elder statesman, he has expressed his opinions in occasional columns published in the official Communist daily, *Granma*. In the past year and a half, since the restoration of relations with the Americans, he has made it abundantly clear that he remains deeply skeptical of American intentions, while emphasizing that he supports his younger brother's decisions. But, coming as it does in the twilight of his life, the fact that the Americans are *back*—initially in the form of a growing flood of eager tourists, but also as prospective investors—must be deeply poignant for Fidel, whose opposition to *el imperialismo yanqui* was the mainstay of his political career. What did Fidel think of the fact that American personalities of the likes of Kim Kardashian and Kanye West and Jerry Springer were touring Havana last spring, taking selfies and tweeting about what they did and saw and ate and drank?

In [his last public appearance](#), at the seventh Cuban Communist Party Congress, in April, a frail-looking Fidel gave a speech in which he did not once mention the Americans. He spoke instead of his preoccupation with the challenges confronting humankind, including the risks posed by arms proliferation, global warming, and food scarcities. And Fidel reaffirmed his faith in Communism, in the future of Cuba, and the legacy that he believed Cuba's Communists had forged. He also mentioned his looming birthday. It was a milestone, he said, that he had “never expected to reach.”

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*P.S. It was probably to be expected that Fidel Castro would not be able to stay silent on such an occasion. In [an open letter](#) published in the Cuban press earlier today, titled “El Cumpleaños” (“The Birthday”), signed and dated, with characteristic attention to detail, on August 12, 2016, at 10:34 p.m., Castro wrote with uncharacteristic wistfulness about his early childhood years spent in rural Birán. Then, as he had done at the Party Congress, he ended on a fretful note about the future of man, the arms race, and overpopulation.*

*Fidel concluded by criticizing President Obama for not having explicitly apologized for the “criminal” U.S. nuclear attacks on Hiroshima and Nagasaki during his visit to Japan a few months ago, and concluding that it was because of those attacks that he felt it “necessary to drive home the need to preserve peace so that no world power takes upon itself the right to kill millions of human beings.”*

*Meanwhile, in honor of Fidel’s birthday, a Cuban master cigar roller has completed [the world’s longest cigar](#); measuring ninety metres in length, one metre for each year of Fidel Castro’s life.*

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