

1. Mark your confusion.
2. Show evidence of a close reading.
3. Write a 1+ page reflection.

Cuba and Uncle Sam: A Brief History Source: *The Week* January 10, 2015

When did Cuba become a nation?

It won its independence from Spain at the end of the 19th century — but only because of U.S. intervention. In the 1898 Spanish-American War, the U.S. supported the Cuban rebels who had been struggling for independence for years, and the powerful U.S. military drove the Spaniards out. But the help came with a price. After a brief occupation, the U.S. recognized an independent Cuban government but maintained a naval base at Guantánamo Bay and forbade Cuba from making treaties with other countries. American dollars poured in, and American corporations snapped up sugar plantations. In the 1930s, amid political turmoil, Cuban army Sgt. Fulgencio Batista seized power in a coup with the full support of the U.S. From the 1930s to the 1950s, Cuba became a playground for wealthy Americans.

Who went to Cuba?

At that time, Havana was the swayingest city in the hemisphere, known as the Paris of the Americas. Snazzy casinos and hotels run by Meyer Lansky, Lucky Luciano, and other American mob figures dotted Havana, and Hollywood stars like Ava Gardner and Marlon Brando filled them up, dancing, drinking, and going to cabarets and horse races. The U.S. mafia and Batista essentially ran the island together. "I would say [Batista] was an equal partner with the mobsters," says T.J. English, author of *Havana Nocturne: How the Mob Owned Cuba and Then Lost It to the Revolution*. "The mafiosi — Meyer Lansky, Santo Trafficante — couldn't have done what they did without their relationship with Fulgencio Batista."

Was Batista good for Cubans?

Not for most Cubans. Ruling sometimes as president and sometimes under puppet presidents, Batista ran Cuba for more than two decades as a brutal, quasi-fascist dictator. The Cuban aristocracy flourished, but most Cubans remained desperately poor. At one point in the 1940s, opposition to his rule grew so great that he moved to Florida and set up a political base there. He soon returned to Cuba to run for office, and when it became clear he would lose the 1952 election, he staged another coup. In the late 1950s, Marxist revolutionaries led by Fidel Castro and Che Guevara had launched an armed rebellion, and they took control in 1959.

What did Castro do?

Castro ruthlessly crushed the other resistance groups, imprisoning or executing his rivals. He angered the Cuban elite by nationalizing scores of private companies, including many U.S. subsidiaries. By 1960, the U.S., alarmed at a Communist regime less than 100 miles off the Florida coast, imposed an embargo. Batista supporters and others persecuted by Castro fled en masse to Florida, where they and their descendants became a passionate political force dedicated to destroying the Communist regime. The first chance came in 1961, when the CIA mobilized some 1,400 Cuban exiles to try to overthrow Castro in the Bay of Pigs invasion; President Kennedy was publicly humiliated by the invasion's abject failure. The next year, U.S. spy planes caught the Soviet Union building silos for nuclear missiles in Cuba, sparking the blockade

known as the Cuban missile crisis. Nuclear war was narrowly averted when the Soviets turned back their ships and removed the missiles.

How did Cuba fare under Castro?

Under the Communist government's iron-fisted control, Cuba's economy withered. The country remained desperately poor and strangely frozen in time, as flashy '50s-era Chevys with tail fins rusted on the streets and colorful mansions crumbled. Cubans had no political self-determination and no freedom of speech, and few were allowed to travel abroad. But they did have excellent free education and free health care. Castro's relationship with the U.S. remained hostile: In 1980, Castro suddenly let thousands of Cubans flee to the U.S. — but he released thousands of criminals and mental patients to join them on rickety boats to Florida.

What's changed?

The older generation of Cuban exiles in the U.S. is dying off, and their children do not hold the same hard-line views on the Castro regime. Now, two out of three Americans believe the embargo should be lifted, and most Cuban-Americans do, too, since isolating the regime has not caused it to collapse. In Cuba, an ailing Fidel ceded power to his brother, Raúl Castro, in 2008 during the global economic crisis, and Raúl began some modest economic reforms. Cubans can now start businesses, lease farmland, buy and sell property, and even in some cases travel abroad. Meanwhile, the drop in oil prices means Cuba can no longer rely on ally Venezuela to prop it up with oil wealth. All these factors combined to make Cuba receptive to change when President Obama began secret negotiations to exchange prisoners and restore diplomatic relations. "We cannot keep doing the same thing and expect a different result," Obama said. But will the embargo be lifted? That's up to Congress.

Fidel, the survivor

When Fidel Castro seized power in Havana, the CIA tried to kill him — not once, but dozens of times. Some plots were planned but never carried out, including the famous exploding cigar. Another plot that never came to fruition was to take advantage of Castro's fondness for scuba diving by planting an exploding conch shell in his favorite diving spot. At one point, the CIA mulled putting a chemical in Castro's shoes that would make his beard fall out to cause him public humiliation; at another point, it researched ways to slip him LSD so he would have an acid trip in public and be discredited. The more serious plots simply failed: The CIA slipped poisoned cigars into Castro's supply during a U.N. trip, but either he didn't smoke them or they didn't work. An ex-lover hired to poison him didn't follow through. And spies ordered to poison his food never got close enough to try. Castro stepped down in 2008 because of illness, but his reign lasted 10 presidencies, from Dwight Eisenhower's to George W. Bush's.

Possible Response Questions:

- Should the embargo against Cuba be lifted? Yes? No? Explain. For help answering this question, go to: <http://cuba-embargo.procon.org/>
- Select any passage and respond to it.