

To what extent did the US push Cuba towards the Eastern Bloc and communism?

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Section A: Identification and Evaluation of Sources

This investigation will try to answer the question ‘*to what extent did the US push Cuba towards the Eastern Block and communism?*’ paying attention to the bipolar Cold War division at the time, as well as the consequences of the US’s support of Batista, relations between Cuba and the US as well as the effects of the trade embargo on Cuba.

The two sources to be evaluated are an extract from *The Memoirs of Richard Nixon*, as well as an extract from the book *Cuban Studies*.

Starting off with *The Memoirs of Richard Nixon*. With reference to its **origins** it is a memoir written by Nixon that was published in 1978. Nixon was at the time frame that this investigation deals with the Vice President of the US under the Eisenhower presidency. He also partook in a meeting with the Prime minister of Cuba, Fidel Castro, in April 1959. As for the **purpose** of the source, given that it is a memoir it was most likely written by Nixon, in part to offer his own perspective of certain events, but also in order for him, who had a very bad reputation following the Watergate Scandal, to redeem himself. The source’s **content** is very broad and does not necessarily have a specific focus on Cuba but rather on Nixon’s life, both professionally and personally. However, it does discuss at some length the impression Nixon had of Castro and the situation that he found himself and the US in. The main **value** of this source comes with its origin and the fact that it is a primary source which provides an official American perspective, as Nixon was an American politician, of Castro at the time between the Revolution and the major conflicts between Cuba and the US. However, a **limitation** of the source also comes with its origins. As he was a politician he had personal interests in portraying the US-Cuba situation in a certain light in order to give a positive impression of his time in office.

The **origins** of *Cuban Studies vol. 19* on the other hand is that it is a textbook written by Jules Benjamin, published by University of Pittsburgh Press in 1989, years after the events described took place. With reference to its **purpose**, as Jules Benjamin is a Professor who has written various history textbooks, it seems that the motive behind its publication is educational. However, at the same time a financial incentive cannot be ruled out. **Contents** **Wise** the excerpt that I used did provide multiple perspectives of how Americans would describe the US’s reaction to the Cuban Revolution but it barely even touched on any Cuban

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perspectives. Hence, one **limitation** of this source is despite bringing up perspectives, that there were not enough to give a broad image of the effects of the revolution on the people it affected the most, the Cubans. On the other hand, a major **value** of this source is that it has the benefit of hindsight, which ensured that the consequences of certain events were properly mentioned and analysed.

Section B: Investigation

To what extent did the US push Cuba towards the Eastern Bloc and communism?

The assertion that Castro and the Cuban revolution was clearly tainted by communism from its beginning is a shaky claim. Its supporters often point to the close association between Castro and his brother Raúl as well as Che Guevara, with the last two having much closer affiliations to communism and marxism than Castro himself. However, neither Vice President Nixon, in a meeting with Castro in 1959 (Nixon, R. M., 1978 p. 201-203), nor an investigation in June of 1960, over a year after the revolution, was able to conclude that Castro was a communist. The US National Intelligence Estimate stated in their report that they were “unable to answer the simple question ‘is Castro a communist or not?’”(Bureau of Intelligence, 1960). Moreover, we also know that Castro was not a member of the PSP, the Cuban communist party, but rather that there was a long history of antagonism between the two, and that the PSP only embraced Castro when his success was inevitable (Luxenberg, A. H., 1988 p. 30). Given all of this the question of what finally pushed Cuba towards the Eastern Bloc and communism, is highly relevant. Some point to US pressures whereas others point to Castro himself and the Cold War backdrop. To examine this question this essay will look at the US backing of Batista, Cuban-American relations shortly following the revolution and American sanctions on Cuba, all in the context of the Cold War. Eventually arguing that America did play a significant role in Cuba’s turn towards the Eastern Bloc but that they were not the only factor.

The US backing of Batista did contribute to anti-Americanism, which in turn laid the groundwork for a support for change in power among the Cuban population. Batista came into power in March 1952 by staging a *coup d’etat* interfering with the national elections scheduled later the same year - in which Batista’s loss was inevitable (Thomas, H., 1987, p. 171). Not only was his rise to power undemocratic, lacking the support of the majority of the Cuban population, but it was also characterised by brutality and corruption. With the US backing this regime, in part by providing it with arms to fight the guerilla warriors, many guerilla factions considered themselves not only to be against Batista but also against the US. The US did in fact provide government forces with about 16 million USD worth of sophisticated military equipment and arms as well as military training for about 500 Cuban

officers (Morley, M. H., 1982). Although the conservative school often dismisses, or downplays America's contribution to Cuban anti-Americanism, pointing for instance towards the US arms embargo on Cuba, this was too little too late to have made a substantial difference. It is true that the US put in place an arms embargo after their opinion on Batista had shifted but at that point they had already established themselves as an opposing force to the guerillas. Moreover, given the nationalist aims of the Cuban Revolution the US definitely alienated themselves with the Cuban cause (Morley M. H., 1982 p. 14).

When looking at the period shortly after the Castro regime stepped into Havana, Cuba's shift seems to be much more at Castro's command. Relations between the US and Cuba were rather cordial in the first half of 1959 and the US was quick to recognize the new provisional government. Although there was some outcry, mainly among conservatives, in Washington fearing that Castro was a communist this does not seem to reflect the common opinion. With most politicians seeming to think that Castro simply needed to be taught how to rule Cuba on US terms (Benjamin, J. R., 1989 p. 143). However, at the same time communism was beginning to infiltrate the Cuban government. The initial regime was headed by Urrutia, widely considered a moderate, and many of the less radical members of the M-26-7 (Todd, A. & Waller, S., 2011 p. 178). However, after condemnation from Castro, claiming that Urrutia was ineffectual and fevered by anti-communism, as well as criticism from sugar workers, Urrutia resigned in July and was quickly replaced by the more communist friendly Dorticós. Moreover, expressed communists started to join the cabinet replacing moderates. By August, there were barely any moderates left (Thomas, H., 1971 p. 831). Given that the US was more or less cordial in the early stages of the new government it seems that Castro, and Cuba, rather than being pushed towards communism and the Eastern Bloc chose it on his own accord.

Following bills put into place after the revolution, the measures taken, by the USA, to oppose Cuba cemented its turn towards the Eastern Bloc. The Agrarian Reform Act was announced in May 1959 and can be said to be the first instance when it became obvious that the revolution would be of major disadvantage to American interests. The main objective of the Agrarian Reform was to redistribute the land of large plantations to the rural poor in Cuba - most of this land belonging to US investors and corporations. Following this, Cuba also nationalised all American oil refineries, factories and mines in August 1960 - without adequate compensation (Todd, A. & Waller, S., 2011 p. 179). At this point US conservatives

started to speak of the communist subversion of the island and the US decided to take dramatic action (Benjamin, J. R., 1989 p. 149). Furthering the embargo on arms to Cuba it also implemented a ban on all exports except for food and medicine to the island (Katz, D., 2005 p. 27). This adversely, instead of forcing Cuba to concede to the US, pushed Cuba to trade more with the Soviet Bloc. Cuba almost immediately signed trade contracts with the Soviet Union which agreed to make good of Cuba's import gap and purchased more sugar from Cuba than what the US had done before the embargo (Todd, A. & Waller, S., 2011 p.179). Though some liberal historians suggest that the relationship between Cuba and the Eastern Bloc was simply one of convenience, stating that Castro was only a nationalist but not a communist, this does not account for his influence on the composition of the Cuban ruling elite mentioned earlier.

Given all of this information, and taking into account the Cold War backdrop, it does not seem like America was the sole reason for Cuba's turn towards the Eastern Bloc but they most certainly did have a major impact. Through its support of Batista and interference in Cuban politics the US alienated Cubans and the Cuban cause for democracy and self governance - exacerbating nationalist streams already present in Cuba and support for the revolution. Moreover, their attempts to oppose Cuba, mainly through the trade embargo, by failing to recognize the anti-American sentiments already present, had the adverse effect of Cuba turning to the USSR for support, instead of conceding to the US. Although these were significant in Cuba's shift towards the Eastern Bloc the US can not be held solely accountable for this. As Castro seemed to have intended to infiltrate the government with communists before significant US aggression this seems to be a choice unrelated to the US. Moreover, the shift from trade with the US also fulfilled the nationalist goal of decreasing US dependence.

Section C: Reflection

When making a historical investigation, the historian not only decides on an area to look into but also a more specific question, in order to make the reading manageable. When having done this the main task is to gather enough historical information as well as the different perspectives in order to be able to write an informative as well as an argumentative essay, but also so that the historian will be able to present a thesis. In order to do this, cross reading is an important method for the historian so that they are able to gather as much information as possible from as wide of an array of perspectives as possible. Issues that the historian might run into during this process include finding historical evidence that speaks against the thesis, in which case the thesis must be reconsidered, or historical evidence goes against each other. In which case more reading has to be done in order to be able to conclude what is true and what that is not.

For my own investigation much was similar but there were also many differences. I did decide on a topic and a question for my investigation but based on the information that I was able to find I had to reformulate this multiple times and rewrite because I was simply not able to do as thorough of an investigation as a well experienced historian would. Moreover, it was difficult for me to present a thesis as clear as the ones I have seen in the source material as I simply did not feel very confident, doubting my historical knowledge. However, I did do a lot of cross reading and reevaluation after every source I read which I think is at its core what a historian is supposed to do, to have a plastic mind and be willing to change opinions based on upcoming evidence.

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