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Henry Louis Taylor, Jr.

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# **AN INTRODUCTION TO THE CUBAN REVOLUTION AND ITS CURRENT CHALLENGES**

This evening, my presentation seeks to provide you with an introduction to the Cuban Revolution and the challenges the nation currently faces under the leadership of Raul Castro. Situated just 90 miles from the United States, Cuba has existed in the fantasies of Americans since the time of Thomas Jefferson. The island's location at the entrance to the Gulf of Mexico and the Caribbean Basin imbued it with enormous geopolitical importance and made it a site coveted by the United States.

The U.S. finally obtained its opportunity to seize control over the island in 1898, when it intervened in the Cuban war against Spain and militarily occupied the country for four years. By setting up the government, and thereafter making repeated armed interventions in Cuba and controlling the country's economy, the Americans thwarted the *Cubanos* dream of liberty and independence.

### **The 1959 Revolution and Cuban Independence**

It was not until the triumph of the 1959 Revolution that Cubans finally obtained the right to build their own nation. The goal of the Revolution was to solve the socioeconomic problems associated with developing nations--illiteracy, poverty, hunger, disease, homelessness, violence, premature death, and the like. *The American response to the Revolution was straightforward.* The idea of a socialist state just 90 miles away was unacceptable, and the United States sought a variety of means to *overthrow* the Cuban government. Thus, *contention* between Cuba and U.S. formed the context within which Castro built his Revolutionary nation.

Undaunted, Castro sought to develop an *egalitarian society* in which the government assumed prime responsibility for the well-being of its people through the provision of jobs and

a system of *subsidized* goods and services, along with the development of safe, hyper-stable neighborhoods overlaid with a set of organizations and institutions that transformed them into highly organized and functional social units. For example, to grapple with quality of life issues, neighborhoods abounded with service institutions, including primary schools, social service centers, food markets, gymnasiums, and cultural institutions.

Every neighborhood had a *family doctor/nurse clinic* that delivered health care services to community residents, and the poorest neighborhoods were staffed with *technical assistance groups* that worked with residents on community development issues, while *people's councils* were set up to coordinate activities and connect the community to local government.

### **Roadblocks to Development: the First Economic Crisis**

*The road to the development of a people-centered society, however, was not a yellow-brick one.* It was fraught with difficulties, and along the way, the island was hit by two severe economic crises that necessitated a *reinvention* of Cuban society. The first crisis occurred in 1989 when the Soviet Union collapsed and the second happened in 2007, when the global financial crisis hit Cuba.

Before 1989, buoyed by subsidies and favorable trade agreements, Cuba fully implemented its development model, and *the masses viewed Patria (Fatherland) as the agent that made their lives better.* "I loved my country back then," a friend said. Then the bottom fell out. The collapse of the Soviet Union plunged the nation into a severe economic crisis, and to worsen the situation, the United States intensified its embargo.

*To survive--Castro **reinvented** Cuba.* Between 1992 and 1995, to get hard currency and revive the economy, the regime resurrected international tourism and legalized the U.S. dollar,

family remittances, limited forms of small businesses, and created a dual economy with two distinct currencies--the dollar/*convertible* and the *peso*.

Concurrently, a determined Fidel Castro kept the *subsidized social structure* intact; nevertheless, these changes *distorted* Cuba's egalitarian social system and incited the rise of a consumer culture. Remittances, for example, represented a form of *unearned income*, and families receiving them had greater purchasing power than families that did not, while the *tourist industry* created jobs in the formal and informal sectors that paid more than jobs in education, medicine, and engineering. This turned the labor market upside down. Education and training were no longer the *only determinants* of success in Cuban society. Now, one's standard of living could also be determined by access to the dollar.

These developments led to the emergence of quality of life differentials among the people. Moreover, as professionals gravitated toward the higher paying jobs in tourism, fields such as education and medicine begin to suffer and a growing number of young people started to shun low-wage public sector work altogether.

*The growth of consumerism was creating a problem of structural dissatisfaction as Cuba evolved into a nation with a First World mentality trapped in a Third World body, with the latter being unable to realize the wants and desires of the former. As consumerism grew, wages stayed low, and life remained hard, people increasingly complained about the quality of their lives. Social unrest spread, individualism grew, and people begin to view immigration as their only pathway to a better life. My friend now said, "I hate my country."*

## The Age of Raul Castro: the Second Crisis

Although Cuba survived the ravages of the *Special Period*, the island still faced serious problems when Raul Castro took power in 2006. To bolster optimism and improve conditions, Raul called upon the people to debate vigorously the country's deficiencies; then he purchased hundreds of buses to improve transportation, launched an aggressive campaign to better housing conditions, intensified the privatization movement, and allowed *Cubanos* to purchase cell phones, computers, DVD players, and to visit tourist hotels.

Then, Cuba was hit by the global financial crisis in 2007, and the economic situation worsened in 2008, when three hurricanes pounded the island and did more than 10 billion in damage. By June 2009 the country was in trouble, as the global financial crisis dampened tourism profits, hurt all sectors of the Cuban economy, and eventually forced the state to cut food imports from the United States, Venezuela, China and Spain. *Hard times were revisiting Cuba.*

Raul responded to the crisis by accelerating the process of *reinventing* Cuba. First, he eliminated *wage caps*, which the Cubans used to buttress their system of egalitarianism by maintaining a fixed ratio between wages. However, the system started breaking down during the late 90s when the desire to earn more money caused workers to seek high paying jobs in tourism and the private sector, rather than stay in low-paying government jobs. By eliminating wage caps, Raul hoped to solve this problem.

Second, Raul sought to end Cuban dependency on food imports by improving productivity through the increased privatization of agriculture. Third, and by far, the riskiest part of Raul's *reinvention strategy* is the dismantling of Cuba's *subsidized social structure*.

Castro says that Cuba can no longer afford to subsidize nearly all aspects of life. Thus, people must work harder and take greater responsibility for their own economic well-being. So, the government has started to eliminate some minor subsidies, while initiating discussions about the elimination of more important ones, such as full salaries for unemployed workers, food ration cards, and the *family doctor/nurse clinics*.

While these measures seem drastic by Cuban standards, when compared to other nations, both developed and developing, they demonstrate Cuba's success in shielding the masses from the most harmful effects of the global financial crisis. For example, although food shortages exist, no one is starving in Cuba. Food is affordable, evictions are non-existent, and people who want to work have jobs.

Raul's efforts notwithstanding, *Cubanos* appear more restless than ever before. A combination of the growth of consumerism combined with low-wages, persistent hardship, rumors about proposed societal change, and the failure of government to communicate effectively with the masses have combined to frustrate many people and cause them to lose faith in *Patria* as an agent of change. Consequently, more and more people are viewing immigration as their only pathway to a better life. Yet, at the same time, there is no indication that this growing social unrest will morph into political unrest and demands for *regime change*.

The basic issue is that people want daily life to be less arduous, they want greater involvement in government decision-making, and they want discretionary income to spend on things that bring pleasure. To improve conditions, Cuba must do three things. First, it must improve the management and productivity of all sectors of its economy. Second, it must maintain the basic elements of its *subsidized social structure*, and lastly, it must continue to

extend democracy and manage the growing frustration and anger that will continually emanate from the citadel of consumer culture.

### **Conclusion**

In closing, *Cuba is a poor and very progressive country, but it is not a paradise.* Moreover, because of its limited resources and hostile relationship with the U.S., it would be surprising if Cuba did not encounter hardships, make mistakes, experience setbacks, and sometimes overreact. Still, its goal of solving the problem of Third World Development is laudable. According to the World Bank, most of the people in the developing world live in poverty, cannot read or write and needlessly suffer and die because of the lack of medical treatment. Only when viewed against this backdrop of misery and pain, can we truly appreciate Cuba's accomplishments. Thus, rather than contest the island, we should end the embargo, and collaborate with Cuba in its quest to build a people-centered society, capable of solving the problem of Third World Development.

