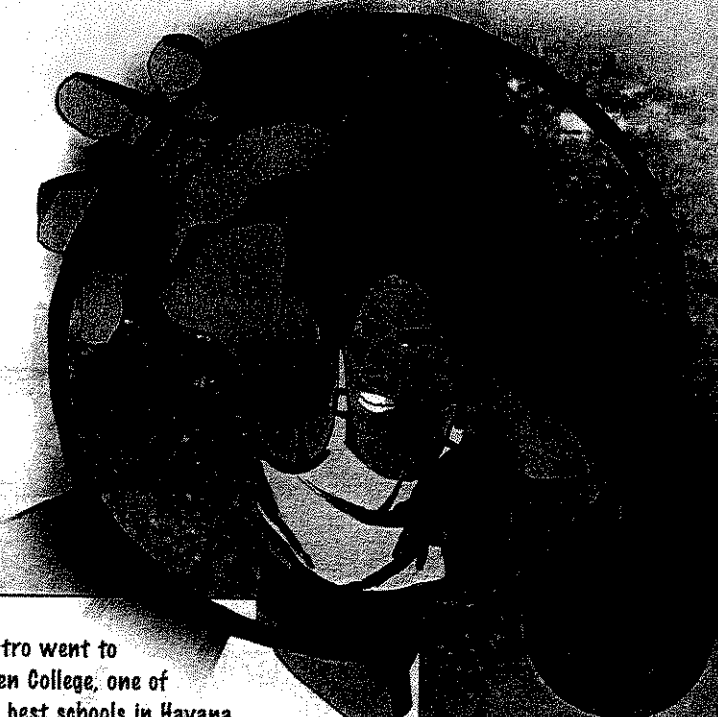





Fidel Castro

August 5, 1951. Partway through his weekly radio broadcast, Eddy Chibás, the leader of Cuba's main opposition party, the Ortodoxo, raised a gun and shot himself. His suicide was intended to alert the Cuban people to the economic plight of their country and the corruption of its leaders. It left a power vacuum in his party that a fiery young lawyer, Fidel Castro Ruz, tried to fill . . .

As a boy, Castro loved climbing mountains and hunting. He was also a natural speechmaker, with an interest in politics. He once tried to persuade the workers at his father's sugar plantation to rise up and demand better treatment. In 1947, at the age of 21, he joined a band of rebels in a failed attempt to invade the Dominican Republic and overthrow its dictator, Rafael Trujillo. Three years later he became a lawyer in Havana, where he worked to help some of the city's poorest people.



Castro went to Belen College, one of the best schools in Havana, Cuba's capital. In 1944 he was voted the best athlete in the college.



The plot to overthrow Trujillo was called off before the rebels reached the Dominican Republic. Castro swam several miles through shark-infested waters in order to evade being captured.



Fidel Castro (born 1926)

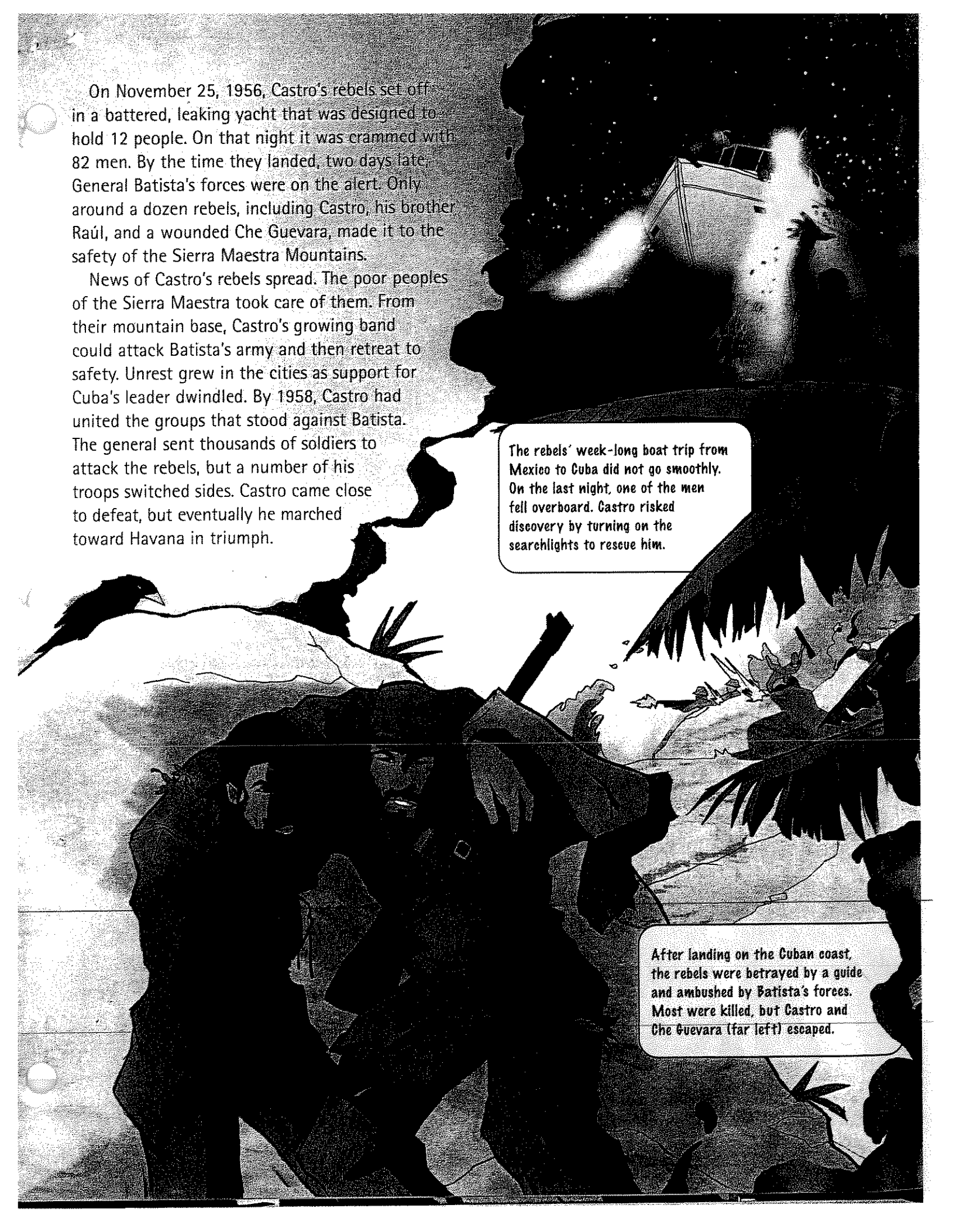
Castro planned to capture the Moncada barracks and broadcast to the Cuban people to rise up against Batista. But some of the rebel cars got lost, and the remaining 150 fighters were beaten easily.

Castro was 26 when he decided to stand for election on behalf of the Ortodoxo Party in 1952. But the election never took place because General Fulgencio Batista seized power. Supported by the U.S., he ruled Cuba as a dictator. In response, Castro assembled a band of rebels to attack the Moncada army barracks on July 26, 1953.

Weeks later, Castro sat in jail at the beginning of a 15-year sentence. The raid had been a disaster. Castro was tried and found guilty. But within two years he was set free. Castro left for Mexico to form a group called the "July 26th Movement." He recruited exiles from Cuba and Latin America, among them a young Argentinian doctor named Ernesto "Che" Guevara.

Castro and Guevara believed that the only way to topple Batista was to use guerrilla warfare and to win the support of ordinary Cubans. Castro made plans to return to Cuba just as his allies on the island started an uprising.

At his trial in 1953, Castro set out his vision of a Cuba free from poverty and the interference of foreign countries.



On November 25, 1956, Castro's rebels set off in a battered, leaking yacht that was designed to hold 12 people. On that night it was crammed with 82 men. By the time they landed, two days later, General Batista's forces were on the alert. Only around a dozen rebels, including Castro, his brother Raúl, and a wounded Che Guevara, made it to the safety of the Sierra Maestra Mountains.

News of Castro's rebels spread. The poor peoples of the Sierra Maestra took care of them. From their mountain base, Castro's growing band could attack Batista's army and then retreat to safety. Unrest grew in the cities as support for Cuba's leader dwindled. By 1958, Castro had united the groups that stood against Batista. The general sent thousands of soldiers to attack the rebels, but a number of his troops switched sides. Castro came close to defeat, but eventually he marched toward Havana in triumph.

The rebels' week-long boat trip from Mexico to Cuba did not go smoothly. On the last night, one of the men fell overboard. Castro risked discovery by turning on the searchlights to rescue him.

After landing on the Cuban coast, the rebels were betrayed by a guide and ambushed by Batista's forces. Most were killed, but Castro and Che Guevara (far left) escaped.



On a 1959 visit to the U.S., Castro met the leaders of Egypt and India, the African-American civil-rights leader Malcolm X, and U.S. Vice President Richard Nixon (above).

Batista fled on New Year's Day 1959. Many of his supporters were executed, and by February Castro was the prime minister. He was only 32 years old.

Castro knew that Cuba's relationship with the world's two superpowers, the U.S. and the Soviet Union, would be crucial. Almost immediately there was friction between Castro and the Americans.

The Cuban government took control of American oil refineries on the island. In response, the U.S. refused to buy Cuban sugar, the country's most important crop. Castro then seized American property in Cuba, and the U.S. banned almost all exports to the island.


In April 1961 around 1,500 Cuban exiles, trained by the U.S. Central Intelligence Agency (CIA), landed in the Bay of Pigs on Cuba's coast. Their aim was to overthrow Castro, but they were easily beaten, strengthening the Cuban leader's grip on power. Many Cubans now agreed with Castro's anti-American speeches, but critics of his regime were sent to prison or even executed.

The Cuban army captured more than 1,000 U.S.-backed troops in the Bay of Pigs. To release them, Castro demanded food and medical supplies worth \$53 million.




Cuba's relations with the Soviet Union were much friendlier. The Soviet leader, Nikita Khrushchev began to put missiles on Cuban soil. These could carry nuclear warheads and reach any point on the U.S. mainland. Tension between the two superpowers almost reached breaking point in October 1962. U.S. ships surrounded most of the island, and the military forces of both sides hovered on red alert. During the Cuban Missile Crisis, as it became known, the world came terrifyingly close to nuclear war.

Just in time, a solution was reached. The missiles were shipped back to the Soviet Union, and the U.S. agreed not to invade Cuba. Castro had not been involved in the deal, but a year later he was welcomed to Moscow as a hero of the Soviet Union.



A truck delivers a Soviet SS4 nuclear weapon to a missile base in Cuba, just 93 mi. (150km) from the coast of the U.S.



Between 1959 and 1962 more than 200,000 Cubans went into exile, often fleeing from the island at night in small boats. Many of them set up a powerful anti-Castro movement in the U.S. Another 125,000 Cubans fled in 1980.

From the 1960s Castro sent soldiers and support to communist rebel forces in Angola (below), Ghana, Nicaragua, and Bolivia.

Castro often gave fiery speeches alongside his brother. In 1976 a new constitution made Castro president.

With the help of the Soviet Union, Castro began to change Cuba's way of life in the 1960s. He built a welfare system to provide free education and healthcare. Today, 97 percent of Cuban adults can read and write, and the average life expectancy is 77, equal to the U.S. But these policies put a great strain on the Cuban economy, which reached breaking point when the Soviet Union collapsed in 1991. Soviet aid, worth \$6 billion per year, was canceled, and Cuba entered a long economic crisis known as the Special Period in Peacetime, with shortages of food and fuel.

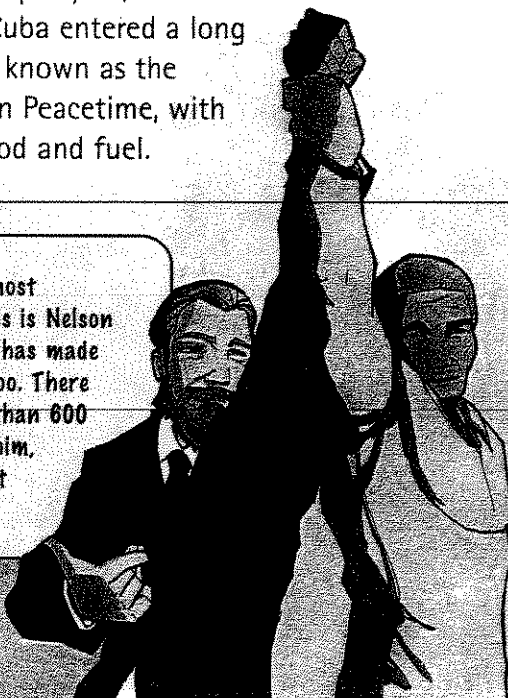
With his health failing, Castro handed power to his brother Raúl in 2008. Around the world he is both loved and hated. He improved conditions for Cuba's poor, but his critics say that he banned democratic elections and sent thousands of people to prison just because they disagreed with him.

For Cuba, it is a time of uncertainty. Fidel Castro held complete power for almost half a century—so long that almost three fourths of Cuban people have known no other leader until now.

One of Castro's most influential friends is Nelson Mandela. But he has made deadly enemies too. There have been more than 600 attempts to kill him, many of them set up by the CIA.

LIFE LINK

Castro has been an inspiration to many people, including Nelson Mandela. Cuba was one of the first countries that Mandela visited after his release from prison. Castro went to South Africa in 1998, when Mandela presented him with the Order of Good Hope, South Africa's highest award for foreigners.



Fidel Castro Discussion Questions

-What qualities did Fidel Castro possess as a young child that reflect future leadership skills?

-What profession did Fidel Castro enter in 1950? What type of characteristics and qualities are needed in this type of profession?

-How did Castro respond to the seizing of Cuban power by Batista?

-What did Castro do upon being released from prison?

-Was Castro successful in achieving his goals? Why/why not?

-Describe the relationship between Cuba and the United States in the early 1960's.

-How did Cuba's relationship with the Soviet Union impact the United States?

-Describe the legacy of Castro. Why do you think he was able to influence leaders such as Nelson Mandela?



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