

History Will Absolve Me

Promise and Record of Fidel Castro

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Fidel. Castro's promise to his people was sweeping, encompassing agriculture, industry, employment, housing, education and health.

Has he kept his word?

This factual study of his record shows huge achievements in education, considerable increase in agricultural production and improvements in housing and elsewhere in the economy.

Even where he has no more than held the line, Castro's achievement has not been inconsiderable. The revolution has not brought on an economic collapse.

The Cuban economy has emerged from the inevitable turmoil unscathed and, at points, strengthened.—

"THE problems concerning the land, the problem of industrialization, the problem of housing, the problem of unemployment, the problem of education and the problem of the health of the people: these are the six problems we would take immediate steps to resolve. CONDEMN ME, I DON'T CARE: HISTORY WILL ABSOLVE ME." So spoke Fidel Castro as he announced his revolution.

"Perhaps this exposition appears cold and theoretical if one does not know the shocking and tragic conditions of the country with regard to these six problems . . .

"85% of the small farmers of Cuba pay rent and live under the constant threat of being dispossessed of the land they cultivate. More than half the best land cultivated belongs to foreigners. In Oriente, the largest province, the lands of the United Fruit Company and the West Indian Company join the north coast to the southern one. There are two hundred thousand peasant families who do not have a single acre of land to cultivate to provide food for their starving children. On the other hand, nearly three hundred thousand caballerias (10 million acres) of productive land owned by powerful interests remain uncultivated. Cuba is primarily an agricultural country. Her population is largely rural.

"With the exception of a few food, lumber and textile industries Cuba continues to be a producer of raw materials. We export sugar to import candy; we export hides to import shoes; we export iron to import plows. Everybody agrees that the need to industrialize the country is urgent, that we need steel in

industries, paper and chemical industries; that we must improve cattle and grain products, the technique of processing our food industry . . . that we need merchant ships. But the capitalists insist that the workers remain under the Claudian yoke; the State folds its arms and industrialization can wait for the Greek calends.

"Just as serious is the housing problem. There are two hundred thousand huts and hovels in Cuba; four hundred thousand families in the country and in cities live cramped in barracks and tenements without even the minimum sanitary requirements; two million two hundred thousand of urban population pay rents which absorb between one fifth and one third of their income; and two million eight hundred thousand of our rural and suburban population lack electricity. (Cuban population: 6½ million.) The utilities monopoly is no better; they extend line as far as it is profitable and beyond that point, they don't care if the people have to live in darkness for the rest of their lives.

"Our educational system is perfectly compatible with the rest of our national situation. Where the *guajiro* is not the owner of his land, what need is there for agricultural schools? Where there are no industries, what need is there for technical or industrial schools? Everything falls within the same absurd logic: there is neither one thing nor the other. In any European country there are more than 200 technical and industrial arts schools; in Cuba there are only six such schools, and the boys graduate without having anywhere to use their skills. The little

rural schools are attended only by half the school-age children — barefoot, half-naked, and undernourished — and frequently the teacher must buy necessary materials from his own salary. Is this the way to make a nation great?"

"Only death can liberate one from so much misery. In this however, early death the state is most helpful. 90% of rural children are consumed by parasites which filter through their bare feet from the earth. Society is moved to compassion upon hearing of the kidnapping or murder of one child, but they are criminally indifferent to the mass murder of so many thousands of children who die every year from lack of facilities, agonizing with pain. When the head of a family works only four months a year, with what can he purchase clothing and medicine for his children? They will grow up with rickets, with not a single good tooth in their mouths by the time they reach thirty: they will have heard ten million speeches and will finally die of misery and deception."

These were the conditions of Cuba before the devolution, as described in Castro's own words, further on in the same document. Fidel promised in brief the reforms the Revolution was intended to make. Let us look at these promises and, where possible, record next to them the action the Revolution has already taken in its first two (actually less) years.

AGRICULTURE.

Promise

"After settling the one hundred thousand small farmers as owners on land which they previously rented a

revolutionary government would proceed immediately to settle the land problem. First, as the Constitution orders we would *establish the maximum amount of land* to be held by each type of agricultural enterprise and would acquire the excess acres by: *expropriation*, recovery of the lands stolen from the state, improvement of swamplands, planting large nurseries and reserving zones for *reforestation*. Secondly, we would *distribute the remaining land* to peasant families with priority given to the larger ones and would *promote agricultural cooperatives* with a single technical, professional direction in farming and cattle raising. Finally We would provide resources, equipment, protection and useful guidance to the peasants.

Action

The Land Reform Law of May 1959 established a limit of 1,000 acres (more than in Puerto Rico) of land for any owner (except 3,000 acres on livestock farms), deed expropriated the remainder, promising to pay with the twenty year bonds. The land was redistributed to those who farm it giving sixty-six free and a purchase option up to 160 acres in some places and establishing cooperatives elsewhere. Six hundred sugar coops and 1,000 other coops have been established, many of the latter on previously unused land. The extent of development of new land by INRA is indicated in Table I. All coops will grow diversified crops.

Earnings for ordinary agricultural work are about \$3.00 a day. Accountants receive \$100 a month and coop administration \$183 a month. Coop profits, when they begin to occur, will be distributed among members. In sugar coops, for the first five years, 80% of earnings are to be used to finance housing and amortization.

Agricultural credit and technical advice have been widely extended in the isolated mountain areas which previously were without it. Individual peasants can freely borrow up to 80% of the estimated market value of their future crop.

Poultry and dairy farms are rising all over the island, all with modern equipment.

"People's Stores" have been established in the rural areas, and they have significantly lowered prices of food in the countryside.

As a result, food imports have already declined. For the first time Cuba has begun to export rather than to import tomatoes. Cuba with six million people accounted for over 30% of 200 million Latin Americans' food imports from the United States.

Reforestation has replaced the cuttings of the last twenty years with saplings. The Isle of Pines is being widely planted with the Eucalyptus for a new lumber industry.

EDUCATION

Promise

"The revolutionary government would undertake the *integral reform of the educational system* Do

Table I : I N R A Development of New Lands

As on April 30, 1960

(acres)

Main crops	Acres
Rice	222,000*
Peanuts	57,000
Corn	55,000
Cotton	37,000
	(none before)
Millet	24,000
Soyabeans	2,000
Total	400,000
Other crops	66,000
Total Crops	466,000

Sources: A. Nunez Jimenez, *Un, Ano de Liberation Agraria*, Havana. May 17, 1960, p. 41.

* Doubles pre-revolutionary acreage. Source: Ministry of Agriculture unpublished data.

not forget the words of the Apostol (Cuban liberator, Jose Marti, died in war of 1895) 'A serious error is being made in Latin America: where the inhabitants depend almost exclusively on the products of the soil for their livelihood, the education stress, contradictorily, is on urban rather than farm life. The happiest people are the ones whose children are well-educated and instructed in philosophy: whose sentiments are directed into noble channels.' A well-educated people will always be strong and free."

Action

The Revolution has designated 1961 as its "Year of Education." Yet in 1959 it already had done the job indicated below. Next year it is planned to eliminate illiteracy (30%) through a "Those who know-teach, those who don't learn" campaign. Also secondary, technical, and adult education are now receiving major attention.

To get the teachers for this mammoth effort, thousands of high-school graduates are receiving six months' intensive training courses, unemployed teachers have gotten jobs, and specialties (English, music mammal training) teachers are recruited into general teaching. Tables II, III and IV indicate the substantial progress in education.

INDUSTRIALIZATION

Promise

"A revolutionary government with the backing of the people and the respect of the nation, would *proceed immediately to industrialize the country*, mobilizing all inactive capital"

Table II : Class Rooms (Primary School)

	Dec 1958	Sept 1960	Increase	
			No.	%
Oriente Province	4,4144	9,242	5,098	123
Cuba	21,173	32,034	10,861	52

Source: Ministry of Education, unpublished.

Table III : Students (Kindergarten and Grades 1-8)

	1953-54	1958-59	1959-60 b	1958-59/59-60	
				Increase	%
			(in 1000's)		
Oriente	164	166a	365	199	120
Urban	94	93a	138	45	46
Rural	70	73a	227	154	211
Cuba	655	636	1041	405	64
Urban	439	423	567	144	26
Rural	216	213	474	261	122

Source: Ministry of Education, unpublished and compiled by the author.

a 1956-57. 1958-59 not available.

b The current or second year of the Revolution not available yet.

Action

Many new small factories and industrial shops have been established. In Oriente Province alone 1,200 workers have been employed in new INRA financed small shoe factories. Table V shows INRA investment in new industry.

Arrangements are being made to increase steel production rapidly.

A contract has been signed with Czechoslovakia for eight new factories, including one for the production of stoves and refrigerators, to be installed in 1960-61.

A recent news release announces an agreement with the Soviet Union to install one hundred new factories, thirty of them in 1961. (Source: *Detriot Free Press*, Dec 27, 1960.)

Tables VI and VII show the increase in consumption of electricity and other articles.

**HOUSING
Promise**

"A revolutionary government would solve the housing problem by *cutting all rents in half* . . . by tearing down hovels and replacing them with modern multiple-dwelling buildings; and by *financing housing* all over the island on a scale heretofore unheard of; with the criterion that, just as each rural family should possess its own tract of land, each city family should own its home or apartment."

**Table V : I N R A Investment in
New Industry 1960***(in million dollars)*

Food Processing	5.622
Textile	3.800
Metal Products	6.337
Sugar Cane Products	.188
Mining	.616
Tobacco	2.420
Total	\$18,983

Source: A. Nunez Jimenez, *Un Ano de Liberacion Agraria*, Havana, May 17, 1960, p. 65.

Table VI : Electricity Consumption

	Jan.-Dec.	Jan.-July
	(In million kWh)	
1935	10	—
1956	1.1	—
1957	13	.720
1958	14	.800
1959	1.6	.880
1960	—	.998

Source : Cuba, *Economica y Financera*,

Sept. 1959, Aug.-Oct., 1960, p.4.

Note: Includes only Compania Cthana de Electricidad. Thi9 did account for about 90% of total. But the agricultural and industrial development of the last two years has resulted in the establishment of many small temporary diesel powered electric turbines. Therefore, the above probably represents a smaller percentage of total and a smaller increase than actual.

Table IV : First and Second Grade Students in 1959-60*(in 1000's)*

	2nd Grade	1st Grade	Difference	
			Increase	x Fold
Oriente	55	211	156	4x
Urban	23	51	28	2x
Rural	32	160	128	5x
Cuba	161	450	289	3x
Urban	86	164	78	2x
Rural	76	286	210	4x

Explanation: Data are for the first year of the Revolution.

Therefore, 2nd grade students represent 1st grade students of the last pre-revolutionary year minus dropouts. Last column represents the x fold increase in one year.

Source: Ministry of Education, unpublished, compiled by the author.

Table VII : Consumption of Other Articles

	1957	1958	1959
Cement (barrels)	3,916,000	4,271,000	3,973,000
Beer (million liters)	129	123	156
Gasoline consumption (million gallons)	228	241	279
Charcoal (1000 sacks)	873	754	1,106

Source: Cuba, *Economica y Financera*. June 1960, p. 6.

Action

Immediately, in 1959 all rents were cut by 50%. In 1960 the Urban Reform Law made occupants owners of their dwellings subject to amortization payments (equal to the new rents) for a period of 5 to 20 years, depending on the age of the building. Payments on all new public housing range from \$15 to \$35 a month and are not to exceed 5% to 10% of the owner's income.

Before the Revolution housing construction was private and pre-eminently in high-cost to luxury class buildings.

Table VIII: Private Construction*(square meters of floor space)*

		Cost per m ²
1957	58 million	\$ 55
1958	61 million	54
1959	20 million	48

Source : Cuba, *Economica y Financera* March 1960

80% of all private construction was concentrated in Havana alone. Table VIII indicates not only the sharp drop in 1959 but also the decline in cost, i e luxuriousness.

Since the Revolution, much public low cost housing has been initiated and built. Most is concrete, the remainder brick. Projects are 2 to 1 bedroom one-family houses with all utilities and some apartment houses. Projects include schools and other community service buildings. (See table IX).'

Table IX : Public Homing 1960

INAV (Nat. Inst. of Savings and Housing)

10,000 units

INRA — Viviendas Campesi

(Nat. Inst. of Agrarian Reform-Peasant

Housing) 10,000 units

Obras Publicas (Public Works)

not known — may be the name

Other agencies

not known

Source: Public Relations Releases

The National Lottery has been transferred to INAV and transformed into a savings bond institution all of whose net receipts are used to finance public housing. Those who do not win at the weekly drawing may hold their bond-tickets three to six years to receive 50% to 110% of their purchase price, plus 3% annually thereafter. Each week about:

\$ 660,000 of bond tickets are sold
 \$ 200,000 are used for 1 \$100,000 prize and 100 \$ 1,000 prizes
 \$ 47,000 are used for administrative costs
 \$ 413,000 are used to finance INAV's public housing

UNEMPLOYMENT AND HEALTH
Promise

With these projects and reforms, the problem of unemployment would automatically disappear and the work to improve public health and to fight against disease would be made much less difficult.

Action

Word of mouth figures from people in the government are:

Unemployed in 1958	600,000
1960	400,000
"Plan" for 1963	eliminated

Hospitals have been built. Clinics have been established in rural areas and small towns. Public health centers have been renovated, better equipped, and better staffed. Concentrated campaigns have been initiated with DDT against malaria, against amoebic dysentery and hook-worm by building latrines and sanitizing the rural water supply.

GENERAL WELFARE

Money, Wages, and Prices

Money in circulation has increased sharply.

Money in Circulation
 (million pesos)

July 1958	395
July 1959	415
July 1960	720

Source: Cuba, *Economica y Financera*, Aug.-Oct. 1960, p. 9.

Wages and Salary Payments have risen

Wages and salaries
 Including Agricultural Labor
 (million pesos)

	Jan-Dec	Jan-Aug
1956	667	—
1957	725	485
1958	723	495
1959	920	577
1960	—	711

Source: Cuba, *Economica y Financera*, Aug.-Oct. 1960, p. 4

Prices have moved variously as indicated in table N

This, then is a partial record of the Revolution. Statistics are scarce. The Central Planning Commission is only just establishing a Central Statistical Bureau and Batista's Government was never anxious to collect or publish too many statistics.

Table X : Price Movements

Urban Rents	down 50% (Urban Reform Law)
Rural Food Prices	down 50% - 30% on many staples (People's Stores)
Medicine Prices	down (November 1960, decree)
Food Price Index	up 1% (Food buying power of the Peso-official index)
Prices of Imports	up
Liquor Prices	up (sumptuary tax)
Other Factors:	
Taxes	up (Income tax New Industrialization "Contribution" - 4% Retirement Fund - 5% Maternity 1%)
Scarcities	Reports of no, reports of yes. Author's observation - no, except for imported goods.

Moreover, at the time of my study less than two years, that is only one calendar year, had passed since the January 1, 1959 installation of the Revolutionary Government. Accordingly, comprehensive data, and particularly statistics which permit comparison of the accomplishments and/or failures of the Revolution with the times past, are hard to come by. But even these few data tell a highly significant story: The Revolution has not, in its initial years, brought on an economic collapse. Far from it, the record ranges from huge achievements in education.

to increases in agricultural production and housing, to holding the line or improvements elsewhere in the economy. But even holding the line alone would be a remarkable and significant achievement for the Cuban Revolution: Probably no other far-reaching revolution, certainly not the Russian one, has ever managed to bring the economy unscathed, never mind strengthened, through the inevitable turmoil of the early period of (literally) re-volution. The record speaks for itself. Fidel Castro has kept his promise. History has already absolved him.

PERSPECTIVE

An Economic Review

A new economic review in the name of *Perspective* makes its first appearance in January 1961. *Perspective* offers a forum for the exchange and development of ideas regarding the real significance of the economic growth and changes taking place in the country, seen from the angle of vision of socialism.

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The second number will include articles by Charles Bettelheim, Gyanchand, Ashok Mitra, Ajit Dasgupta, Amarendraprasad Mitra, A. Rudra, Ajit Roy and S. Naqvi. Others who will collaborate with the review include K. N. Raj, Amartya Kumar Sen, H. K. Mazumdar, Vir Bahadur Singh, K. Naqvi, Sulekh Chandra Gupta and J. Rudolph.

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