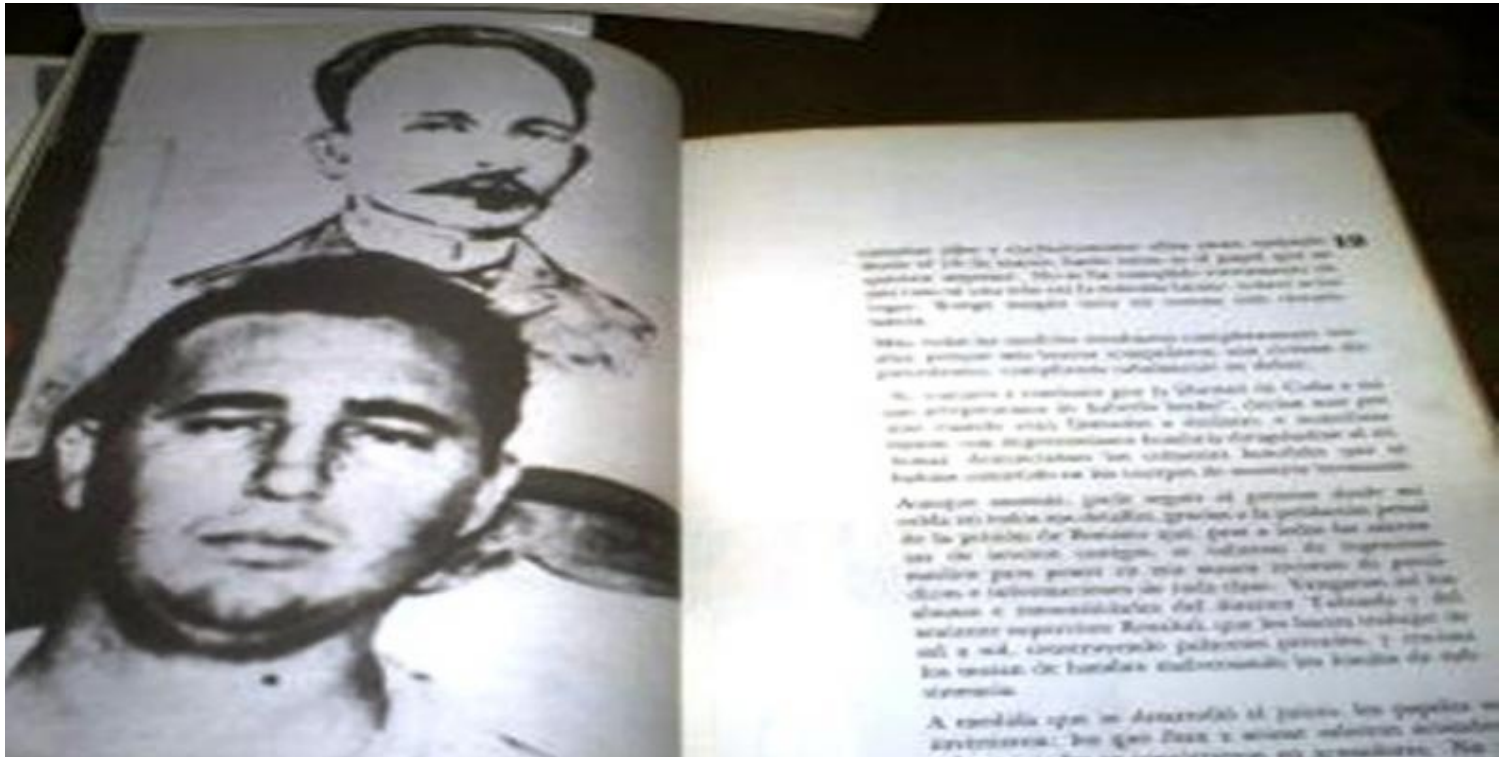




## Notes on the Revolution / Column 20



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History Will Absolve Me: The manifesto and program of the Cuban Revolution, 1954-1960

By Charles McKelvey

On Tuesday, Cuba commemorated October 16, 1953, when the young lawyer Fidel Castro, on trial for his leadership of the July 26, 1953 attack on the Moncada military barracks in Santiago de Cuba, delivered an address of self-defense before the Court. The extraordinary discourse, from which the press was excluded, was reconstructed by Fidel in prison, and it was printed as a pamphlet and distributed clandestinely in 1954. The title of the address is taken from its final sentence. Fidel's concluding declaration that "history will resolve me" reflected his deep conviction that justice will prevail in human history.

In a declaration released three days earlier, on July 23, Fidel had called upon the people to continue the unfinished revolution that was proclaimed in 1868 and that has evolved through various stages, which now was entering "a new period of war." The intention of the July 26 assault was to launch the new period of war, by seizing weapons for the opening of a guerrilla struggle in the mountains. The assault failed, and 70 of the 126 attackers were killed, 95% of them murdered after capture by Batista's soldiers in a four-day period following the assault.



In the October 16, 1953 address to the court, Fidel described the organization and the carrying out of the assault on Moncada, its intentions, the reasons for its failure, and his capture. He condemned the soldiers who had tortured and murdered captured revolutionaries, maintaining that they had degraded the uniform of the army. He harshly criticized the career of Batista and his lies to the people the day after the attack. He praised the courage and heroism of the young insurrectionists who had carried out the assault.

In addition, Fidel argued that the armed attack on the Moncada barracks was legal. He maintained that in early 1952, although the people were not satisfied with government officials, they had the power to elect new officials, and they were in the process of doing so. They were engaged actively and enthusiastically in public debates in anticipation of elections. The Batista coup d'état of March 10, 1952 ended this process. Fidel noted that the Batista dictatorship emitted the "Constitutional Statutes" as a replacement of the 1940 Constitution, but the Statutes are neither valid nor constitutional. The assault on the Moncada barracks, he maintained, was an attempt "to overthrow an illegal regime and to restore the legitimate Constitution."

In the October 16 address, Fidel maintained that the 1940 Constitution remains in force, including Article 40, which affirms the right of insurrection against tyranny. And the Batista regime, he maintained, is tyrannical. It used tanks and soldiers to take over the Presidential Palace, the national treasury, and other governmental offices. As soon as it took power, the regime engaged in repression against popular organizations, cultural institutions, and journalists, including arbitrary arrests, beatings, torture, and murder. Furthermore, the regime placed in top positions the most corrupt members of the traditional political parties. The previous regime was guilty of plunder of the public treasury and disrespect for human life, but the Batista regime increased pillage and disrespect for human life many times over.

Fidel proceeded to remind the Court that the right of the people to revolt against tyranny was recognized by the theocratic monarchies of Ancient China, the city-states of Greece, Republican Rome, and the philosophers of Ancient India. Various well-known theologians and philosophers of the Middle Ages and early modern Europe confirmed the right of the people to violently overthrow a tyrant. He reminded the court that the right of the people to overthrow despotic kings was the foundation of the English Revolution of 1688, the American Revolution of 1775, the French Revolution of 1789, the U.S. Declaration of Independence, the French Declaration of the Rights of Man, and various philosophers of the era.

Fidel expressed the patriotism of the young people who assaulted the Moncada garrison. "We are Cubans and to be Cuban implies a duty, not to fulfill that duty is a crime; it is treason. We are proud of the history of our country, [which] we learned in school. . . . We were taught from an early age to venerate the glorious example of our heroes and martyrs. . . . We were taught to cherish and defend the beloved flag of the single star, and to sing every afternoon our National Anthem, whose verses say that to live in chains is to live submerged in an affront and dishonor, and to die for the country is to live. All this we learned and will never forget."

Fidel maintained that if the assault had succeeded, the revolutionaries would have had the support of the people. Not the comfortable sectors of the nation, but "the vast unredeemed masses, to whom all make promises and who are deceived and betrayed by all; who yearn for a better, more dignified and more just nation; who are moved by ancestral aspirations of justice, having suffered injustice and mockery generation after generation; and who long for significant and sound transformations in all aspects of life, and who, to attain them, are ready to give even the very last breath of their lives, when they believe in something or in someone, and above all when they believe sufficiently in themselves."



Fidel described the sectors that comprise the people: agricultural workers who work only four months of the year and who live in miserable shacks; industrial workers without adequate salary, pension, or housing; tenant farmers, working on land that is not theirs; the unemployed; teachers and professors who are poorly paid; small businessmen who are weighed down by debt and plagued by graft imposed by corrupt public officials; and young professionals in health, education, engineering, law, and journalism, who find that their recently attained degrees do not enable them to find work.

Fidel maintained that if the Moncada barracks had been successfully taken, five revolutionary laws would have been broadcast immediately by radio, including the re-establishment of the Constitution of 1940, with the executive, legislative, and judicial functions assumed by the revolutionary government, in order that the government would be able to implement the popular will and true justice, until these governmental structures, presently distorted by dictatorship and corruption, can be restored legitimately. Including, secondly, the ceding of land to tenant farmers, sharecroppers, and squatters who occupy parcels of land of less than 67 hectares, with compensation for the former owners. Including, thirdly, the granting of the right of workers and employees in commercial and industrial enterprises to 30% of the profits. And including the confiscation of property that was fraudulently obtained as a result of government corruption. Fidel explained that these revolutionary laws would have been followed by other laws, based on further study, which would have included agrarian reform; the integral reform of education; and the nationalization of (US-owned) electric and telephone monopolies and the return to the people of the excessive money that these monopolies have collected through their high rates.

Fidel explained the structural roots of the social problems of Cuba. Cuba is an agricultural country, an exporter of raw materials and an importer of manufactured goods; it has limited industrial capacity. More than half of the productive land is foreign-owned. Eighty-five percent of small farmers pay rent, and many peasant families do not have land to use for the production of food for their families. These economic conditions generate inadequate housing, low levels of education, and high levels of unemployment. The solution to these problems, Fidel maintained, cannot be based in strategies that protect the interests of the economic and financial elite. A revolutionary government would ignore such interests and would act decisively in defense of the needs of the people. It would mobilize capital to develop industry; distribute land to peasants; stimulate the development of agricultural cooperatives; establish limits to the amount of land that can be owned by an agricultural enterprise, expropriating the excess acreage; reduce rents; and expand and reform the educational system.

Although the attack on the Moncada barracks failed to attain its strategic military objective, it immediately attained political importance. Moncada was a heroic act that called the people, through the force of its example, to a new stage of struggle that would advance forward through personal courage and sacrifice. The Cuban poet and essayist Cintio Vitier expressed its impact, when he wrote that the assault on Moncada unleashed an “enormous, ripping and creative new force that would project itself over the future of Cuba in an irresistible form.”

History Will Absolve Me was both a popular manifesto and political platform, brought into being by a galvanizing and heroic action. It was an effective manifesto that describes the tyrannical government and the social evils that the people face, and that succinctly explains the economic structures that are the source of the nation's maladies. In addition, it proposes a strategy for the taking of power, and it defends that strategy in the name of patriotism and by invoking Western political philosophy. It promises a revolutionary government that will defend the rights and needs of the people.

It also was a politically intelligent manifesto that did not copy and apply the Marxist doctrine of



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a working-class vanguard. Instead, it adapted the insights of Marxism-Leninism to the neocolonial situation of Cuba, where not only industrial workers, but also agricultural workers, tenant farmers, professionals, and small businesspersons are victims of exploitation and oppression. The manifesto called all sectors of the people to patriotic revolutionary action in defense of the nation and its 1940 Constitution, which had been developed as a result of the force of the popular movement of that time.

At the same time, History Will Absolve Me is a political platform that proposes concrete steps and measures. And it is a politically intelligent platform: it proposes measures that touch upon matters that are sources of frustration and anger of the people, such as the extensive ownership of land by U.S. companies, the exorbitant electricity and telephone rates of U.S. monopolies, and the enrichment of government officials through corruption.

In studying History Will Absolve Me and its impact, we become aware of the characteristics that enabled the Cuban Revolution to take political power and to act decisively in defense of the people. The Moncada assault was not a politically pointless expression of frustration and anger by 126 youth. It was the bold initiation of a strategy for the taking of political power, led by a person with an exceptional capacity to name the social evils that the people confronted, to explain the sources of such social evils in understandable terms, to formulate measures that could be taken by a government that defends needs of the people rather than the interests of the elite, to conceive of a strategy for the taking of political power, and to lead courageous persons in the implementation of the strategy. When this phenomenon began to express itself, the historic thirst of the people for justice and for a dignified nation was awakened, and the people came to identify with and trust the leadership formed by the exceptional leader and his key aids.

We of the societies of the North have the duty to study the processes through which popular socialist revolutions have come to power in the Third World plus China, in order to arrive to the insights necessary for the taking of political power by the peoples in our own nations.

This is Charles McKelvey, reflecting on the unfolding global popular socialist revolution forged by our peoples in defense of humanity.

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