

ALMEIDA THEATRE

'History Will Absolve Me' by Fidel Castro

The Speech

- Watch the speech delivered by Iwan Rheon

<https://www.speech.almeida.co.uk/speech/history-will-absolve-me>

Duration: 10 minutes 46 seconds

- Discuss students' initial responses.

Context

Fidel Castro was the political leader of Cuba from 1959 – 2008. He gained power after leading a successful communist revolution between 1956 and 1959. An earlier attempt at revolution in 1953 failed and led to his arrest and subsequent imprisonment until he was released in 1955 as part of a political amnesty. This speech was made at his trial in 1953.

- Ask students to research how the creation of Cuba as a communist state changed the country's relationship with the USA.

Content

Leaders and speakers throughout time have called upon the masses to overthrow governments or totalitarian regimes.

- Ask students to use the chart on the next page to reflect on the ways in which Castro attempts to incense the crowd and stir their emotions.
- Rank the degree of emotional intensity for each section of the speech – 1 being low and 10 being high.

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Section	Ranking	Explain Why
Appeals to feelings of love and the relationship between the heart and the voice.		
Contrasts his mountain shack with tyranny and dictatorship.		
Outlines the violent sequence of events in which the revolutionaries clashed with the dictatorship.		
Gives an account of horrific torture and massacre that served as punishment for the resistance. Note the visceral images.		
Hones in on the army, their lack of humanity and monstrous traits.		
Reflects on the nature of manhood.		
Gives an overview of past revolutions claiming that Cuba is the final link in the chain to be broken.		
Declares national pride and what it means to be Cuban.		
Calls for action – in metaphoric rather than concrete terms.		
States resolution to be imprisoned as an act of solidarity.		

Language and Structure

- Ask students to read a copy of the speech. **A transcript is included at the end of this document.**
- The speech includes a great deal of violent imagery. Ask students to replace these images with softer or more neutral images and assess the extent to which it loses its impact.

Discussion

- Ask students to debate with a partner the following questions:
 - The extent to which highly emotional language and imagery is effective or counter-effective?
 - Is reason or emotion more important in oratory?
 - Would you rather a leader address their listeners calmly or passionately?

Useful Links

Websites

[Fidel Castro](#) – Obituary in the Guardian

[A Hero or a Tyrant?](#) – An article exploring Castro's legacy

[The Cuban Revolution](#) – Article from the Cold War Museum website

[Post-Revolution Timeline](#) – A timeline exploring significant events following the revolution

Films

[Comandante](#) – Documentary by Oliver Stone

[Looking for Fidel](#) – Follow up to Comandante by Oliver Stone

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HISTORY WILL ABSOLVE ME

Fidel Castro | 16 October 1953

This is an edited version of the four-hour speech given by Fidel Castro in his own defence in court after he led an attack against a military barracks, widely accepted to be the beginning of the Cuban Revolution.

If there is in your hearts a vestige of love for your country, love for humanity, love for justice, listen carefully.

I know that I will be silenced for many years; I know that the regime will try to suppress the truth by all possible means; I know that there will be a conspiracy to bury me in oblivion. But my voice will not be stilled - it will rise from my breast even when I feel most alone, and my heart will give it all the fire that callous cowards deny it.

From a shack in the mountains I listened to the dictator's voice on the air.

While the long cherished hopes of freeing our people lay in ruins about us, we heard those crushed hopes gloated over by a tyrant more vicious, more arrogant than ever.

The endless stream of lies and slanders that poured forth in his crude, odious, repulsive language, may only be compared to the endless stream of clean young blood which had flowed since the previous night.

Already a circle of more than a thousand men, armed with weapons more powerful than ours and with orders to bring in our bodies, was closing in around us. Moncada Barracks were turned into a workshop of torture and death.

Some shameful individuals turned their uniforms into butchers' aprons. The walls were splattered with blood. The bullets embedded in the walls were encrusted with singed bits of skin, brains and human hair, the grisly reminders of rifle shots fired full in the face.

The grass around the barracks was dark and sticky with human blood. The criminal hands that are guiding the destiny of Cuba had written for the prisoners at the entrance of that den of death the very inscription of Hell: 'Forsake all hope.'

In every society there are men of base instincts. The sadists, the brutes, go about in the guise of human beings, but they are monsters, only more or less restrained by discipline and social habit. If they are offered a drink from a river of blood, they will not be satisfied until they drink the river dry.

Throughout their torturing of our comrades, the Army offered them the chance to save their lives by betraying their ideology. When they indignantly rejected that proposition, the Army continued with its horrible tortures. They crushed their testicles and they tore out their eyes. But no one yielded. No complaint was heard nor a favour asked. Even when they had been deprived of their virile organs, our men were still a thousand times more men than all their tormentors together.

Photographs, which do not lie, show the bodies torn to pieces. For my dead comrades, I claim no vengeance. Since their lives were priceless, the murderers could not pay for them, even with their own lives. It is not by blood that we may redeem the lives of those who died for their country. The happiness of their people is the only tribute worthy of them.

What is more, my comrades are neither dead nor forgotten; they live today, more than ever, and their murderers will view with dismay the victorious spirit of their ideas rise from their corpses.

I am a humble citizen who one day demanded in vain that the Courts punish the power-hungry men who had violated the law and torn our institutions to shreds. The right of rebellion against tyranny, has been recognised from

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the most ancient times to the present day by men of all creeds, ideas and doctrines. The city states of Greece and Rome not only admitted, but defended the meting out of violent death to tyrants.

In the Middle Ages, Martin Luther proclaimed that when a government degenerates into a tyranny that violates the laws, its subjects are released from their obligations to obey. It is well known that in England during the 17th century two kings, Charles I and James II, were dethroned for despotism. These actions coincided with the birth of liberal political philosophy and provided the ideological base for a new social class. This new philosophy constituted the foundation of the American Revolution of 1775 and the French Revolution of 1789. These great revolutionary events ushered in the liberation of the Spanish colonies in the New World - the final link in that chain being broken by Cuba. I believe I have sufficiently justified my point of view.

All these reasons support men who struggle for the freedom and happiness of the people. None support those who oppress the people, revile them, and rob them heartlessly. Still there is one argument more powerful than all the others.

We are Cubans and to be Cuban implies a duty; not to fulfil that duty is a crime, is treason.

We are proud of the history of our country; we learned it in school and have grown up hearing of freedom, justice and human rights.

We were taught that liberty is not begged for but won with the blade of a machete.

We were taught that for 'The man who abides by unjust laws and permits any man to trample and mistreat the country in which he was born, is not an honourable man.

We were taught that the 10th of October and the 24th of February are glorious anniversaries of national rejoicing because they mark days on which Cubans rebelled against the yoke of infamous tyranny.

We were taught to cherish and defend the beloved flag of the lone star, and to sing every afternoon the verses of our national anthem: 'To live in chains is to live in disgrace' and 'To die for one's homeland is to live forever!' All this we learned and will never forget, even though today in our land there is murder and prison for the men who practise the ideas taught to them since the cradle.

We were born in a free country that our parents bequeathed to us and the Island will sink into the sea before we consent to be slaves of anyone. In the world there must be a certain degree of honour just as there must be a certain amount of light. When there are many men without honour, there are always others who bear in themselves the honour of many men. These are the men who rebel with great force against those who steal the people's freedom, that is to say, against those who steal human honour itself. In those men thousands more are contained, human dignity is contained.

I come to the close of my defence plea but I will not end it as lawyers usually do, asking that the accused be freed. I cannot ask freedom for myself while my comrades are already suffering in the ignominious prison of the Isle of Pines. Send me there to join them and to share their fate. It is understandable that honest men should be dead or in prison in a Republic where the President is a criminal and a thief. I know that imprisonment will be harder for me than it has ever been for anyone, filled with cowardly threats and hideous cruelty. But I do not fear prison, as I do not fear the fury of the miserable tyrant who took the lives of seventy of my comrades.

Condemn me. It does not matter.

History will absolve me.