

## Fidel Castro at the National Press Club, April 20, 1959



*Fidel Castro, April 20, 1959.  
National Press Club Archives*

On April 15, 1959, Fidel Castro (b. 1926), the charismatic leader of Cuba's new revolutionary government, was warmly greeted at Washington National Airport as he embarked on a goodwill tour to speak before groups of editors, journalists, and university audiences, face Congressional committees and a *Meet the Press* panel, tour the nation's capital's monuments, and confer with a few Eisenhower administration officials, including Vice President Richard Nixon. The unofficial visit, occurring just three months after the overthrow of the brutal and corrupt regime of Fulgencio Batista, came at a time when most ordinary North Americans had yet to form fixed opinions about Castro or the revolution. Although the Eisenhower administration for a time had supported Batista's forces militarily in their battle against the insurgents, Castro and his guerrilla band gained sympathy from press stories portraying them as freedom fighters that liberated their country from a tyrannical dictator. In the months following the takeover, the new government had initiated reforms to provide land grants to peasants, unemployment relief, and health care, to initiate education programs and promote racial equality, to combat prostitution, graft, and narcotics trafficking, and to reduce rents and utility rates. Two years later, historian Arthur Schlesinger, Jr., recalled the optimistic feeling during the revolution's first days as he wrote in a State Department White Paper, "The hemisphere rejoiced at the overthrow of the Batista tyranny, looked with sympathy on the new regime, and welcomed its promises of political freedom and social justice for the Cuban people."

The optimism was mixed with anxieties. News of executions of more than 500 “war criminals” disgusted many, including President Eisenhower. Castro’s inflammatory remarks attacking the U.S. for interfering with Cuban affairs and for making Cuba a political and economic dependent since the Spanish-American War of 1898 cast doubts on prospects for peaceful coexistence. His perceived lust for power, lack of training in economic matters, and rumored plans to nationalize and expropriate U.S.-owned utilities and plants caused uncertainty among potential North American investors who feared future political and economic chaos. The possibility that communists might gain control of powerful posts in Cuba’s government, army, unions, and the press gave pause to American anticommunists. Castro’s call for revolutions against dictators in the Dominican Republic, Nicaragua, and Paraguay fueled fears that Cuba – only 90 miles from Florida – might, in defiance of the Monroe Doctrine, ally itself to the Soviet Union, whose expressed policy was to support such Third World struggles. As the Monroe Doctrine, a staple of United States foreign policy since the early 19<sup>th</sup> century, cautioned that the U.S. might wage war to protect its sphere of interest in the Western Hemisphere, what some in the press called the “Castro enigma” held the sobering potential to bring the world to the brink of nuclear war.

Concerns over Castro’s intentions pervaded the question-and-answer session that followed his address to the National Press Club on April 20. While he repeatedly emphasized his fervent hope to establish a “real friendship” with the United States and “real democracy” in his country, skeptical journalists questioned his decision to postpone elections, his expropriation plans, and his opinion of Soviet Premier Khrushchev. Historians now know that three days later, on April 23, Khrushchev approved a petition sent to him by Raúl Castro, Fidel’s brother and commander of the Cuban army, to send Spanish communist military advisors to help him maintain control over the Cuban army. Whether or not Fidel Castro knew of this petition in advance has been the subject of speculation. Following his North American visit, relations between the U.S. and Cuba declined precipitously, while Cuba’s ties to the Soviet Union strengthened.

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