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# WEEKEND BREAK

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## Castro's death made history come alive again



NASA  
 President John F. Kennedy presents astronaut Alan Shepard Jr. with NASA's Distinguished Service Medal Award on May 8, 1961. Shepard was the first American in space.



TASS via AP, File  
 In this May 1, 1963 file photo, Cuba's leader Fidel Castro, left, and Soviet Premier Nikita Khrushchev clasp hands at the Lenin mausoleum in Moscow's Red Square in Moscow, Russia.

### Events showcased strengths, weaknesses of U.S. presidents

By DAVID PERO  
*The Daily Astorian*

**T**he death of Fidel Castro at age 90 last week is a reminder that history often happens around us on a daily basis, even just as an observer.

It was May 1961, and I was a youngster standing with my family on a crowded beach in Indialantic, Florida, with nearly everyone in town. Schools and businesses were closed — we were all there watching America's first manned space shot. It was a day of wonderment and thrills as the Redstone rocket blasted Alan Shepard into space on a 15-minute suborbital ride. It launched the U.S. firmly into the space race with the Soviet Union, and the Cold War heated up.

Only a month before, unbeknown to many on the beach, and especially youngsters like myself, another history-making event occurred — the failed Bay of Pigs invasion of Cuba by CIA-trained Cuban exiles on a mission to overthrow Cuba's new leader, Castro.

That event, like Shepard's space shot, had ramifications for Florida and the nation that continue today. Castro's rule of Cuba endured so long that his antagonism for the U.S. spanned nearly five decades. It became a laboratory test in America diplomacy, exposing the strengths and weaknesses of three particular presidents.

#### The Cuban Revolution

Castro came to power as Cuba's prime minister after guerrillas led the Cuban Revolution in 1959. In the U.S., John F. Kennedy was inaugurated as president in January 1961, not long before the Bay of Pigs fiasco.

After Castro assumed power, according to those who later left Cuba, enormous human rights violations began. Thousands of opponents of the revolution were jailed and sometimes executed, and it increased greatly after the Bay of Pigs. Cubans who wanted to leave the country couldn't, and sometimes families were separated when some escaped to freedom any way they could.

An immediate ramification of the Cuban Revolution was a trade embargo the U.S. initiated, which has been the longest enduring U.S. embargo in history.

Meanwhile, Castro aligned Cuba with Soviet socialism, and his country essentially became a puppet state of the U.S.S.R. and its premier, Nikita Khrushchev. Castro continually feared a U.S. invasion and supported a plan to put Soviet nuclear missiles on his island country 90 miles off the Florida coast. The combined actions of Castro and Khrushchev created the Cuban Missile Crisis, which put the U.S. and Soviet Union frighteningly on the brink of nuclear war. Historians acknowledge it as the closest the two superpowers ever came to all-out war.

#### 'Duck and Cover'

During the 13-day crisis, Kennedy stood strong in his resolve against the missiles, and the Soviets removed them after receiving a public promise that the U.S. would never invade Cuba. Throughout the crisis, and even in the months that followed, Florida schoolchildren, myself included, learned to "duck and cover" during silly daily drills that taught us to use our wood-and-metal school desks as protection in the event of a nuclear strike.

History recorded that Castro was left out of all negotiations to end the crisis while Kennedy's hard-line handling of it became a diplomacy-with-strength model for future



AP Photo/Javier Galeano, File  
 In this May 1, 2006 file photo, Cuba's leader Fidel Castro speaks on International Workers Day in Revolution Plaza in Havana, Cuba. He died Friday, Nov. 25 at the age of 90.

### Writer's Notebook

presidents to follow.

Afterward, Kennedy wanted the Bay of Pigs and the missile crisis in the rear-view, and he galvanized America around the space program. The country united and responded. On the booming Space Coast, where we lived, nearly every job was connected to NASA in some way. It set the foundation for giant leaps and achievements to come.

In the years that followed, my family and I moved to South Florida, first to the Miami area, and later north to Fort Lauderdale. South Florida, which even early on had a large Cuban population, remained teeming with rage and anger toward Castro and the human rights violations he sanctioned. Routinely there were emotional, vocal demonstrations against him, and ending Cuban repression was always a goal within South Florida's Cuban community. But the nation was focused on civil rights, the Vietnam War and in fulfilling Kennedy's challenge of putting a man on the moon by the end of the '60s. We did, in July 1969, and two years later — 10 years to the month after he became the first American in space — Alan Shepard walked on the moon as commander of Apollo 14. But throughout that time, America's focus had shifted away from Florida, Cuba and Castro's tyranny.

#### The Jimmy Carter Years

In 1975, Cuba restructured. Castro became president and solidified his rule as both head of state and head of government. By then the Cuban economy was crumbling. Castro remained preoccupied with exporting his vision of communism to other parts of the world through his military. The next year America elected Jimmy Carter, whose presidency was marked by what seemed to be a non-stop series of crises that included inflation, an energy shortage, Soviet aggression in Afghanistan and the taking of American hostages in Iran. Then came Castro — again.

Carter had taken a softer approach with Castro than previous presidents, and Castro, seeking to end the still ongoing embargo, took advantage. As more of Cuba's population became disenchanted with the economy and the despot leader, Castro began allowing them to leave the country. They left in small numbers at first, but then in April 1980, in the middle of Carter's re-election bid, Castro opened the gates, allowing anyone on the island to leave

by way of Cuba's Mariel Harbor. Cubans in South Florida tearfully rejoiced, celebrating the news wildly in the streets. They rushed to get boats in the Florida Keys and head to Cuba to help bring family, friends and anyone they had space for to U.S. shores. The Mariel Boatlift lasted until October, and brought 125,000 Cubans to the U.S. It overwhelmed immigration and other agencies with the sheer number of refugees. The refugees were located in secure government-run camps, many hastily built under interstate bridges because of a lack of facilities to house the tens of thousands who were without sponsors to help in their immersion into the U.S. The nation learned later that as part of the boatlift Castro had also emptied his prisons and mental institutions.

#### Castro's Marginalization

Although he never lifted the trade embargo, the boatlift destabilized Carter, and Ronald Reagan won 44 states and became the 40th U.S. president. Like Kennedy, Reagan took an immediate hard line against Castro, and in 1983 when American interests were threatened by the presence of Cuban military on Grenada, the U.S. invaded and quickly secured the island. Other presidents who followed Reagan also took the hard-line with Castro, essentially marginalizing him after the breakup of the Soviet Union. Castro left power in 2006 and officially retired in 2008.

Some of the same scenes of celebrations in South Florida last week of Castro's death were a vivid reminder of the scenes of celebrations at the beginning of the boatlift.

The boatlift, like the missile crisis, changed South Florida and had a lasting impact. The aftermath of the missile crisis launched America to vast technological achievements through the space program. It's hard to imagine that the computers that powered the lunar lander had less processing power than an everyday cell phone, and it helped launch the computer revolution in the U.S. along with advances in medicine, transportation and consumer products. And while the boatlift caused initial problems by the sheer number of refugees, it began that region's widespread change of its demographics that turned South Florida into much more of a rich melting pot, especially from the Caribbean and Latin America influences. The South Florida of today is far different — and many there say far better — than that of the 1980s.

For me, it's all a reminder that the memories from one's youth are often life-long, especially when you realize you observed history in the making.

David Pero is editor and publisher of *The Daily Astorian*.



NASA  
 The Redstone booster carrying Mercury astronaut Alan B. Shepard, Jr. lifted off from Cape Canaveral at 9:34 a.m. Eastern on May 5, 1961. His 15 minute sub-orbital flight made him the first American in space.