
Fidel Castro on Salvador Allende's Birth Centenary

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SALVADOR ALLENDE: HIS EXAMPLE LIVES ON He was born one hundred years ago in Valparaiso, in southern Chile, on June 26, 1908. His father, a middle-class lawyer and notary, was a member of Chile's Radical Party. When I was born, Allende was already 18 years old. He was pursuing secondary studies in high school in his native city. In his senior years, an old Italian anarchist, Juan Demarchi, introduced him to the works of Marx. He graduated with top grades. He liked and practiced sports. He enlisted for military service voluntarily, joining the Cuirassiers of Viña del Mar Regiment. He asked to be transferred to the Lancers Regiment of Tacna, a Chilean enclave in the dry and semi-deserted north, a region later returned to Peru. He completed his service as an Army reserve officer. By then, he was already a man of socialist and Marxist ideas. He was not a weak or characterless young man. It was as though he sensed that he would one day fight to the death in defense of the convictions that were already taking shape in his mind. He decided to study for the noble profession of medicine at the University of Chile. He organized meetings with a group of students who met regularly to read and discuss Marxist literature. He founded the Avance Group in 1929. He was elected vice-president of the Federation of Chilean Students in 1930 and actively participated in the struggle against Carlos Ibáñez's dictatorship. The Great Depression had already unleashed in the United States, following the Stock Market Crash of 1929. In Cuba, the struggle against Machado's dictatorship was underway. Mella had been murdered. Cuban workers and students faced repression. Communists, led by Martínez Villena, organized a general strike. "We need a charge to do away with scoundrels, to complete the work of revolutions (...)", Villena had written in a vibrant poem. Guiteras, a man of profound anti-imperialist sentiments, attempted to overthrow the dictatorship through an armed insurrection. Machado, who was unable to contain the nationwide upheaval, was overthrown and there ensued a revolution which the United States managed to crush, in a matter of months, with kid gloves and iron fist, securing absolute control of the island until 1959. In a country where imperialist domination was brutally exercised over its workers, culture and natural resources, Salvador Allende remained true to his ideals in a struggle where he showed an unwavering revolutionary conduct. In 1933, he graduated as a medical doctor. He took part in the founding of Chile's Socialist Party. By 1935, he was already a leader at the Chilean Medical Association. He was imprisoned for nearly half a year. He impelled efforts to create a Popular Front and was elected sub-secretary general of the Socialist Party in 1936. In September 1939, he was appointed head of the Department of Health of the Popular Front government. He published a book on social medicine. He organized the first Housing Fair. In 1941, he participated in the annual meeting of the American Medical Association in the United States. In 1942, he became Secretary General of Chile's Socialist Party. In 1947, he voted in the Senate against the Permanent Defense of Democracy Law, also known as the "Cursed Law", due to its repressive nature. In 1949, he was promoted to President of Chile's Medical School. In 1952, the Popular Front put him forth as presidential candidate. He was then 44 years old. He was not elected. He presented the Senate with a draft law for the nationalization of the copper industry. In 1954, he traveled to France, Italy, the Soviet Union and the People's Republic of China. Four years later, in 1958, he was proclaimed candidate to the presidency of the republic by the Popular Action Front, made up of the Popular Socialist Union Party, Chile's Socialist Party and the Communist Party. He lost the election to the conservative Jorge Alessandri. In 1959, he attended the inauguration ceremony of Venezuelan President Rómulo Betancourt, who until then had been considered a leftist revolutionary figure. That same year, he traveled to Havana and met with Che and me. In 1960, he gave his support to Chile's coal miners, who went on strike for more than three months. In 1961, he and Che denounced the demagogic nature of the Alliance for Progress at an OAS meeting held in Punta del Este, Uruguay. Appointed candidate to the presidency once again, he was defeated in 1964 by Eduardo Frei Montalva, a Christian Democrat who enjoyed the full support of the dominant classes and who, according to declassified US Senate documents, received campaign money from the CIA. During his time in office, imperialism attempted to craft what came to be known as the "Revolution in Liberty", an ideological response to the Cuban revolution. What it engendered were the foundations of the fascist dictatorship. At that election, however, Allende had secured more than one million votes. In 1966, he headed the delegation that attended the Tri-Continental Conference of Havana. He visited the Soviet Union for the 50th Anniversary of the October Revolution. The following year, in 1968, he visited the Democratic Republic of Korea and the Democratic Republic of Vietnam, where he had the pleasure of meeting and conversing with that country's extraordinary leader, Ho Chi Min. His itinerary included Cambodia and Laos, at a time when revolutionary sentiments were at their most effervescent. Following Che's death, he personally accompanied three Cuban members of the Bolivia guerrilla to Tahiti, men who had survived the Heroic Guerrilla and were already in Chilean territory. The Popular Unity Party, --a political coalition made up of communists, socialists, radicals, the MAPU, PADENA and Independent Popular Action parties-- proclaimed him its candidate on January 22, 1970. On September 4 of that year, he won the elections. Allende is a truly classical example of the peaceful struggle for the establishment of socialism. The US administration, headed by Richard Nixon, went immediately into action following this electoral triumph. The Chilean Army's Commander in Chief, General René Schneider, was the victim of an assassination plot on October 22 and died three days later. He had not kowtow to the imperialist demand that he lead a coup d'état. The attempt to keep the Popular Unity Party out of office had failed. Allende legally took office on November 3, 1970 in a wholly dignified manner. From office, he began his heroic battle for change, and against fascism. He was already 62 years old. I had the honor of having fought next to him against imperialism for 14 years, from the time of the triumph of the Cuban revolution. At the municipal elections of March 1971, the Popular Unity Party secured an absolute majority of votes (50.86 percent). On July 11, President Allende promulgated the Copper Nationalization Law, an idea he had presented before the Senate 19 years before. It was unanimously passed by Congress. No-one dared oppose it. In 1972, before the UN General Assembly, Allende denounced the international aggression of which his country was victim. He received a standing ovation which lasted

several minutes. That same year, he visited the Soviet Union, Mexico, Colombia and Cuba. In 1973, at the March parliamentary elections, the Popular Unity Party obtained 45 percent of the vote and expanded its parliamentary representation. The measures impelled by the Yankees in the two Houses to have the president dismissed met with failure. Imperialism and the Right intensified their all-out war against the Popular Unity government and unleashed acts of terrorism around the country. I wrote Allende six confidential letters —I handwrote them in small print using a fine-point pen—between 1971 and 1973. In them, I took up issues of interest with the utmost discretion. In May 21, I wrote him: “(…) We’re amazed at your extraordinary efforts and the limitless energies you've poured into maintaining and consolidating your victory. “Here, we can appreciate that the people are gaining ground, in spite of the difficult and complex mission they shoulder. “The April 4 elections were a splendid and encouraging victory. “Your courage and resolve, your mental and physical energy and ability to carry the revolutionary process forward, have been of the essence. "Great and different challenges are surely in store for you, and you must face these in conditions which are not precisely ideal, but a just policy, with the support of the people and applied with determination, cannot be defeated (...)" On September 11, 1971, I wrote: “The carrier will travel to discuss the details of the visit with you. “Initially, considering that a direct flight in a Cubana airliner is possible, we deemed it convenient to travel to Arica and to begin the tour at the north. Two things then come up: the interest you and Velazco Alvarado have expressed in a potential contact during my trip there; the possibility of using a Soviet IL-62 plane with greater capacity. If we opted for this, this would allow us to travel directly to Santiago by air. "I am including an itinerary for the tour and activities. You may add, remove or introduce whatever modifications you deem appropriate. "I have focused exclusively on what might prove of political interest and have not concerned myself much about the pace or intensity of the work, but we await your opinions and considerations on absolutely everything. "We were very pleased with the extraordinary success you had in your trip to Ecuador, Colombia and Peru. When will we, in Cuba, have the opportunity to share in the heartfelt emotion and the warmth with which Ecuadorians, Colombians and Peruvians welcomed you?" The last moments before Chile’s elected president Salvador Allende’s death during the coup. Photo: NYT During that trip, whose itinerary I had conveyed to President Allende, my life was miraculously spared. I walked dozens of miles before an immense crowd, standing by the side of the road. The Central Intelligence Agency had organized three actions to ensure my assassination during the trip. At an interview for the press which had been previously coordinated, Cuban mercenaries, who had entered Chile with Venezuelan passports had a camera, supplied by a Venezuelan television broadcaster, equipped with automatic weapons. Ultimately, they were not brave enough, they who had only to pull the trigger at any point during the lengthy interview, while the cameras were on me. They did not want to risk death. What's more, they had chased me down all around Chile, where they had not been able to have me as close and vulnerable as at that moment. I was to learn of the details of the cowardly action only years later. US Special Services had gone further than what we had imagined. On February 4, 1972, I wrote Salvador: "The greatest care was put into receiving the military delegation here. The Revolutionary Armed Forces devoted practically all of their time during those days to look after it. The gatherings were cordial and fraternal. The program was intense and varied. My impression is that the trip has been positive and useful, that it is possible and convenient to continue organizing such exchanges. "I spoke with Ariel about the idea of your trip. I can understand perfectly well that the intense work ahead of you and the tone of the political struggle in recent weeks have not allowed you to schedule the trip for the approximate date we mentioned on that occasion. It is clear we had not taken these eventualities into account. That day, on the eve of my return to Cuba, when we dined in your house in the early morning hours, having little time and in the haste of the moment, it was reassuring for me to think that we would again meet in Cuba, where we would have the opportunity to converse at length. Nevertheless, I still harbor the hope that you can consider scheduling your visit for some time before May. I mention this month because, mid-May, at the latest, I must make a trip, which can no longer be postponed, to Algiers, Guinea, Bulgaria, other countries and the Soviet Union. This long tour will demand considerable time. “I am immensely thankful for your impressions on the situation there. Here, more familiarized with, interested in and very much moved by the process Chile is experiencing each day, we are following the news that reach us very attentively. Today, we can better understand the affection and passion that the Cuban revolution must have inspired in others at the beginning. You could say we are re-living our own experience, from the outside. "In your letter, I can appreciate the magnificent state of mind, serenity and courage with which you are determined to confront the challenges ahead. And that is of the essence in any revolutionary process, particularly one undertaken in the highly complex and difficult conditions of a country like Chile. I took away with me a very strong impression of the moral, cultural and human virtues of the Chilean people and of its notable patriotic and revolutionary sentiment. You have the singular privilege of being its guide at this decisive point in the history of Chile and America, the culmination of an entire life devoted to the struggle, as you said at the stadium, devoted to the cause of the revolution and socialism. There are no obstacles that cannot be surmounted. Someone once said that, in a revolution, one moves forward 'with audacity, audacity and more audacity’. I am convinced of the profound truth of that axiom." I wrote President Allende again on September 6, 1972: “I sent you a message on different matters with Beatriz. After she left and, in response to the news that reached us all last week, we decided to send comrade Osmany to reiterate our willingness to help in any way, and so that you can convey to us, through him, your impression of the situation and your ideas about the scheduled trip to this and other countries. The pretext for Osmany's trip will be the inspection of the Cuban embassy, but this will not be publicly announced. We want his stay there to be as brief and discrete as possible. “Work is already underway with respect to the points you made through Beatriz (...) “Though we are conscious of the current difficulties faced by Chile’s revolutionary process, we are confident you will find the way to overcome these. “You can rely on our full cooperation. A fraternal and revolutionary salute from all of us goes out to you." On June 30, 1973, we sent President Salvador Allende and the Popular Unity parties an official invitation to participate at the ceremonies organized to commemorate the 20th anniversary of the attack on the Moncada Garrison. In another letter, I wrote him:

“Salvador: “The above is the official, formal invitation to the ceremonies in commemoration of the 20th anniversary. It would be formidable if you could hop over to Cuba on that date. You can imagine what this would mean in terms of joy, satisfaction and honor for Cubans. I know that this depends, more than anything, on your work and the situation there. We leave it, then, to your consideration. “We are still under the impact of the great revolutionary victory of the 29th and your brilliant, personal role in the events. It is natural for many difficulties and obstacles to subsist, but I am certain that this first trial, where you have come out successful, will encourage you and consolidate the people's confidence in you. These events have been attached special importance internationally and are considered a great triumph. “With actions like those of the 29th, the Chilean revolution shall come out victorious of any test, no matter how hard. Again, Cuba is at your side and you can rely on your faithful friends of always." On July 29, 1973, I wrote him my last letter: “Dear Salvador: “With the pretext of discussing matters concerning the meeting of Non-Aligned Countries with you, Carlos and Piñero will travel to Chile. The real objective is for you to inform them on the situation and to offer you, as always, the assurance of our willingness to help you face whatever difficulties and dangers stand in the way of the revolutionary process. Their stay will be very brief, as they have much pending work here and, not without sacrificing part of their time, we decided they should make the trip. “I see that you are now facing the delicate question of a dialogue with the Christian Democrats, in the midst of serious developments, such as the brutal murder of your naval aide-de-camp and the new truck-drivers strike. I can therefore imagine the great tension and your interest in winning time, improving the balance of forces in case the struggle should break out and, if possible, find a path that will allow you to carry the revolutionary process forward without a civil war, as well as assuming your historical responsibility for what could happen. Those are commendable aims. But, should the other side, whose real intentions we are not in a position to assess from here, pursue a treacherous and irresponsible policy and demand a price that the Popular Unity Party and the revolution cannot pay, something which, in fact, is quite likely, do not for a minute forget the formidable strength of Chile's working class and the vigorous support they've shown you at all difficult moments. They can, at your call, defend the revolution in a moment of danger, paralyze the coup officers, impose their conditions on them and decide, once and for all, if it were necessary, Chile's fate. The enemy must be conscious of this fact; they must be on guard and ready to go into action. Its strength and combativeness can tilt the balance of forces in your favor, even when other conditions are not as favorable. “Your decision to defend the process steadily and honor, at the cost of your own life, which everyone knows you are willing to sacrifice, shall bring all forces capable of fighting and all men and women of honor in Chile to your side. Your courage, serenity and audacity at this historical time for your country and, above all, your firm, resolved and heroic leadership, are crucial in this situation. “Let Carlos and Manuel know how your loyal Cuban friends can help. “Let me remind you of Cuba's affection and unqualified confidence in you.” I wrote this a month and a half before the coup. The emissaries were Carlos Rafael Rodríguez and Manuel Piñero. Pinochet had talked with Carlos Rafael. He had feigned the kind of loyalty and firmness sworn by Carlos Prats, Army Commander in Chief for a time under the Popular Unity government, a dignified military man, who the oligarchy and imperialism brought to a total crisis, obliging him to resign, later murdered in Argentina by two DINA henchmen, following the fascist coup of 1973. I had been mistrustful of Pinochet from the time I read the books on geopolitics he gave me as a gift during my visit to Chile and had the opportunity to observe his style up close, his declarations and the methods, as Army Chief, that he used when the provocations from the Right obliged President Allende to decree a state of siege in Santiago de Chile. I recalled what Marx had forewarned in the 18th Brumaire. Many Army chiefs in the different regions and their general staffs wanted to converse with me wherever I was and showed considerable interest in issues related to our war of liberation and the experience of the Missile Crisis in 1962. The meetings, which lasted hours, would be held in the early morning, which was the only time I had available. I would agree to these to help Allende, to familiarize them with the idea that socialism was not an enemy of armed institutions. Pinochet, as a military leader, was not an exception. Allende considered those meetings useful. On September 11, 1973, he died heroically, defending the Presidential Palace of La Moneda. He fought like a tiger until his last breath. The revolutionaries who stood up to the fascist onslaught there would later recount incredible stories about those last moments. Their versions didn't always agree, for they fought at different parts of the Palace. Also, some of their closest collaborators perished or were later assassinated during the intense and unequal battle. The difference in the testimonies consisted in the fact that some affirmed he had fired his last shots at himself to avoid being taken prisoner and others that his death was brought about by enemy fire. The Palace was up in flames as a result of an attack perpetrated by tanks and planes which sought to consummate a coup they had considered an easy task that would meet with no resistance. There is no contradiction whatsoever between these two ways of answering the call of duty. In our wars of independence, there is more than one example of illustrious combatants who, when defeat was imminent, took their own lives to avoid falling prisoners. Much remains to be said about what we were willing to do for Allende. Some have written about this, but it is not the aim of these lines. Allende was born one hundred years ago today. His example shall live on.

Fidel Castro Ruz

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6:34 p.m.