



# Celia Sanchez: The Legend of Cuba's Revolutionary Heart

*Rich Haney*

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Fidel Castro was powerless, in prison, when the Cuban Revolution was launched by a tiny woman named Celia Sánchez. A fearless and brilliant organizer and recruiter, she created, nurtured, and led the insurgency that ousted the U.S.-backed dictator Fulgencio Batista, the Mafia, the Communist Party of Cuba, and the U.S. capitalists from Cuba in 1959.

Castro's first two thrusts against Batista were dismal failures: the attack on the powerful Moncada Army Barracks on July 26, 1953, when everyone in his terribly outmanned and outgunned little force was either killed or captured and imprisoned; and, after two years of imprisonment, his return from Mexico on a leaky yacht in December of 1956, when 70 of his 81 rebels were quickly ambushed and killed by a Batista army as they scrambled ashore at Playa Colorado. The twelve survivors including the Castro brothers Fidel and Raúl, Che Guevara, Camilo Cienfuegos, and Juan Almeida were saved by and joined up with Celia's already viable guerrilla movement in the foothills of the Sierra Maestra Mountains of eastern Cuba. Only then did they begin to make a dent in the supposedly impregnable Batista arsenal.

From their first meeting in the Sierras till victory was theirs in the first week of January, 1959, Castro never forgot whose revolution it was Celia's. And from January of 1959 till she died of cancer in January of 1980, he never forgot whose Cuba it was Celia's. And it still is, as Castro has ruled the beleaguered island even since 1980 only in the manner he perceives Celia would want him to rule it.

Castro turned 80 on August 13, 2006, in his 47th year as Cuba's leader. The transition to post-Castro Cuba looms vividly on the horizon, whether it comes as a result of natural causes or with an assist by the Batistiano-influenced U.S. government. This highly personal account gives insights into the U.S.-Cuban relationship and the motivations of Cuba's leaders at a historical juncture.

Cuban historian Eusebio Leal called Celia a sweet and friendly woman with strong determination and character, intelligence, and willingness to give firm assistance.

Yet, little has been written about Celia Sanchez. She is mentioned in Georgie Anne Geyer's *Guerrilla Prince* and other works that focus on Fidel Castro, and she is tantalizingly introduced in websites for Cuba buffs and pro- and anti-Castro factions all forums for readers who want to know more about her.

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