Castro and the United States

Central Historical Question:
How did Fidel Castro view the United States?

Materials:
- Castro and the U.S. PowerPoint
- Documents A & B
- Timeline
- Corroboration Chart
- Historical Thinking Skills Chart

Castro and the United States
In January 1959, Fidel Castro assumed power in Cuba after years of opposing the regime of Fulgencio Batista. Initially, the relationship between Castro’s government and the U.S. was uncertain. However, relations between the two countries quickly soured. In this lesson, students engage in contextual thinking as they analyze two documents and consider different ways that Castro viewed the United States.

Common Core State Standards for Literacy in History/Social Studies: #1 (Gr. 6-12), #6 (Gr. 6-12), #9 (Gr. 6-12)

Instructions:

1. View the PowerPoint handouts to review background information about the Cuban Revolution.
   a. Slide 2: Spanish Colony. The first Spanish settlement was established in Cuba in 1511. Cuba slowly grew into a large world supplier of sugar cane.
   b. Slide 3: Wars for Independence. In 1868 and 1879, Cubans made attempts (eventually unsuccessful) to gain their independence from Spain. In 1895, another attempt at independence began. In 1898, the U.S. joined the war on the side of the Cubans. By December 1898, Spain gave up control of Cuba.
   c. Slide 4: Independence. The U.S. took control and ruled Cuba through a military government. By 1902, Cuba achieved full independence; however, the U.S. was still allowed to intervene, particularly in economic or foreign affairs. Many American companies, especially agricultural and sugar companies, operated in Cuba.
   d. Slide 5: Batista Takes Power. In 1933, Fulgencio Batista came to power in Cuba after a massive labor strike motivated by government corruption. During his 26-year rule, Batista implemented some progressive social and economic reforms but later suspended these. Government corruption and brutality grew over time during his administration. The number of American companies operating in Cuba, particularly in the sugar industry, grew, and the U.S. supported Batista until 1958.
e. Slide 6: Attack on Moncada Army Barracks. On July 26, 1953, Fidel Castro, who was educated as a lawyer and became part of a group critical of Batista, led an attack on the Moncada Army Barracks. The group became known as the 26th of July movement; its goals were to overthrow Batista and carry out progressive reforms in Cuba. Castro was arrested and put in jail. He was released in 1955 and moved to Mexico to continue building support for his movement against Batista.

f. Slide 7: The Cuban Revolution. In 1956, Castro and other members of the 26th of July movement snuck back into Cuba and established a base in the mountains. They quietly worked to build more support among the Cuban people. Starting in August 1958, Castro’s armies surrounded major cities and cut off railroads and supply lines. On December 31st, Batista fled Havana, the capital city, and Castro took power.

2. Take out Timeline.

a. Review events in the timeline. Return to final PowerPoint slides.

b. Slide 8: Visiting the U.S. The Eisenhower government recognized Castro as the new leader of Cuba, and in April 1959, Castro visited the U.S. and met with Vice President Nixon.

c. Slide 9: Bay of Pigs Invasion: April 17, 1961. Relations between the U.S. and Cuba quickly soured. The U.S. grew skeptical of Castro. Castro banned foreign ownership of land in Cuba (remember that many American companies owned agricultural land there!) and took over privately owned business. In October 1960, a U.S. embargo of Cuba began—Americans were not allowed to sell anything to Cuba except food and medicine. In April 1961, the CIA funded an invasion of Cuba to try to overthrow Castro. This is known as the Bay of Pigs invasion. The CIA-backed forces were quickly defeated by Castro’s army.

3. Review skills of sourcing, contextualization, and corroboration.

a. If necessary, use Historical Thinking chart to review the skills of sourcing, contextualization, and corroboration. (see attached.)

b. Historians make claims based upon evidence found in historical documents. In order to gather credible evidence, historians evaluate the reliability, or trustworthiness, of different historical sources. To help them do this, historians pay careful attention to the source of the document: the point of view of the author, his or her purpose for writing, the audience, and the date the document was produced. They also
corroborate, or compare, information across multiple sources and try to contextualize sources, paying attention to when and where a document was written and what was going on at the time. They think about how this context might influence the content of the documents, which helps them interpret and understand the documents and assess their reliability.

4. You will be working on sourcing, contextualizing, and corroborating two documents, both written by Fidel Castro around the time of the Cuban Revolution. After carefully analyzing documents, you will develop a claim addressing the lesson's Central Historical Question: How did Fidel Castro view the United States?

5. Take out Document A. First you will be reading an interview that Fidel Castro completed in 1959.

   a. Begin by reading the headnote and source information and then look at the timeline and physically note where this interview would fall. Look at the events around this interview and speculating how they might affect the interview to help us learn how to contextualize.

Sample modeling script: So, after the reading the headnote, the first thing I am going to do is read the source note [read source information.] As I source this document, I notice the date. In February 1959 Castro had just come to power and was probably working to establish his rule. Eisenhower had recognized the new Cuban government, and Castro was traveling to the U.S. a few months later, in April. Neither side had taken a firm stance toward the other—the relationship was very new. Furthermore, I notice that this interview was done with U.S. newspaper editors. That makes me wonder if he is trying to get some “good press” in the United States. Now that I’ve thought about the context in which this interview was given, as I read the interview I’ll want to think about how this context might have affected what Castro said about the U.S. This process is called contextualization.

Is this a credible document to help us determine how Fidel Castro viewed the United States? Given what I know so far, it may be, but because it happened so early in Castro’s presidency, it might not give us a really good sense of Castro’s true beliefs because he’s still working to establish his power, and he may be engaged in a public relations campaign here. He’s not sure how the U.S. is going to treat Cuba, and he might want to establish a good relationship with a powerful neighbor. As you read the interview, think about
how the context in which the interview was given might have influenced what Castro said.

b. Now read the rest of the document and complete Question 4 in the Graphic Organizer. We should note that Castro is generally positive about the United States. For example, he says the U.S. sent a “good Ambassador” and he would be willing to meet with Eisenhower.

6. Take out Document B. Now you will be reading a speech that Castro gave in 1961.

a. Read Document B, and complete Questions 1-4 in the appropriate column of the Corroboration Chart. You are encouraged to use the timeline while you are sourcing and contextualizing the document.

b. Look at the responses in your chart.

i. Important to note is the context in which the speech from Document B was given: Much has changed in Cuba and with relations between the U.S. and Cuba since Document A. Relations between the U.S. and Cuba have soured substantially — Castro banned foreign companies and took over privately owned businesses; the U.S. began an embargo of Cuba and, just a few weeks before this speech, funded an attempt to overthrow Castro in the Bay of Pigs Invasion. Castro was speaking to a crowd of Cubans in Havana on a holiday celebrating workers.

ii. As we might expect from the change in context, Castro’s views of the U.S. changed dramatically in this speech. Castro is clear that he does not approve of the U.S.’s government or economic system and says that the U.S. has no business interfering in Cuba’s affairs (he even compares Kennedy to Mussolini and Hitler!). He argues that Cuba’s actions are not affecting or endangering the U.S. and that Cuba’s rights are just as important as the U.S.’s, even if Cuba is a smaller country.

7. Complete Question 5 on the Graphic Organizer for both documents.

8. Final considerations:

a. How did Fidel Castro view the United States?

b. Why did the documents provide different answers to this question? (Push students to clearly articulate differences in date, audience, and context between the two documents.)
c. Which of these documents do you find to be a better representation of Castro’s views? Why?

d. What do the differences between these documents teach us about the importance of sourcing and contextualizing in history?

Citations:

The Cuban Revolution & Fidel Castro
Spanish Colony
Wars for Independence

Cuban and American generals during the Spanish-American War, 1898
Independence

U.S. forces in Havana, 1898
Batista Takes Power

Fulgencio Batista in Washington, D.C., 1938
Attack on Moncada Army Barracks

Castro under arrest after the Moncado Barracks attack
Cuban Revolution

Castro rides into Havana after the revolution, 1959
Visiting the U.S.

Press conference with Castro in the U.S., April 1959
Bay of Pigs Invasion: April 17, 1961
Central Historical Question

How did Fidel Castro view the United States?
Cuban Revolution Timeline

**August 1958** – Fidel Castro’s armies launched an attack on President Fulgencio Batista’s government, surrounding major cities and cutting off railways and supply lines.

**December 31, 1958** – Batista fled Havana, the capital of Cuba, and Castro took power. President Dwight Eisenhower recognized the new Cuban government soon after.

**April 1959** – Castro visited the United States and met with Vice President Richard Nixon. He was greeted by cheering crowds in many cities.

**May 1959** – Castro signed the Agrarian Reform Act, which banned foreign ownership of land in Cuba and limited landholdings to 1,000 acres. The government took over any amount over 1,000 acres owned by a single family or company, broke it up, and gave it to peasants or turned it into state-run communes.

**February 1960** – Cuba and the USSR agreed to begin trading sugar, oil, and grain.

**March 1960** – Eisenhower approved funding and training for a plan to overthrow Castro. He also approved an embargo of sugar, oil, and guns, banning Americans from trading these items with Cuba.

**July 1960** – Castro began nationalizing U.S. companies operating in Cuba.

**January 3, 1961** – The U.S. ended diplomatic relations with Cuba.

**January 20, 1961** – John F. Kennedy became president. He defeated Nixon, who had been Eisenhower’s Vice President. During the campaign, Kennedy accused Eisenhower and Nixon of not doing enough to stop Castro, asking in one campaign speech, “How did we permit the Communists to establish this foothold 90 miles away?”

**April 17, 1961** – A CIA-funded invasion of Cuba, known as the Bay of Pigs Invasion, was launched with the goal of overthrowing Castro. Castro’s army defeated the invasion within a few days.
Document A: 1959 Interview (Modified)

In February 1959, Castro was interviewed in Havana by members of the American Society of Newspaper Editors, an organization that represents the editors of U.S. newspapers. These are excerpts from the interview.

Question: Are the electoral laws going to be changed?

Answer: Of course, we will try to improve the system so that democracy will be here in politics. People used to buy votes, spend money, using power to win the election. We want to improve our electoral system.

Question: What is your opinion of the U.S. foreign policy towards Cuba since you came?

Answer: I am not an American citizen. I have no right to speak about the political situation. But if you ask me about Cuba, I think now it is not a bad policy. This time I think the U.S. government sent a good Ambassador. Everybody says he is a good Ambassador and I feel the attitude is not against us politically. Really the official policies as I think now and observe is of friendship.

Question: Can you estimate when the elections will be held?

Answer: Yes, in about two years. People want this.

Question: Do you have a plan to work with Eisenhower to solve any difficulties?

Answer: As you know there are some interests of a few people, that are a small percentage of the U.S. . . . But really there are no serious difficulties. . . . I do say we are a small country and a small people working here too much to solve our difficulties. The U.S. is a big country and big people working to solve the difficulties. . . . Then I am here in my place, working in my small country and working for my small people, and we want to be in friendship with all the countries of America. If President Eisenhower has time—and if I have time, too, I would gladly speak with him as I speak with you and as I speak the same with the most small citizen and the most big citizen of the U.S. I would gladly salute and shake hands.

Document B: 1961 Speech (Modified)

Castro gave this speech in Havana, Cuba, on May 1, 1961. May 1st is International Workers’ Day, a celebration of the working class promoted by labor advocates and leftists.

The Americans spoke of elections. What elections did they want? A revolution expressing the will of the people is an election everyday, not every four years; it is a constant meeting with the people, like this meeting. The old politicians could never have gathered as many votes as there are people here tonight to support the revolution.

If Mr. Kennedy does not like socialism, well we do not like imperialism! We do not like capitalism! We have as much right to protest over the existence of an imperialist-capitalist regime 90 miles from our coast as he feels he has to protest over the existence of a socialist regime 90 miles from his coast. We would not think of protesting over that, because that is the business of the people of the United States. It would be absurd for us to try to tell the people of the United States what system of government they must have.

Rights do not come from size. Right does not come from one country being bigger than another. That does not matter. We have only limited territory, a small nation, but our right is as respectable as that of any country, regardless of its size. It is absurd for Mr. Kennedy . . . to tell us what kind of government he wants us to have. It occurs to Mr. Kennedy to do that only because he does not have a clear concept of international law or sovereignty. Who had those ideas before Kennedy? Hitler and Mussolini!

We do not endanger the security of a single North American. We, making agrarian reform, people’s ranches, houses, schools, literacy campaigns, building hospitals, sending doctors, giving scholarships, building factories, increasing the productive capacity of our country, creating public beaches, converting schools, and giving the people the right to a better future—we do not endanger a single U.S. family or a single U.S. citizen.

Source: Fidel Castro, Speech in Havana, Cuba, on May 1, 1961.

Vocabulary

sovereignty: the authority of a state to govern itself
### Castro Documents Corroboration Chart

|---|----------------------------|-------------------------|
| 1) **Sourcing:**  
Who was the audience of the document? How might the audience affect what Castro said? | | |
| 2) **Contextualization:**  
What was going on in Cuba at the time? How might this have affected what Castro said? | | |
| 3) **Contextualization:**  
What was going on in the U.S. at the time? How might this have affected what Castro said? | | |
| 4) **According to this document, how did Fidel Castro view the United States?** | | |
|---------------------------|-------------------------|
| **5) Overall, do you think this is a credible document to help you answer the question, How did Fidel Castro view the United States?**  
(Explain your answer using sourcing and contextualization analysis.) | |
<table>
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<tr>
<th>Historical Reading Skills</th>
<th>Questions</th>
<th>Students should be able to . . .</th>
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| **Sourcing**              | • Who wrote this?  
• What is the author’s perspective?  
• When was it written?  
• Where was it written?  
• Why was it written?  
• Is it reliable? Why? Why not? | • Identify the author’s position on the historical event  
• Identify and evaluate the author’s purpose in producing the document  
• Hypothesize what the author will say before reading the document  
• Evaluate the source’s trustworthiness by considering genre, audience, and purpose | • The author probably believes . . .  
• I think the audience is . . .  
• Based on the source information, I think the author might . . .  
• I do/don’t trust this document because . . . |
| **Contextualization**     | • When and where was the document created?  
• What was different then? What was the same?  
• How might the circumstances in which the document was created affect its content? | • Understand how context/background information influences the content of the document  
• Recognize that documents are products of particular points in time | • Based on the background information, I understand this document differently because . . .  
• The author might have been influenced by _____ (historical context) . . .  
• This document might not give me the whole picture because . . . |
| **Corroboration**         | • What do other documents say?  
• Do the documents agree? If not, why?  
• What are other possible documents?  
• What documents are most reliable? | • Establish what is probable by comparing documents to each other  
• Recognize disparities between accounts | • The author agrees/disagrees with . . .  
• These documents all agree/disagree about . . .  
• Another document to consider might be . . . |
| **Close Reading**         | • What claims does the author make?  
• What evidence does the author use?  
• What language (words, phrases, images, symbols) does the author use to persuade the document’s audience?  
• How does the document’s language indicate the author’s perspective? | • Identify the author’s claims about an event  
• Evaluate the evidence and reasoning the author uses to support claims  
• Evaluate author’s word choice; understand that language is used deliberately | • I think the author chose these words in order to . . .  
• The author is trying to convince me . . .  
• The author claims . . .  
• The evidence used to support the author’s claims is . . . |