

BATISTA AND THE PRESS: CARROT OR STICK?

Guiding Questions:

- Was Batista a true dictator or did he attempt balance between freedom and security?
- To what extent was Batista telling the truth when he said he did not desire press censorship?

Overview

Shortly after Batista came to power in 1952, he established the Ministry of Propaganda (later renamed the Ministry of Information) “to issue regular government news releases.” To lead this office, Batista appointed Ernesto de la Fé, a relatively unknown newsman.

Not only was this request ignored, but Batista—in an attempt to prevent possible future revolts against his government—also established **Decree Law 997 on Public Order** on August 6, 1953. This law provided for “*finer, prison sentences and the closing of businesses for those guilty of ‘damaging the dignity of the nation,’ harming its economy or expressing disrespect for the Government, its officials or organs.*”

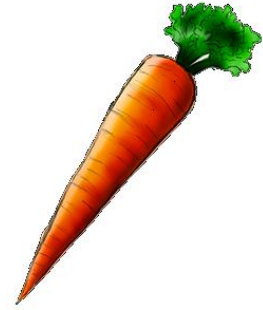
In Cuba, following the July 26, 1953 **Moncada attack**, those found guilty were sentenced to a maximum of fifteen years. However, less than two years later, on May 15, 1955, Batista granted **amnesty** to all political prisoners and the attackers were subsequently released. This occurred both because of the increased pressure of government critics and because Batista did not feel seriously threatened by the insurgents. It is crucial to note that following his release, Fidel Castro went to Mexico to once again plan future attacks against the Batista administration.

Between September 1953 and May 1955, when the rebels were imprisoned, Batista felt confident that his government could withstand any opposition and thus approached the press in a more amicable manner. During this time, any potential opponents to the government learned to censor themselves in response to the previous repression that had occurred.

Constitutional guarantees were largely suspended from the arrival of Fidel Castro on December 2, 1956, from Mexico to Batista’s flight from Cuba on December 31, 1958. In the two months following Castro’s landing in Oriente Province in Cuba, the Batista regime switched “from the big carrot to the big stick, from widespread bribery to overt censorship of the press,” according to Marvin Alisky. On January 15, 1957, Batista “proclaimed a state of siege” in response to guerrilla fighting in eastern Cuba, and once again imposed press censorship.

Carrot or Stick?

On the one hand, it is clear that Batista largely relied on an incentive policy to win the press over. From the very beginning he appointed prominent journalists of his liking to his Consultative Council where they were to serve as advisors. Additionally, Batista showed preferential treatment to the press when he ordered the proceeds from two national lotteries, totaled at approximately \$100,000, to go the Association of Reporters. Finally, Batista also bribed certain journalists to report favorably about his government. Some have argued that by the end of 1958, Batista was paying the press up to \$450,000 a month in subsidies. Possibly because he provided incentives to the press, Batista may not have felt the need to confiscate any newspapers or imprison any journalists.



On the other hand, Batista was successful in using a “stick” policy when he felt it necessary. First, he closed two major national newspapers, **La Calle** in August 1952 and July 1955 and **Noticias de Hoy** in 1953. Batista also suspended the Constitution when there was a perceived threat to his government. In the area of constitutional provisions and laws, **Batista temporarily suspended constitutional guarantees— including freedom of the press—on 5 separate occasions, for a total of 255 days.** There were actually relatively few suspensions in Batista’s early years, but in 1957 and 1958 pressure from a growing opposition prompted additional suspensions. Lastly, **Batista established Decree Law 997 on Public Order** in August 1953 in response to the July 26, 1953, armed rebellion led by Fidel Castro. This decree permitted the government to impose fines, prison sentences, and the closing of businesses for those thought to be guilty of “damaging the dignity of the nation,” its economy or **being disrespectful** to the Government of its officials. Batista’s strategies were largely influenced by the growing opposition to his government.

