

# AFRICANA

Gateway to the Black World

[Browse Africana](#)

Search:

Welcome Guest

[Home](#) > [Heritage](#) > [Castro Revisits Harlem](#)

## heritage



Photo: Cuban President Fidel Castro hugs an unidentified child during his visit to The Riverside Church Saturday, Sept. 9, 2000, in New York. AP Photo/Jose Goitia

### Castro Revisits Harlem

[Email](#)   [Letter to the Editor](#)

On Friday, September 8, after days of high-level meetings and political protocol at the UN's Millennium Summit in New York, Cuban leader Fidel Castro headed uptown with a delegation of diplomats to pay his respects to the people of Harlem. The audience of two thousand erupted into cheers of "Fidel! Fidel!" when the "jefe maximo" in military fatigues strode into Riverside Church as hundreds waiting in a line that extended around the block and down Broadway chanted the leader's name and "Cuba Si, Yankee No!"

Castro's first visit to Harlem was in September 1960, when the Cuban leader attended a UN meeting and chose to stay in Harlem's Hotel Theresa after the management of the Shelburne Hotel in midtown asked the Cuban delegation to pay for its stay in advance.

Speaking in Harlem forty years later, Castro recalled his first visit. "I had to choose between two options: either set up a tent in the patio of the UN plaza -- and as guerrillas who had just descended from the mountains that was not impossible -- or, we could go up to Harlem, to one of whose hotels I had been invited," he said. "I decided, 'I'm going to Harlem, because it is there that I will find my best friends.'"

The audience in the church -- and the hundreds outside listening to the speech through speakers -- cheered loudly, at one point breaking into an impromptu chorus of "Happy Birthday," in celebration of the Cuban leader's seventy-fourth birthday in mid-August. Castro expressed his gratitude,

saying, "It's only because of a miracle that I've survived so long," a reference to the numerous alleged assassination attempts mounted by successive American administrations.

Castro spoke in Spanish through an interpreter from 10:00 pm until after 2:00 am, decrying the inequality between the developed world and the Third World, lambasting the US for its treatment of minorities, citing statistics to show the racial bias of capital punishment in states such as Pennsylvania and specifically referring to the case of death row inmate Mumia Abu Jamal. He proudly told of his country's involvement in liberation struggles in Angola, Namibia, and South Africa, and blasted the US's "criminal embargo" against Cuba, saying the US was hypocritical for "trading with a country [South Africa] that practiced fascism and apartheid" while imposing an embargo on Cuba as punishment for its political system.

"There was no Toricelli Act, no Helms-Burton law against the regime of apartheid," said Castro, referring to the legislation intended to penalize American and non-American companies for doing business with Cuba. "All these measures have been adopted against the country that practices solidarity, Cuba, not to invest in oil or minerals" but to fight for the liberation of Africans, he continued, reminding his audience of the half million Cuban medical, development and military personnel who have worked in southern Africa since the 1960s.

Castro claimed ideological and political solidarity with Africa and the African Diaspora upon assuming power after the Cuban Revolution of 1959. In a now famous speech, Castro declared that the Revolution would aggressively tackle issues of discrimination and racial injustice in Cuba. "We all have lighter or darker skin. Lighter skin implies descent from Spaniards who themselves were colonized by Moors that came from Africa," he said. "Those who are more or less dark-skinned came directly from Africa. Moreover, nobody can consider himself as being of a pure... race."

Despite his government's stated ambition to eradicate racial discrimination, critics contend that Cuba still maintains a system of racial privilege that extends to government and is evinced in the over-representation of black Cubans in prisons and among the poor. Although many see Cuba as having had a negative record on fostering racial equality, Castro's supporters have long regarded him as a champion of African and African American causes.

On his visit to Harlem in 1960, Castro met with Malcolm X as large crowds gathered to greet the Cuban leader, while in Cuba huge rallies denounced the racism of the United States. "To Harlem's oppressed ghetto-dwellers, Castro was that bearded revolutionary who had thrown the nation's rascals out and who had told white America to go to hell," reported the *New York Citizen Call*, a black newspaper.

This time around, the crowd that stood patiently in line waiting to hear the Cuban leader's September 2000 speech seemed equally as appreciative of Castro's solidarity with black causes. "Harlem is home for Castro. We love him, he's our brother," said real estate broker and Harlem native Jabir El-Amin. "People of African descent have an affinity for him. He believes in true freedom for all peoples, for all Cubans and particularly for Africans and people of African descent. And he has stood steadfast in his beliefs, and kept his dignity and the dignity of his people despite the sanctions and pressures put on his people."

Into the wee hours of the morning, Castro spoke eloquently of the plight of African Americans and Latinos in the US and related their predicament to that of the poor in the Third World. "The world is undergoing a catastrophic situation. Don't believe the experts who feign optimism and ignore the cruel realities of the developing world," warned Castro. "We shall be entering the 21st century, and that will happen in extremely harsh conditions for the world." Castro rebuked Western governments for not doing enough to battle disease and illiteracy, and said Cuba was willing to train 250 American doctors per year, provided they return to practice in the poorer parts of the United States.

Castro's denunciations of "the existing economic and social order of the world" and the "consumption patterns" of rich nations resonated with many members of the audience.

"Fidel has confronted the pressure of the US. No one has stood up the way he has. Ninety miles away and he has not buckled. And the US still refuses to talk to Cuba as an equal, and is still trying to claim property on the island," said Richard Avaujo, managing editor of *Elpuentelatino.com*, a Latino cultural affairs magazine, as he stood in line. "How can the US say they want pluralism in Cuba, when we have dualism here, two parties with the same foreign policies and small differences domestically? How can the US say they want peace, when they're exporting weapons of mass destruction? The US is responsible for 85 percent of arms sales. The US just gave the Colombian government \$1.3 billion, which will extend the war there for another thirty years. The US has refused to stop testing bombs off the island of Vieques (in Puerto Rico), which has destroyed the environment, contaminated fish, and caused high rates of cancer. And Clinton speaks of peace and democracy. It's a joke."

Predictably, Castro's visit to Riverside Church, a Harlem institution that played a pivotal role during the civil rights and anti-war movements of the 1960s, the house of worship where Martin Luther King made his unforgettable speech against US involvement in Vietnam, stirred controversy. "Fidel Castro is a murderer," New York Mayor Rudolph Giuliani said the week before Castro's appearance in Harlem. Giuliani refused to attend a UN-sponsored cocktail reception welcoming world leaders to the Millennium Summit and explained his absence by saying, "No hobnobbing with murderers, kleptocrats, and duded-up thugs for me."

Representative Maxine Waters (D) of California and Representative Jose Serrano (D) of New York, both long-time proponents of normalization of relations with Cuba, both referred to Giuliani's abrasiveness in their introductory remarks at Castro's Harlem speech. "I would like to apologize for the bad manners of the mayor of this city," said Waters, thanking Castro for the "red carpet treatment" he afforded the delegation the congresswoman led to Cuba in 1999. "We will do no less for you," she promised.

Serrano recalled Castro's visit to the Bronx in 1995 and extended the greetings of New York's Puerto Rican community. "Thank you for solving a political problem in New York City. We didn't know what the mayor was running for in the future. Now we know he's running for the mayor of Miami!" Serrano quipped as the audience cheered. "As long as kids like Elian exist and dignified parents like Juan Miguel, we will not rest until the blockade towards Cuba ends."

Conservative commentators have repudiated the organizers of the Riverside Church event. One unsigned *New York Post* editorial attacked

Reverend Joan Brown Campbell, the former head of the National Council of Churches who campaigned for Cuban castaway Elian Gonzalez's return to Cuba. "A little odd...that someone so reflexively condemnatory of Giuliani and the NYPD in the wake of tragic accidents like the death of Amadou Diallo feels the need to suck up so shamelessly to the architect of Havana's 40-year agony," read the editorial.

Whatever one's political persuasion, relations between Cuba and the US are at a turning point, as symbolized by the highly-publicized handshake between Castro and Clinton at the UN -- a gesture both leaders have attempted to downplay. Reverend James Forbes of Riverside Church, in welcoming the audience to "an evening of solidarity with the people of Cuba," referred to the now famous handshake. "Was there any substance to the handshake?" he asked. "The people bring substance to the symbol. A prophetic handshake says the Cold War is over."

[Email](#)   [Letter to the Editor](#)

[About Us](#) | [Your Privacy](#) | [Careers](#) | [Newsletter](#) | [Contact Us](#) | [Help](#)

Africana.com web site © Copyright 1999-2003 Africana.com Inc.

Microsoft® Encarta® Africana content © Copyright 1999-2003 Microsoft Corporation. All rights reserved to media owners