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Cubans who lived through Castro's literacy program frustrated by Bernie Sanders' praise usa today Alan Gomez, USA TODAY, USA TODAY - March 13, 2020

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countryside.

and "V" for victory.

pulled out of the literacy campaign.



It was 1961, and the 17-year-old had been sent out to small, rural towns in a green

shirt, green pants and black boots as part of Fidel Castro's literacy campaign that

But Garcia knew something was strange the moment she picked up the training

materials produced by the government. The teacher's manual included 76 pages

usual ABCs, the student's manual featured "F" for Fidel, "R" for his brother, Raúl,

Within three months, Garcia's father had seen enough and arranged for her to be

Fidel

Fi del

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to

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fusil de Fidel es de

La fe afila sus ideas:

ide su ideal, de su fe!

[15]

"In those moments, when people were learning, of course it felt good. I love

teaching and that's what I wanted to do," said Garcia, 76, who left Cuba years

later and became a teacher in Miami. "But everything was designed to introduce

The history of that program will be revisited as the presidential campaign makes

After losing Michigan and other states on Tuesday, Vermont Sen. Bernie Sanders

University poll conducted last week had Biden up 61-25 over Sanders in the state.

And now Sanders is preparing to face the Cuban American exiles that he angered

when he repeated his praise for Castro's literacy program. During a Feb. 23 "60

Minutes" interview that has become required viewing in South Florida, Sanders

said Castro "totally transformed the society" in Cuba in part through his literacy

Election 2020: Bernie Sanders will keep pursuing presidential nomination with

Those who were living in Cuba at the time say Sanders' assessment is wrong on

ranking in Latin America when Castro took over. And more importantly, they say

"You can't divorce (the literacy campaign) from the political agenda that Castro

had," said Yuleisy Mena, a Cuba native and high school history teacher in Miami

who has been interviewing participants in the 1961 literacy campaign as part of

Venezuelans and Nicaraguans who fled socialist dictators in their homelands —

explains why Sanders has won the Hispanic vote in California and Texas, but is

trailing Biden among Hispanics in Florida 48% to 37%, according to a Telemundo

When Castro's bearded guerrillas marched into Havana on New Year's Day 1959

to claim power over the island, Cuba's education system was fractured but doing

Carmelo Mesa-Lago, a professor emeritus at the University of Pittsburgh who has

studied Cuba for decades, said the last census in Cuba in 1953 revealed that 76.4%

of the population was literate. He estimates literacy rose to about 79% by 1958,

the year before Castro took power, which placed Cuba fourth in Latin America.

He said Cuba ranked equally high on a number of other health and education

indicators, including the lowest infant mortality rate in all of Latin America.

While there was room for improvement in each area, Mesa-Lago said those

metrics show how Sanders' assessment of a country in desperate need of reform

"That story is not true," he said. The data "shows that Cuba was positioned very

The literacy data did show one glaring gap in Cuba's educational system. The 1953

That's where Castro focused his efforts, a sentiment that was lauded by the United

realized that the history books were quickly being rewritten. Cuba's Independence

Nations and others in the international community. But for those who

experienced it in Cuba, the educational push was confusing from the start.

Fidel Castro: Among world's most influential leaders for a half-century

Jaime Suchlicki was studying at the University of Havana in 1959 when he

Day was no longer in 1902, the year that the island broke free from a military

government established by the United States. It was suddenly Jan. 1, 1959, the

"They transformed Cuban history," said Suchlicki, director of the Cuban Studies

Mario Soto was an 10-year-old living in Havana when Castro took power. By the

start of the next school year that fall, he said the government had even changed

"Instead of 'two cows plus two cows equals four' it was 'two guerrillas plus two

guerrillas equals four,'" said Soto, a retired engineer and telecommunications

Sergio Rodriguez Puig, who grew up in Ciego de Avila in central Cuba, found

similar changes in his workbooks. Just eight years old at the time, he was no

longer asked to count up balloons or butterflies, but guns and tanks instead.

innocent math book," said Rodriguez Puig, 67, whose family left Cuba in 1960

after seeing how quickly the revolution was shifting toward communism. He lived

The literacy campaign started in earnest in 1961, which the Cuban regime dubbed

"The Year of Education." At the core of the program was enlisting 100,000 young

Cubans — from age 10 to 19 — to trek into the countryside and teach the farmers,

ranch hands and others far from Havana the basics of reading and writing.

"You see the insidiousness of their brain-washing already, in a seemingly

and worked for 50 years in New Orleans before retiring to Miami.

Institute and a professor emeritus at the University of Miami.

census found that 88.4% of people living in Cuba's cities were literate, but only

high in Latin America in terms of education and health care."

58.2% of people living in rural areas could read and write.

well when compared with other Latin American nations.

are suspicious of any political candidate who even mentions socialism. And it

her Ph.D. dissertation at Florida International University. "This was a mass

That viewpoint explains why so many Cuban Americans in Florida — and

multiple counts. They say Cuba's literacy rate was already among the highest-

the literacy campaign Castro implemented in 1961 was more political

is desperate for a win in the Sunshine State. But he's already being pummeled

there by former Vice President Joe Biden in the polls — a Florida Atlantic

La Isla se fía de él,

su Isla.

1961. "F" is for Fidel.

campaign.

"Is that a bad thing?" he said.

indoctrination than basic education.

mobilization used for indoctrination."

poll released Wednesday.

was flawed.

day Castro took power.

the math textbooks.

executive who now lives outside Atlanta.

communism. That was it."

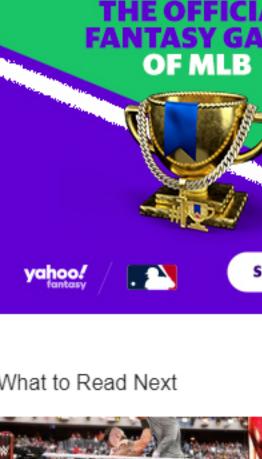
its way toward the critical swing state of Florida.

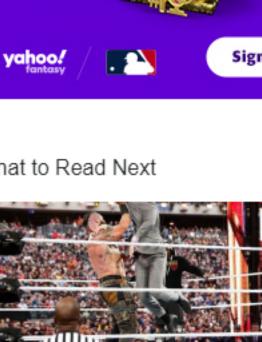
eyes on Sunday debate, despite narrow path ahead

of chapters outlining the glories of Castro's revolution and the dangers of

imperialism and just 20 pages of suggested vocabulary words. Instead of the

was promoted as a way to eradicate illiteracy on the Caribbean island.





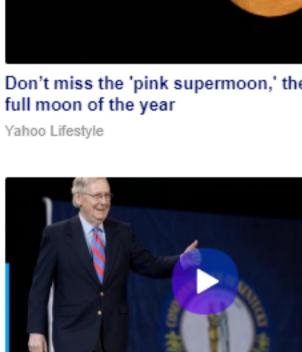












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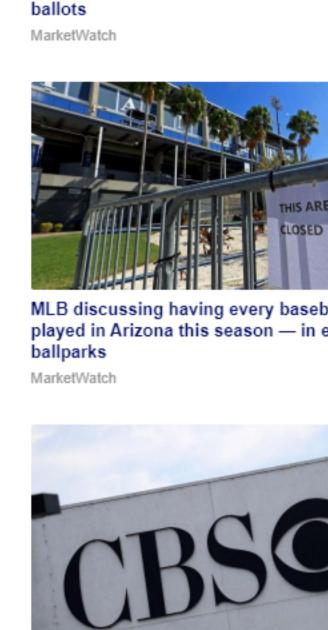
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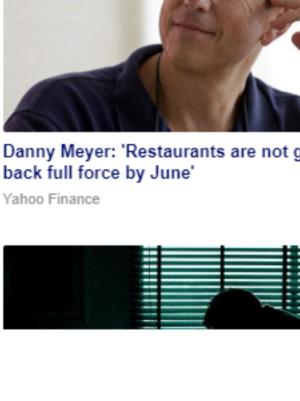


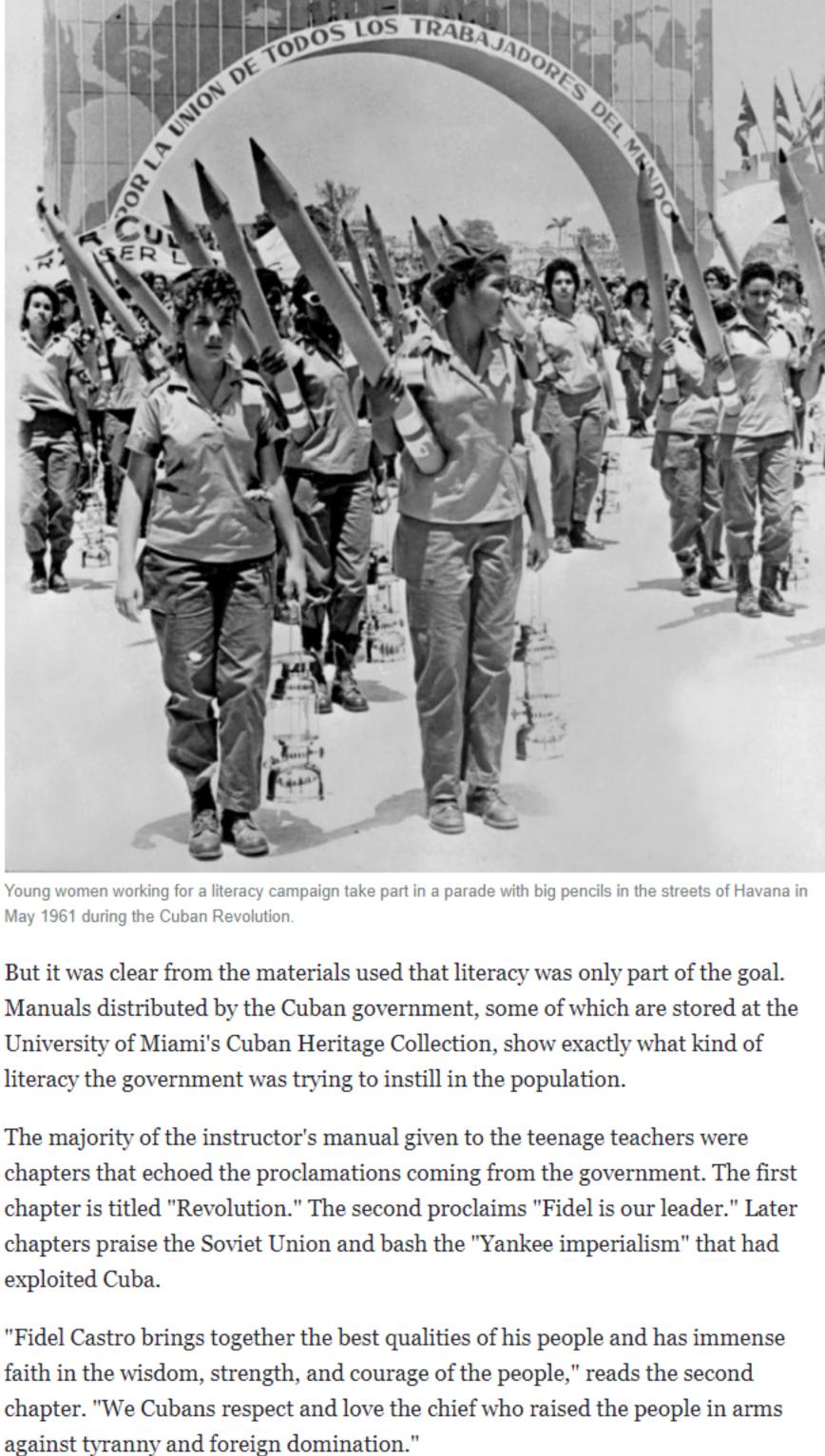
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it "involuntary volunteerism." Soto said there was pressure on students to participate in the program and to accept the new lessons being taught in schools. He said that after speaking out in class too many times and being suspected of destroying a picture of Fidel Castro that hung in a classroom, his principal called his mother into the school and delivered a thinly-veiled threat. "They said, 'If you want, he could also choose to go to a technical school and we

The final section of the manual provides 20 pages of vocabulary words and

are surprising: the Associated Press, freedom of the press.

FBI, the Klu Klux Klan, the State Department and "gringo."

people."

phrases that could be used during lessons. Some are basic: democracy, resources,

tourism. Some are militaristic: the art of war, blockade, foreign aggression. Some

And many are focused on the organizations and people of the United States: the

The definition for the former Soviet Union describes it as a, "Nation formed by

exploitation of man by man, since in it the goods of production belong to the

While the Cuban government said all the teenagers who participated in the

the union of several republics, which have a socialist regime and where there is no

literacy program were volunteers, many Cubans laughed at that assertion, calling

can send him to the Soviet Union or East Germany to study engineering," Soto said. "That's when my mom got really scared." Within weeks, the family fled to Florida. Garcia, the former 17-year-old who taught mostly elderly people in their homes in

central Cuba, said she sometimes strayed away from the curriculum, teaching her

students to read with whatever other books or newspapers were lying around. But for the most part, she felt she had to stick to the script.

"I was scared," she said. "Imagine, I was a kid. You were dominated by fear." The most disturbing part for those teachers was the final exam. Mena, the history teacher who has been interviewing teachers in the literacy campaign, said that for many, that meant writing a "thank you" letter to Castro himself.

In the end, those who participated in the literacy program were left torn by what

they did. Mena said they all said they enjoyed teaching people the basics of

reading and writing. But as the days and months wore on, they realized they were taking part in something different. "It was a farce and the disillusionment was real," Mena said. "They had to

Cuba for what it was and they saw the new government for what it was." Bernie setback: Biden racks up more big wins and widens delegate lead, but

reevaluate the larger context of what they did. Their naivete went away. They saw

This article originally appeared on USA TODAY: Election 2020: Bernie Sanders' praise for Fidel Castro angers teachers

Sanders says he'll keep fighting

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