

**MODERN COSTA RICA  
(1948-PRESENT) - JOSE  
FIGUERES FERRER: DON  
PEPE**



# MODERN COSTA RICA (1948-PRESENT) - JOSE FIGUERES FERRER: DON PEPE

## Description

Through the investigation of primary and secondary sources, students here will identify, understand and be able to explain the details of how Figueres came to power in Costa Rica in 1948, what changes to Costa Rican domestic society he instituted by executive decree or supervised through overseeing the writing of a new constitution, how he positioned Costa Rica as a powerbroker in international circles, and how the legacy of Don Pepe is seen by the people of Costa Ricans today as they move forward into the twenty-first century. For American students using this lesson in Spanish classes, there will be specific primary and secondary sources in Spanish, although most of the lesson plan will be in English.

## Subjects

World History, Latin American History, Spanish

## Grade Level

11-12

## Duration

90 minutes

## Tour Links

- Pepe Figures Statue, San Jose
- Plaza de la Democracia, San Jose
- 10,000 Colones (Costa Rican Money)

## Essential Questions

- Who was Jose Figueres Ferrer? By what nickname is he better known in Costa Rica?
- Where was Figueres educated? How did this education help play a role when he came to power?
- How did Figueres become a national hero during the Costa Rican Civil War of 1948?
- What major decisions did Figueres make once he came to power after the Civil War of 1948?
- What was the relationship between the Costa Rican government under Figueres and the United States?
- How is Figueres seen by the people of Costa Rica today?

## Academic Summary

### Primary Sources

The future of mankind cannot include armed forces. Police, yes, because people are imperfect.

*Jose Figueres Ferrer, speech abolishing the Costa Rican military, 01 Dec 1948*  
Public officials are mere custodians of authority. They must carry out the duties entrusted to them by law and cannot usurp powers which the law has not conferred upon them.

*Costa Rican Constitution of 1949, Article 11*

The Army as a permanent institution is abolished. There shall be necessary police forces for surveillance and the preservation of public order.

*Costa Rican Constitution of 1949, Article 12*

All persons are equal before the law and no discrimination contrary to human dignity shall be practiced.

*Costa Rican Constitution of 1949, Article 33*

The State shall seek the greatest welfare for all inhabitants of the country, organizing and promoting production and the most appropriate distribution of wealth.

*Costa Rican Constitution of 1949, Article 50*

Every worker is entitled to a minimum wage, to be fixed periodically, for a normal working day, which will provide for his welfare and a decent living. Wages shall always be equal for equal work performed under identical conditions of efficiency.

*Costa Rican Constitution of 1949, Article 57*

A regular working day for daytime work may not exceed eight hours a day or forty-eight hours a week. The regular working day for night work may not exceed six hours a day or thirty-six hours a week. Overtime work shall be paid at a rate of fifty percent above the stipulated wages or salaries. However, these provisions shall not apply in well-defined exceptional cases, to be determined by law.

*Costa Rican Constitution of 1949, Article 58*

All workers shall be entitled to one day of rest after six consecutive workdays and to annual paid leave, the duration and time of which shall be regulated by law, but which shall not, in any case, be less than two weeks for every fifty weeks of continuous service, all without prejudice to the well-defined exceptions established by law.

*Costa Rican Constitution of 1949, Article 59*

The State shall promote the construction of low-cost housing and create a family homestead for workers.

*Costa Rican Constitution of 1949, Article 65*

### Secondary Summary

On 08 Jun 1990, former Costa Rican President Jose Maria Hipolito Figueres Ferrer, known to the people affectionately as "Don Pepe," passed away after a heart attack at

his home in San Jose. He was 83 years old. Normally the passing of an elderly former head of state in a small Latin American country with neither economic nor military power would garner little international attention, but this case was different. Don Pepe had been an inspiration to millions of people both in Costa Rica, across Latin America and around the world.

Figueres had been born into an upper middle class family in Costa Rica. He was educated in the United States at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology (MIT) and was fluent in English. He was a successful farmer and businessman before World War II.

In 1948 a bloody civil war broke out in Costa Rica over a disputed presidential election. When it was over after 40 days, 2000 lay dead and Figueres had come to power at the head of the "Junta Fundadora" (Founding Council), a body charged with writing a new constitution. Although he had grown up with means, Figueres was popular among for the masses for his stances on political, economic and social issues. Politically, he leaned to the left, normally favoring the common people over business and government. As the head of the founding council, Figueres was able to exert a great deal of pull on the delegates writing the new constitution. In the meantime, Don Pepe ruled the country by executive decree, establishing a system that would be very difficult to change after he was gone. In essence, he turned Costa Rica into a socialist state, establishing such ideas and institutions such as basic welfare and the civil service. He also decreed the nationalization of the banking system, established universal suffrage for all citizens and set up a free public education system. He also abolished the armed forces (leaving in place only a national police force for ensuring the implementation of law and order), a decision apparently inspired by socialist books Don Pepe had read at MIT in the 1920s. During the Depression of the 1930s, he had been an admirer of many of FDR's New Deal programs, but also felt that the American president had not gone far enough to promote the cause of the working class over business interests. He also took note that the American Supreme Court eventually declared much of the New Deal to be unconstitutional, a problem he would rectify when directing the writing of the Costa Rican constitution after he came to power.

The Costa Rican Constitution of 1949 took almost 18 months to finish. Unlike the US Constitution most students are used to reading, the Costa Rican one is a much longer document that incorporates and specifically spells out basic rights for all citizens such as nationalized healthcare, minimum wages, vacations and educational opportunities. It also officially abolished the military. Rather than being purposely vague on many points like the US version (which allows for interpretation over time), the Costa Rican Constitution specifies rights and responsibilities in a plain language specifically written so commoners could understand it. When it was complete, Figueres handed power over to Otilio Ulate Blanco, the candidate who had been denied victory in the 1948 election that precipitated the civil war. In stepping down peacefully, Don Pepe started a tradition not often seen in Latin America that has continued in Costa Rica to the present day (although it would be decades before another political party came to power). Figueres would eventually serve three terms as president in Costa Rica (1948-49, 53-58 and 70-74). He was never without controversy and style. Although only 5'3" tall, he stood up to some of the biggest players in the Western Hemisphere, including the

United States and Cuba, vowing throughout his life to keep Costa Rica independent during the cold war. That is not to say he favored total neutrality, but rather that he used his position to get the best deal for his country. He hated dictators, and chastised the US for supporting them. In 1971, the little president even stood on the tarmac at San Jose's international airport and pointed a submachine gun towards the cockpit of a plane that had been seized by supporters of General Anastasio Somoza Debayle of Nicaragua. The hijackers eventually surrendered. Don Pepe had a way with people. When he finally retired from public life in the 1980s, Figueres was one of the most beloved leaders in Latin American history. In many ways, his legacy can be seen all over Costa Rica today. His face is even on the front of the Costa Rican 10,000 Colones bill (worth just short of \$20 US today).

Through the investigation of primary and secondary sources, students here will identify, understand and be able to explain the details of how Figueres came to power in Costa Rica in 1948, what changes to Costa Rican domestic society he instituted by executive decree or supervised through overseeing the writing of a new constitution, how he positioned Costa Rica as a powerbroker in international circles, and how the legacy of Don Pepe is seen by the people of Costa Ricans today as they move forward into the twenty-first century.

For American students using this lesson in Spanish classes, there will be specific primary and secondary sources in Spanish, although most of the lesson plan will be in English.

## **Objectives**

1. Students will identify, understand and be able to explain how Jose Figueres Ferrer came to power in Costa Rica after the Civil War of 1948.
2. Students will identify, understand and be able to explain what changes "Don Pepe" brought to Costa Rican society through executive decree and/or his supervision of the writing of the new constitution.
3. Students will identify, understand and be able to explain how Figueres was able to position Costa Rica between competing global powers in the 1950s, 1960s and 1970s.
4. Students will identify, understand and be able to explain legacy of Don Pepe's reign for the people of Costa Rica today.
5. Students in Spanish classes will use context clues and Spanish-English dictionaries to correctly define words in the target language.

## Procedure

### I. Anticipatory Set

- Writing / Question: Is it possible for a leader who comes to power through a violent revolution to institute true democratic reforms? (5 min)
- Handouts – Copies of documents and readings from the websites listed. (5 min)

### II. Body of Lesson

- Lecture / PPT – Jose Figueres (15 min)
- Suggestion: Give students paper copies of the PowerPoints below (in Spanish) so they can follow along. Students should have access to a Spanish-English Dictionary as well.
- Video – Documentary: Pepe Figueres – Video is in Spanish (25 min)
- Independent Activity – Students read the articles and sources on Don Pepe Figueres, taking notes as appropriate. (20 min)
- Suggestion: Have the students read some of these articles and sources for homework before class.
- Suggestion: Advanced/AP students should focus on sources in Spanish.
- Group Activity – Socratic Seminar: Discussion on how Figueres was able to come to power in Costa Rica after the civil war in 1948. What reforms did he institute? How did he bring about many of his reforms? What are the major differences between the US and Costa Rican Constitutions? (15 min)

### III. Closure

- Assessment / DBQ – Essay: Explain in detail how Figueres came to power in Costa Rica in 1948, what changes to Costa Rican domestic society he instituted by executive decree or supervised through overseeing the writing of a new constitution, how he positioned Costa Rica as a powerbroker in international circles, and how the legacy of Don Pepe is seen by the people of Costa Ricans today as they move forward into the twenty-first century.
- Alternate Assessment for Spanish Classes – With the assistance of a Spanish-English dictionary, Students should translate selected articles relating to the military and/or social programs from the Constitution of the Republic of Costa Rica (both English and Spanish versions are in the web links below) – Articles 12, 33, 50, 57, 58, 59 and 65 are recommended.

## **Extension**

### **On tour: Plaza de la Democracia, San Jose**

While on tour, students can visit the Plaza de la Democracia in downtown San Jose, where they can see for themselves where on 01 Dec 1948 then President Figueres demonstrated Costa Rica's commitment to peace by smashing a wall of what was then the military barracks. In a fiery and impassioned speech, Figueres declared to the world that he was abolishing the country's military. The event is also set as the background image on the Costa Rican 10000 Colones bill, which has Don Pepe's face on the front. Today, the site is home to the National Museum. While at the site, students should look for the bronze statue of Don Pepe overlooking San Jose's downtown.



## Web Links

### Lesson Plan Websites

- [www.elespiritudel48.org/](http://www.elespiritudel48.org/)  
El Espiritu Del 48 (website in Spanish) – great website in Spanish. It contains a great deal of information on Don Pepe and his role in Costa Rican history. The site is highly recommended for both teachers and students.
- [qcostarica.com/2013/12/15/costa-ricas-peace-dividend-how-abolishing-the-military-paid-off/](http://qcostarica.com/2013/12/15/costa-ricas-peace-dividend-how-abolishing-the-military-paid-off/)  
Costa Rica's Peace Dividend: How Abolishing the Military Paid Off (web article in English). From Q Costa Rica, an English based website on Costa Rica.
- [www.nytimes.com/1990/06/09/obituaries/jose-figueres-ferrer-is-dead-at-83-led-costa-ricans-to-democracy.html](http://www.nytimes.com/1990/06/09/obituaries/jose-figueres-ferrer-is-dead-at-83-led-costa-ricans-to-democracy.html)  
Jose Figueres Ferrer is Dead at 83 (web article in English). From the archives at the NY times newspaper, 09 Jun 1990.
- [articles.latimes.com/1990-06-09/news/mn-591\\_1\\_costa-rican-government](http://articles.latimes.com/1990-06-09/news/mn-591_1_costa-rican-government)  
Jose Figueres (web article in English). From the archives at the Los Angeles times newspaper, 09 Jun 1990.
- [www.wipo.int/wipolex/en/text.jsp?file\\_id=219833](http://www.wipo.int/wipolex/en/text.jsp?file_id=219833)  
Constitución Política de la República de Costa Rica – in Spanish (primary source)
- [www.wipo.int/wipolex/en/text.jsp?file\\_id=219959](http://www.wipo.int/wipolex/en/text.jsp?file_id=219959)  
Political Constitution of the Republic of Costa Rica – in English (primary source)
- [insidecostarica.com/dailynews/2006/september/26/nac03.htm](http://insidecostarica.com/dailynews/2006/september/26/nac03.htm)  
Don Pepe Remembered (web article). From Inside Costa Rica, an English language news source in Costa Rica.
- [www.fundacionjoseguillermocarrillo.com/sitio/entrevista\\_jose\\_figueres\\_ferrer.php](http://www.fundacionjoseguillermocarrillo.com/sitio/entrevista_jose_figueres_ferrer.php)  
Jose Figueres Ferrer (Spanish)
- [www.elespiritudel48.org/multi/donpepe.ppt](http://www.elespiritudel48.org/multi/donpepe.ppt)  
Don Pepe (PowerPoint in Spanish) – from El Espiritu Del 48 – note: this ppt has some socialist overtones in it, especially on the last page.
- [www.elespiritudel48.org/multi/legado.ppt](http://www.elespiritudel48.org/multi/legado.ppt)  
Don Pepe Figueres Ideario y legado (PowerPoint in Spanish) – from El Espiritu Del 48 – suggestion: for Advanced / AP students – also highly recommended for teachers.
- [www.teachingchannel.org/videos/choosing-primary-source-documents?fd=1](http://www.teachingchannel.org/videos/choosing-primary-source-documents?fd=1)  
Reading Like a Historian: Primary Source Documents (video). Great 2-minute video on how to incorporate primary sources into the Common Core and history classes. From Shilpa Duvoor of Summit Preparatory Charter High School in Redwood City, CA. Highly recommended for teachers.
- [www.youtube.com/watch?v=tlRbhK72ZPg](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=tlRbhK72ZPg)  
Documental Pepe Figueres (video in Spanish) – Part 1 of 6. The entire video is approximately 60 minutes, and so is probably too long for most in-class showings, but it is well worth it. The video is in Spanish.
- [www.youtube.com/watch?v=Cz4aDy6D2\\_k&list=PL874BA205BE160484](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Cz4aDy6D2_k&list=PL874BA205BE160484)

Costa Rica – The History Channel (video in Spanish). This video, produced by the History Channel, is in Spanish and tells the complete history of Costa Rica from Columbus to the modern age.

### **Background Information**

- [www.en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Jose\\_Figueres\\_Ferrer](http://www.en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Jose_Figueres_Ferrer)  
Jose Figueres Ferrer – Wikipedia article (English)
- [www.es.wikipedia.org/wiki/Jose\\_Figueres\\_Ferrer](http://www.es.wikipedia.org/wiki/Jose_Figueres_Ferrer)  
Jose Figueres Ferrer – Wikipedia article (Spanish)
- [www.en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Military\\_of\\_Costa\\_Rica](http://www.en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Military_of_Costa_Rica)  
Military of Costa Rica – Wikipedia article

### **Key Terms**

- Civil war
- Constitution
- Costa Rica
- Election
- Jose Figueres Ferrer
- President

