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“If That Is Heaven, We Would Rather Go to Hell”: Contextualizing US–Cuba Relations

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Abstract

The history of Cuba is one of conquest and rebellion. Since the arrival of Columbus, it has had two colonial masters: Spain and the United States. Spain, after the collapse of its empire, ceased to be a threat to the peoples of America. Now, the Spanish are among the principal investors in Cuba, and make up a high percentage of tourists to the island. The United States, engaged in empire-building as sole superpower and continuing to pursue a half-century-old policy of regime change in Cuba, is still seen by the Cubans as the greatest threat to their independence and sovereignty. This article reviews the history of relations between the two countries, seeking to contextualize their social origins and political evolution, concluding that an improvement in relations is unlikely absent a profound change in the political economy of either country, or of both, a change that could occur internally or be caused by external factors.

“Si así es el cielo, preferimos el infierno”: contextualizando las relaciones EUA–Cuba

La historia de Cuba es una de conquista y rebelión. Desde la llegada de Colón Cuba ha tenido dos dueños coloniales: España y Estados Unidos. España, después del colapso de su imperio, dejó de ser amenaza para los países de América. Ahora los españoles figuran entre los principales inversionistas en Cuba, y representan un alto porcentaje de los turistas a la isla. Estados Unidos, empeñado en construir un imperio como única superpotencia, es visto todavía por los cubanos como la mayor amenaza a su independencia y soberanía. Este artículo repasa la historia de las relaciones entre los dos países, buscando contextualizar sus orígenes sociales y evolución política, concluyendo que una mejora en las relaciones no es probable sin mediar un cambio profundo en la economía política de uno u otro país o de ambos, cambio que podría darse por causales internos o externos.

132 L. E. Rumbaut, R. G. Rumbaut / Societies Without Borders 2 (2007) 131–152

“Si nous sommes en paradis, nous irions plutôt à l’enfer”: mettant dans un cadre des Relations d’Etats-Unis–Cuba

L’histoire du Cuba est une de la conquête et de la rébellion. Depuis l’arrivée de Columbus, elle a deux maîtres coloniaux: L’Espagne et les Etats-Unis. L’Espagne, après que la chute de son empire, cessé d’être une menace aux peuples de l’Amérique. Dès maintenant, les Espagnols sont parmi les principaux investisseurs au Cuba, et font grande partie des touristes à l’île. Les Etats-Unis s’occupent dans le bâtiment d’empire en tant que seule superpuissance et continuent à poursuivre une politique des années cinquantes de changement de régime du Cuba et donc, est encore vue par les Cubains comme la plus grande menace pour leur indépendance et leur souveraineté. Cet article passe en revue l’histoire des relations entre les deux pays, cherchant à mettre dans un contexte leurs origines sociales et évolution politique. Il finit en disant qu’une amélioration des relations est peu probable sans un changement profond de l’économie politique du pays, ou de celle des deux, un changement qui pourrait se produire intérieurement ou être provoqué par des facteurs externes.

Keywords

Cuba, Spanish colonialism, US imperialism, US–Cuba relations, Platt Amendment, Fidel Castro, José Martí, Hatuey

Introduction

Every student in Cuba learns early in life about Hatuey, the Taíno chieftain. Witness to the horrors inflicted by the Spanish upon the indigenous people in nearby Hispaniola, and wanted by the Spanish, he escaped to Cuba to warn and organize the Taínos who had settled there. The Spanish did capture him, in 1512, and prepared to burn him at the stake. Before Hatuey was burned, a priest explained to him about heaven and hell, and that if he converted to the god of the Spanish he would go to heaven. Hatuey asked the priest, pointing to the conquistadores around him, whether they, too, were going to heaven. Assured that they would be there, Hatuey told the priest that he would rather go to hell. This story – a scary and heart-rending tale for a schoolchild – has been seared into the synapses of every Cuban student since long before the Revolution of 1959 as the original legend of Cuban identity and nationhood. The bar of patriotism in Cuba is set high early in life.

About 250 years after Hatuey’s death, and to the north, another nation was being born. One of its founders inspired the colonists struggling against a foreign despot with the slogan that would define their identity: *Give Me Liberty or Give Me Death!* Students in the United States learn, also early in life, this battle cry. One might think that the heirs of Hatuey and Patrick Henry, eventually separated by only a few dozen miles of sea, would be best friends in understanding and solidarity. That has not been the case.

L. E. Rumbaut, R. G. Rumbaut / Societies Without Borders 2 (2007) 131–152 133

The history of Cuba is one of conquest and rebellion. Since the arrival of Columbus, it has had two colonial masters: Spain and the US. Spain, after the collapse of its empire, ceased to be a threat to the peoples of America. Now, the Spanish are among the principal investors in Cuba, and make up a high percentage of tourists to the island. The US, engaged in empire-building as sole superpower, is still seen by the Cubans as the greatest threat to their independence and sovereignty. This article reviews the history of relations between the two countries, seeking to contextualize their social origins and political evolution, concluding that an improvement in relations is unlikely absent a profound change in the political economy of either country, or of both, a change that could occur internally or be caused by external factors.

US Expansion West and South

The nascent US set ambitious sights on expanding into the vast lands upon which it bordered.¹ To the west, it would purchase the Louisiana territory in 1803, and, to the south, Florida in 1819. Further to the west, it would take half of Mexico by war in 1848 and force the Gadsden Purchase in 1853. Near the end of the 19th century, the border with Mexico was fixed, and the new country had moved on to purchase Alaska and to take Hawaii under the banner of Manifest Destiny. The southernmost maritime border, the tip of Florida, pointed to new lands that cried out to be taken, after decades of waiting. Spain had lost most of its vast American empire by 1826. Toward the end of the 19th century it held only two small possessions: Cuba and Puerto Rico. The rise of the US, parallel to the fall of Spain's empire, left for the peoples of the islands only two likely outcomes: independence or annexation to the US.

Cuba was well known to the leaders of the US. When the Revolutionary Army under George Washington was at its lowest point and needed money, Jean Baptiste Rochambeau sought funding from Admiral Francois Joseph Paul de Grasse, who at the time led a French fleet in the Caribbean. He, in turn, asked for help from the Ladies of Havana, as they have come to be known, society ladies of patriotic sentiment who worked with local merchants to raise the money. The merchants wanted to break with Spanish mercantilism in order to trade with the nearby colonies, and both they and

¹⁾ The current population of Havana alone, 2.2 million, is roughly equivalent to the entire European and African population, 2.5 million, of the Thirteen Colonies around 1775.

the Havana ladies, like General Washington, disliked the British. They donated jewels and about 1.2 million pounds sterling, sufficient to pay all the salaries of a 5,000-man detachment for four months.² Historian Stephen Bonsal wrote later (1945) that “The million that was supplied by the ladies of Havana, may, with truth, be regarded as the ‘bottom dollars’ upon which the edifice of American independence was erected.”³

John Adams, the second president of the US, in 1783 had designated Cuba as a natural point of expansion for the US, and urged that the US prevent the independence of Cuba until it could be pried loose from Spain, a policy followed until the US eventually defeated Spain in war more than a century later. Thomas Jefferson, who saw that control of Cuba could transform the US into the “masters of the Caribbean,” observed that Cuba’s “independence against all the world *except* Spain would be nearly as valuable to us as if it were our own.”⁴ In November 1805, President Jefferson told the British minister in Washington, according to the latter, that “In the event of hostilities he considered that East and West Florida and successively the Island of Cuba, the possession of which was necessary to the defense of Louisiana and Florida... would be an easy conquest...”⁵ By 1823, he would counsel James Monroe to “oppose, with all our means,” Cuba’s “transfer to any power, by conquest, cession or in any other way.”⁶

US leaders also knew that the revolution in Haiti⁷ had driven many of the surviving French – allies of the US – to Cuba. Cuba’s fertile lands were rich in precious woods, and, with slave labor, produced great wealth in sugar and rum. With its fine harbors, beautiful beaches, and strategic location, the island was ripe for the picking. In 1823, Secretary of State John Quincy Adams instructed the US minister in Spain on the laws of political as well as physical gravity in this manner: “... if an apple, severed by the tempest from its native tree, cannot but fall to the ground, Cuba, forcibly disjoined from its unnatural connection with Spain and incapable of self-support, can gravitate only to the North American union, which by the same law of nature, cannot cast her off from its bosom.” He added: “Cuba... has become an object of transcendent importance to the political and commercial interests

² Lasaga 1984, Vol. I, p. 114.

³ Bonsal 1945, p. 120.

⁴ Thomas Jefferson to James Monroe, June 11, 1823. See Pérez, Jr. 1997, pp. 40–41.

⁵ Portell Vilá, Vol. I, p. 142. Cf. Williams, p. 410.

⁶ Thomas Jefferson to James Monroe, October 24, 1823. See Pérez, Jr. 1997, p. 41.

⁷ The Haitian Revolution lasted from 1791 to 1803.

L. E. Rumbaut, R. G. Rumbaut / Societies Without Borders 2 (2007) 131–152 135

of our Union... The annexation of Cuba to our federal republic will be indispensable to the continuance and integrity of the Union itself."⁸

Jefferson concurred. In his letter to President Monroe of 24 October 1823 he wrote: "I candidly confess that I have ever looked on Cuba as the most interesting addition which could ever be made to our system of states. The controul which with Florida point, this island would give us over the Gulph of Mexico and the countries, and the Isthmus bordering on it, as well as all those whose waters flow into it, would fill up the measure of our political well-being."⁹ In the same year, President Monroe issued his warning to Europe to stay out of America – which, he considered, would thereafter belong to the "sphere of influence" of the US.

The very first territory to the south of the US was Mexico, which would be attacked 23 years later. The next territory to the south of the US was Cuba.

An Empire Ends, Another Begins

Spain still had the power and wealth to defend its remaining colonies in the Caribbean, but Cubans had their minds set on joining the rest of liberated America. In 1868, shortly after the end of the Civil War in the US, Cuban independence was proclaimed and armed struggle began. The Ten Years' War dragged on without resolution, and following negotiations an unquiet peace lasted for 17 years. In 1895, war broke out again: the War of Independence. The commander in chief of the Cuban army was Máximo Gómez, who spent more than half his life fighting for Cuban independence. A Dominican who had abandoned the Spanish army and moved to Cuba, he was, like Hatuey, from Hispaniola.

Spain sent 100,000 soldiers to take on the newly-rebellious Cubans. The empire was spent, however. Year by year, the Cubans gained ground. The US was watching. Whereas during the Ten Years' War the US had been focused on reconstruction and on reuniting a bitterly divided nation, it was now in a position to make real the earlier dreams of its own Caribbean empire. For

⁸) John Quincy Adams to Hugh Nelson, April 28, 1823. See Portell Vilá, Vol. I, p. 226.

⁹) See Pérez, Jr. 1997, p. 39. The text of the letter is available online via the Jefferson Papers, Library of Congress: [http://memory.loc.gov/cgi-bin/query/r?ammem/mjtj:@field\(DOCID+@lit\(jm040139\)\)](http://memory.loc.gov/cgi-bin/query/r?ammem/mjtj:@field(DOCID+@lit(jm040139))).

decades, it had waited for Spain to lose its grip more than for Cuba to break free. It was time to prevent independence through direct action.

The ideological leader of the war was José Martí, one of America's greatest intellectuals and men of action. He had lived in the US, organizing cigar workers in Tampa and writing for the *New York Sun* and other publications. At first an admirer of the energy and industriousness he found in the US, he later concluded that the country posed the principal threat to Cuba and the nations beyond. In a letter to a Mexican friend shortly before he was killed in battle he wrote:

Every day I am in danger of giving my life for my country and for my duty – for I understand that duty, and am disposed to carry it out – to prevent the United States, with the independence of Cuba, from expanding throughout the Antilles and falling with that additional strength on our lands of America. All I have done so far, and will do, is for that purpose.¹⁰

This is the letter in which he wrote of the “brutal and turbulent North which despises [us],” and that “I have lived in the monster and I know its entrails; my sling is David’s.”

Martí was killed in battle, as was the great general Antonio Maceo, for whom were named many African–Americans in honor of the black general who ran circles around the Spanish army. Notwithstanding the painful losses – and the decimation of the Cuban population (at least 300,000, nearly 20% of Cuba's 1.6 million people, died between 1895 and 1897), the collapse of the Cuban economy, the horrendous consequences of the policy of *reconcentración* (forced urbanization of the rural population) introduced by Spanish general Valeriano Weyler, hunger and unemployment, the spread of disease – the war proceeded.¹¹ Victory and nationhood were within grasp when the 24-gun battleship *Maine* (making a “courtesy call”) exploded in Havana harbor, leading to a declaration of war by the US against Spain. Within hours, President McKinley made clear that the US would not recognize the Cuban declaration of independence. In short order, Teddy Roosevelt led his Rough Riders up San Juan Hill – with critical although seldom-mentioned assistance from *mambises*¹² under general Calixto García – and Spain surrendered to the US. The terms of the surrender in Santiago de Cuba

¹⁰ *Gran Enciclopedia Martiana*, Vol. 5, p. 322.

¹¹ Foner 1972, Vol. I, pp. 98–118. Cf. Pérez, Jr. 1998.

¹² “*Mambí*” was the Cuban term for a combatant for independence.

L. E. Rumbaut, R. G. Rumbaut / Societies Without Borders 2 (2007) 131–152 137

barred the Cubans from entering the city at all, and defined Santiago as territory conquered by the US and as such “part of the Union.” The “splendid little war” (as John Hay proclaimed it after the fall of Santiago) lasted sixty days, but it transmogrified a long-fought liberation struggle into a US war of conquest.

What had been the Cuban War of Independence became, in the US, the “Spanish–American War.” The peace treaty was signed in Paris, without Cubans at the table. Spain ceded to the US its colonies – Cuba, Puerto Rico, the Philippines, and Guam. The Spanish empire in America was gone, and the US, ascendant, began its imperialist era. The Cubans went from one colonial master to another. On 8 January 1899 General Máximo Gómez wrote in his diary:

The attitude of the American Government towards the heroic Cuban people in these historic moments reveals, to my judgment, no more than a grand business, aside from the dangers for the Country presented by a situation that mortifies the public spirit and hinders organization in all of its branches... when all was completely its own work, of all the inhabitants of the island without distinction of nationality... there cannot be in Cuba the true moral peace that the peoples need for their happiness and good fortune; for the duration of the transitional government, imposed by the spreading force of a foreign, and therefore illegitimate, Power incompatible with the principles that the entire Country has sustained for so long and in defense of which half its sons were sacrificed and its wealth consumed.¹³

An Independence of Sorts

Direct US control of Cuba lasted from 1898 to 1902. The Cuban yearning for independence still burned brightly. The US settled for granting limited sovereignty: it would keep Puerto Rico as a colony, and also reserve its rights to the Isle of Youth (formerly the Isle of Pines, Stevenson’s legendary Treasure Island, off the southern coast of Cuba’s main island). The US would also keep as a coaling station for steamships the deep-water port at Guantánamo, which provided a window on Jamaica, Haiti, and the islands to the east, as well as a second harbor, Bahía Honda. The US would soon sign a treaty with the new state of Panama, in 1903,¹⁴ with the purpose of taking over the work

¹³) Cordero Michel 2005, p. 230.

¹⁴) Actually, the treaty was signed with the French director of the canal company, Philippe Bunau-Varilla.

on the canal. Roosevelt, who had become president in 1901, described Guantánamo as the “absolute necessary strategic base” for controlling the Caribbean and the routes to the Panama Canal.

By then, it was clear that Patrick Henry’s stirring words about liberty did not necessarily apply to other nations, just as they had not applied to the Africans or Native Americans in the Thirteen Colonies. President Roosevelt had plans for Cuba, and they did not involve liberty from the US. The army of occupation invested in sanitation and public hygiene, principally to combat the same infectious diseases that had dramatically slowed the work of the Panama Canal under the French, but disallowed any nation-building on the part of the Cubans. Indeed, the US chose to reappoint to public office many of the Spaniards who had served the former colonial master.

Some in Congress disdained the new imperial course of the US; some simply held economic interests that would be inconvenienced by denying independence. The deal finally agreed to was advanced by Connecticut Senator Orville Platt, based on principles previously laid out by Secretary of War Elihu Root: Cuba would be permitted a formal independence upon certain conditions being met. Platt amended a pending authorizations bill to stipulate the conditions of Cuban independence, and the constitution of the new republic was re-written to ensure that Cuba would maintain a low public debt; refrain from signing any treaty impairing its obligation to the United States; grant to the United States the right of intervention to protect life, liberty, and property; validate the acts of the outgoing military government; and, if requested, provide long-term naval leases. A Permanent Treaty of 1903 set forth the details of the military bases to be used by the US.¹⁵

Finally, the Cuban nation had been born, but hardly free and hardly independent. Platt would later write: “Cubans are incapable of stable self-government. In many respects, they are like children.”¹⁶ Governor General Leonard Wood dismissed the Cubans who advocated independence as “ignorant masses,” the “unruly rabble,” “trouble makers,” “the element... absolutely without any conception of its responsibilities or duties as citizens.” He added: “When the Spanish–American war was declared the United States took a step forward, and assumed a position as protector of the interests of Cuba. It became responsible for the welfare of the people, politically, mentally and morally.”¹⁷

¹⁵) Foner 1972, p. 559.

¹⁶) Foner 1972, p. 584. Cf. Schoultz 1998.

¹⁷) Pérez, Jr. 1997, pp. 100–106.

L. E. Rumbaut, R. G. Rumbaut / Societies Without Borders 2 (2007) 131–152 139

In 1902, when the Republic of Cuba was formally established, Senator Stephen Elkins clearly spelled out the strategic implications for US national interests:

When Cuba shall become part of the American Union and the isthmian canal shall be completed, which is now assured, Porto Rico, Cuba, Hawaii and the Philippines will be outposts of the great Republic, standing guard over American interests in the track of the world's commerce in its triumphant march across the globe. Our people will soon see and feel that these island possessions belonging to the United States are natural and logical, and in the great part we are to play in the affairs of the world we would not only not give them up but wonder how in the working of our national destiny we could get on without them. This splendid chain of island possessions, reaching half-way around the world, would not be complete without Cuba, the gem of the Antilles.¹⁸

Renewed Intervention

The US re-established direct control of Cuba between 1906 and 1909 as a result of internal political strife on the island. In 1912, black Cubans grouped in the Independent Party of Color, who now found their future compromised after fighting for equality, rebelled. The US intervened once again to help put down the revolt.¹⁹ Not coincidentally, that year, President William H. Taft expressed in these words his vision of what was to come: "The day is not far distant when three Stars and Stripes at three equidistant points will mark our territory; one at the North Pole, another at the Panama Canal, and the third at the South Pole. The whole hemisphere will be ours in fact as, by virtue of our superiority of race, it already is ours morally."²⁰

The Marines were deployed to Cuba once again from 1917 to 1923, a period when US officials and businesspeople basically ran the country. From 1925 to 1933, Gerardo Machado, the "jackass with claws,"²¹ a friend and admirer of the US, instituted a violent and corrupt dictatorship. The US supported him until he was no longer an asset. He was overthrown (and fled to the US), and a period of uncertainty followed, leading to a mass display of US gunboats offshore. The Platt Amendment was finally abrogated in 1934.

¹⁸) Cited from the *Congressional Record* of the 57th Congress in Pérez, Jr. 1998, p. 49.

¹⁹) Fermoselle 1974.

²⁰) Galeano 2000, p. 172.

²¹) The phrase came from Julio Antonio Mella, student and anti-imperialist leader and co-founder of the first Cuban Communist party. He was assassinated in Mexico while walking with Italian photographer Tina Modotti.

The US, however, kept the base at Guantánamo Bay, until such time as both parties agreed to cancel the agreement – in practice, for as long as the US chose to keep it. The Cubans coined a new adjective: *platista*, meaning “interventionist like the Platt amendment.” Soon, a second dictatorship would follow, that of Fulgencio Batista, who would dominate Cuban politics in one way or another until 1959, enjoying the support of the US until the end was inevitable.

US capital flowed into Cuba; by 1929 US direct investment in Cuba totaled nearly one billion dollars – more than one-fourth of all US investment in Latin America, and more than that invested by US capital in any Latin American country on a per-capita basis and in absolute terms.²² US interests owned the major sugar properties, the railroads, the telephone and electricity companies, significant factories, and major hotels and casinos, an area that came to be dominated by a US mafia led by Meyer Lansky. Contrary to what Martí had fought for, economic and political interests were oriented toward and controlled by the US. The Cuban president was said to be the second most powerful man on the island, after the US ambassador. The misbehavior of US sailors on shore leave, the control exercised by US interests, the brutality of a dictator supported by the US, all combined to fuel anti-US sentiments.

In 1956, Fidel Castro landed on the shores of Oriente, at the time the easternmost province, and with 11 other survivors of the ambushed landing launched a guerrilla war in parallel to the existing underground resistance and to the political opposition in the cities.²³ Three years later, in the early hours of 1 January 1959, Batista left the country after looting the national treasury. The post-colonial period of US–Cuba relations was over, ending what in Cuba is now called “the pseudo-republic.” The stage was set for a head-on confrontation.

Marx Joins Martí

In the 56 years of Cuba’s limited sovereignty the world had changed profoundly. Diesel-powered dreadnoughts had overtaken steamships powered

²²) Cf. Pérez, Jr. 1997, pp. 117–148.

²³) The expeditionary force consisted of 82 guerrillas who left from Mexico aboard a dangerously overloaded yacht, named *Granma*, in English. *Granma* is now also the name of the official newspaper of the Cuban Communist Party and of the province where the landing took place.

L. E. Rumbaut, R. G. Rumbaut / Societies Without Borders 2 (2007) 131–152 141

by coal. The airplane had gone from cloth-covered test models to soaring jet planes and high-altitude bombers and spy planes. Submarines prowled the seas. Two World Wars had led to the development and use of the atomic bomb. The Soviet Union had come into being and become the first nation to go into space. China, in a massive upheaval, had joined the socialist camp. The space race, the arms race, and the Cold War were on.

The revolution that overthrew Batista found its inspiration in the struggles of the preceding century and in the writings of José Martí and others who had built a Cuban identity and sense of nationhood. Of course, Cubans in 1959 were aware of the opinions historically held of them by successive US presidents, legislators, and military commanders. The Revolution was profoundly anti-imperialist. Fidel Castro's own views were shaped also by his childhood among the farm workers of far-eastern Oriente, and by the experience of the rebels in the Sierra Maestra, who found support from the peasants in the mountains and saw first-hand the poverty of what was then a remote and ignored area.

There was also the class-based ideology that had taken root in Cuba after the Bolsheviks' successful rise to power in Russia.²⁴ As the Revolution deepened and class conflicts sharpened, as the state became the only entity capable of substituting for large US corporations, and as Cuba sought support in its face-off with the US – support that it received from the Soviet Union – Marxist socialism became central to revolutionary ideology. In line with the changes that had transformed the world between 1902 and 1958, rural and underdeveloped Cuba now adopted an ideology born of the Industrial Revolution in the means of production and the accumulation of international capital. The Soviet Union and the socialist block would disappear in time, but for thirty years they made possible the survival of the Revolution.

Alone and Blockaded

In 1991 the Soviet Union imploded. Shock therapy was in the cards for the post-Soviet states, including Russia itself, where the cold-turkey shift to unregulated capitalism brought declining health indices and declining production, mafias, and the outflow of rubles to foreign banks. Russia, under Yeltsin, was making friends with its former enemy. Cuba was on its own.

²⁴ The Cuban communist party, eventually named Popular Socialist Party (PSP), was founded in 1921.

The drastic shift had a profound effect upon Cuba. Practically overnight, imports fell by 75%. There was no capital to invest; or oil, which until then had been supplied in sufficient quantities and on favorable terms by the Soviet Union. Without oil, machinery ground to a halt, as did the means of transporting people and materials. Horse-drawn carriages traveled the roads. Farm workers plowed and pulled with oxen. Sugar cane was no longer cut by the huge combines of Soviet-Cuban design, which could make short work of harvesting an entire field; again, the cane was cut by hand. The government had prepared for what it called the Special Period in Time of Peace, and created Option Zero, the strategy for addressing zero-oil conditions if those came to pass, but no amount of planning could make up for the lack of resources. The economy went into free fall. Life became exceedingly hard.

In the US, Cuba was seen as the next in the series of falling dominoes. If Russia, East Germany, Czechoslovakia, and Hungary, with their high levels of development, willingly abandoned socialism to join the consumer society, could Cuba be far behind? Still, to help the process along, Congress in 1992 passed into law at the behest of then-Congressman Robert Torricelli the “Cuban Democracy Act,”²⁵ a hardening of the embargo that purported to control the behavior of other nations with respect to Cuba, and which brought such diplomatic complications that George Bush the elder, in his re-election campaign, opposed it, while challenger Bill Clinton moved to the right to support it. The embargo turned into a blockade.

Yet, Cuba did not fall. It reorganized its economy towards Europe and Latin America and Asia and invited foreign investments – especially in tourism – while maintaining basic educational and social programs. In the mid 1990s its economy started to surpass the growth rate of the neo-liberal economies of Latin America. The Revolution was going to survive. Consequently, a further tightening was carefully devised, this time sponsored by Senator Jesse Helms and Congressman Dan Burton. The “Cuban Liberty and Democratic Solidarity (Libertad) Act,”²⁶ passed and signed into law in 1996, imposed among other things conditions for recognition of a post-revolutionary government. Such a government would be required to begin to turn over nationalized properties to their former owners – in effect, a program to restore property relations as they were during the Batista dictatorship.

²⁵ The text of the law is available at <http://uscode.house.gov/download/pls/22C69.txt>.

²⁶ The text of the law is available at http://usinfo.state.gov/usa/infousa/laws/majorlaw/h927_enr.htm.

L. E. Rumbaut, R. G. Rumbaut / Societies Without Borders 2 (2007) 131–152 143

“Castro has to leave, vertically or horizontally,” said Marc Thiessen, press spokesman for Senator Jesse Helms. Miami and Washington reviewed plans to arrange for an exile for the Castro brothers and other details of a change seen, once again, as inevitable. But despite the hardships, dissension at home, and a growing number of illegal exits from the country, Cuba held on. Unable to provide for the needs of Cuba’s own population, the government dropped its activities in support of revolutionary and nationalist forces overseas. The Washington Consensus became the blueprint for development In Latin America.

Realignment in the New Century

The 21st century brought a new alignment of forces in South America. Three decades of the neo-liberal model, imposed at first by military dictatorships, had failed to deliver economic prosperity. Instead, poverty grew, and wealth became more and more concentrated in fewer hands. The privatized economies left nations without assets. In reaction, open elections brought center-left and left governments to Venezuela, Brazil, and Argentina, and later in Uruguay and Bolivia. People throughout Latin America called for a closer relationship with Cuba, and then with Venezuela. By 2004, Cuba could count on sizable investments from China and Venezuela, even from NAFTA member Canada, and maintained friendly relations with most American countries. Cuba revalued its currency and began a series of social investments that it had been unable to make since the fall of the Soviet Union. The Special Period was reaching its end. Cuba still placed at the top of health and education rankings worldwide, and similarly in the areas of culture and the arts, sports, and other aspects of social development. It even looked ahead to increasing its oil-producing potential, with the possibility of becoming a net exporter.

Once again, the US responded, this time through the George W. Bush administration.²⁷ Effective November 2004, it limited family contacts (redefining the meaning of “family” itself to exclude aunts and uncles, cousins, nephews and nieces), restricted contacts with immediate family members to one short trip every three years, and reduced the amount of money that could

²⁷) From Eisenhower to the younger Bush, every president of the U.S. has attempted to overthrow the Revolution.

be sent to their relatives in Cuba. It set aside additional money to foment dissidence within Cuba. It also created new obstacles to US agricultural trade with Cuba, which – as a rare exception to the blockade – was growing geometrically. In the same year, the Bush administration named a Commission for Assistance to a Free Cuba. The Commission produced a Transition Plan that set out the process of transforming a future Cuban state into a model dependent neo-liberal economy.²⁸

The US broadened the traditional political attacks on Cuba to include Venezuela and other independent-minded states whose national resources, markets, and labor forces remained to be controlled through free-trade treaties. A second report of the Commission for Assistance to a Free Cuba, officially released in July 2006, cited Cuba as a key support for Venezuela, which itself was mentioned 16 times in that report on Cuba.²⁹ For its part, Cuba, emboldened by its economic recovery, kept up its denunciations of the US and its economic and political system.

There is little likelihood at present of a decrease in tensions between the US and Cuba, because what is in play now is the economic alignment of the Southern Hemisphere: will it become a grouping of neo-liberal economies bound by treaties to a dominant US economy, or will it evolve in the direction of a nationalist/center-left/socialist block of nations building relations among themselves instead of looking to the US for direction? The positions taken by John Kerry in the 2004 elections showed that Democrats will not differ much from Republicans as concerns Cuba, or Latin America, for that matter. At the time of this writing, the Bush administration was only halfway through its second term, and remained firmly allied with the most conservative Cuban-American sectors. In July 2006, Cuba signed a trade compact with MERCOSUR (*Mercado común del sur*), the trading block that includes Brazil, Argentina, Venezuela, Uruguay, and Paraguay as principal partners, facilitating imports from those countries as a further avenue to bypass the blockade.³⁰

²⁸⁾ The 2004 Report is available at <http://www.state.gov/p/wha/rt/cuba/>.

²⁹⁾ The 2006 Report is available at <http://www.cafc.gov/rpt/2006/>.

³⁰⁾ On 28 July 2006, the Washington Post published an op-ed opinion by Alvaro Vargas-Llosa entitled, with apparently humorous intent, “Has Mercosur Gone Bananas?”

Attraction and Expulsion

Spanish colonialism in Cuba extended from 1492 to 1898, or 406 years. US colonialism in the island lasted for four years more, to 1902. The post-colonial republic lasted 56 years (May 1902 to December 1958). By January 2007, the Revolution will have lasted 48 years. For the entire period after independence from Spain, the US and Cuba have been bound tightly together by forces of attraction and repulsion, whether in a planet-satellite relationship or as enemies destined by geography to remain a few dozen miles from each other.³¹

Like people from other Caribbean islands close to the vast and promising nation on the continent, Cubans have long been drawn to the US. Father Félix Varela (1788–1853), revered on both sides of the Straits and for whom the dissident Varela Project of 2001 was named, escaped a Spanish death sentence in the early 19th century to spend the rest of his life in the US. When José Martí (who was born in the same year of Varela's death) began to build support for independence he found an established community of Cuban immigrant cigar workers in Florida, and others in New York. Tomás Estrada Palma was a citizen of the US for 15 years before he returned home to become the first Cuban president in 1902. Beginning early in the 20th century, whenever political personalities and parties in Cuba ran into trouble, they called upon the US for help. Mostly, the US was glad to oblige: there were even provisions in the Cuban constitution that allowed it to intervene. And intervene it did, right up to the end of Batista's rule.

Before 1959, Cuba, like other countries, exported working-class labor and brain-drain graduates to the US, emigrants who in the main decided to stay. With the Revolution, Cuba exported a practically-entire bourgeoisie, which defined itself as an exile rather than an emigration. In the main, they did want to return, not as simple citizens, but to take back the government.

It was inevitable that the dominant class evicted from power would seek shelter across the Florida straits, and that from there they would plan the restoration by any means necessary. The US government welcomed the *batistianos* and the exiles who came by the tens of thousands, extending to them the resources to make their plans possible: employment and business opportunities, government contracts, a favorable press, and help from the

³¹) Cf. Pérez, Jr. 1997; Smith 1987.

CIA and the FBI, aside from education and relocation programs, a special Cuban Welfare Program, and the Cuban Adjustment Act.³²

After the failure of the Bay of Pigs invasion and Operation Mongoose,³³ as it became clear that the struggle would be for the long term, US advisors counseled the exiles to take on a new role, creating the Cuban American National Foundation. Miami harbored still a variety of paramilitary groups, often composed of men previously trained by the CIA and the armed forces, but the new model was to become dominant. The leadership of the exile opposition changed its image from commando operations to lobbying Congress and the White House, from fatigues and gunboats to suits and ties and fund-raising events.

The second generation of the *batistianos* and the “historical exiles” of the early 1960s grew up to become influential economic and political figures. They developed in symbiosis with the US government, as each side had something to offer the other in support of the common goals of combating communism and once more controlling the Pearl of the Antilles. Their growing influence over Miami radio and newspapers, and a hard-edged style of eliminating the opposition, contributed to their establishing a hegemonic presence in Miami that continues to the present, with considerable influence in the US government, wholly disproportionate to their numbers.

For Cuba, the US is still a tantalizingly accessible source of grains, beans, and other dry foodstuffs, cattle, milk, apples, canned goods, and – potentially – medical and hi-tech equipment, motor vehicles and construction machinery, airplanes, and in general everything that an advanced society of temperate zones can offer, even investment capital. It also sees in the US its principal foreign threat, an imperialist power that for over a century has tried to subordinate Cuba for its own benefit.

For the US, Cuba is a nation at once exotic and familiar, a warm and fertile land that could become a jewel of the tourist business, a source of cultural commodities and world-class baseball players, and a springboard to the Caribbean and Latin America, as well as a dependable market supported by a healthy and educated population. Instead, it finds in Cuba a tenacious opponent that, far beyond defending its perimeter, openly challenges US

³²) The Act grants residency to any Cuban who enters the United States with or without documentation, albeit complicated by the current dry-foot, wet-foot policy of applicability.

³³) On Operation Mongoose, see <http://www.marxists.org/history/cuba/subject/cia/mongoose/c-project.htm>.

L. E. Rumbaut, R. G. Rumbaut / Societies Without Borders 2 (2007) 131–152 147

hegemony in Latin America and denounces its activities on the continent and the world; a former ally of the greatest opponent the US has faced, the land where nuclear missiles were stationed closest to – and targeted on – the US mainland, and the only country in Latin America to survive not only a US-sponsored invasion but 46 years of economic warfare and covert operations.³⁴

Neither country gains from the blockade. Each would like for it to be over, but on its own terms. Cuba wants the blockade to disappear, but in order to continue to build its program of anti-imperialist socialism oriented to the developing world. The US would like to establish close ties with Cuba – but only if it becomes a neo-conservative, privatized, capitalist economy, with elections that yield political leaders aligned with the US. The Cuban government cannot conceive of a sovereign, independent state, with social justice, in today's world without a socialist government to guarantee it. The US – now as a matter of law and of explicit policy set forth in the Transition Plan – will not undertake normal relations with Cuba until the socialist state is dismantled and Cuba is once again a US dependency.

Civil and Human Rights

Of all of the arguments raised against Cuba's government, none has had such impact, especially in the US and Europe, as those that challenge the lack of *civil* rights in Cuba in terms of freedom of speech and press, multiparty elections, and due process: freedoms from the state of the individual's private choice and initiative. Often, these are phrased as individual *human* rights, a concept that for the US does not include such Cuban (and, often, international) postulates as the right to a job, the right to education, and the right to medical care irrespective of income: rights inherent to a shared humanity that the state must protect and foster.³⁵

³⁴ The embargo began under Dwight Eisenhower on 15 October 1960. Eisenhower also left for John F. Kennedy the planned invasion of Bay of Pigs.

³⁵ As Blau and Moncada (2005, p. 15) point out: "Today we consider human rights – not simply rights – to mean inter-connected freedoms and opportunities. To illustrate, there are now international agreements about the following fundamental rights: food security; housing; education; health care; social security; employment; leisure; freedom of expression; freedom of movement; privacy; political freedoms; civil rights; freedom from discrimination; freedom to join a trade union; freedom to marry; protections for children; protections for the

People in the US, used to everyday choice in everything from taking part in protest marches or joining a political party to traveling outside the country (anywhere but to Cuba), understand these arguments by direct comparison to their own lives, especially when they grow up learning about the Bill of Rights in the US Constitution. They are among the most powerful arguments wielded by the US government in support of regime change in Cuba. It is true that most people who are asked in US polls also say that they favor an end to the blockade and would like the option to visit Cuba, while powerful business sectors press for an opening of trade between the two countries. Still, the issue of rights remains: no society in today's world should be exempt from guaranteeing basic human and civil rights to its people.³⁶ That subject, however, does not determine US–Cuba relations, even if it is essential to the official US discourse on Cuba.

Civil and human rights are not the basis for US policy concerning Cuba, and never have been. From the time of Jefferson and Adams to the July 2006 commission report, the real interests have been the same: strategic location, land, resources, markets, and inexpensive labor, albeit with such variations as access to good beaches, casinos, and prostitution. As in any actual or prospective colonial relation, the civil and human rights of the actually or prospectively colonized do not matter. Such concerns did not keep the US from precluding Cuban sovereignty in 1898, nor were they raised during the dictatorships of Machado and Batista. Since 1954, when the US destroyed democracy and civil and human rights in Guatemala, Cubans have seen the US – in Latin America alone – support the Somoza and Duvalier dynasties and ensure that the elected president in the Dominican Republic did not remain in office; they have seen the violent overthrow of democracy in Chile, a not-so-secret war to bring down the elected government in Nicaragua, the support or even creation of death squads in El Salvador, and the cordial and

elderly and disabled; rights to a cultural, racial, or ethnic identity; protections for minority and indigenous populations; language rights; and environmental rights.” See also Blau and Moncada 2006.

³⁶ “Perhaps the most succinct summary of the overall objectives of these multilateral instruments is the statement adopted at the 1993 World Conference on Human Rights: ‘All human rights are universal, indivisible and interdependent and interrelated. The international community must treat human rights globally in a fair and equal manner, on the same footing, and with the same emphasis. While the significance of national and regional particularities and various historical, cultural, and religious backgrounds must be borne in mind, it is the duty of States, regardless of their political, economic and cultural systems, to promote and protect all human rights and fundamental freedoms.’” Blau and Moncada 2005, p. 32.

L. E. Rumbaut, R. G. Rumbaut / Societies Without Borders 2 (2007) 131–152 149

discrete relations kept by the US with dictatorial and unimaginably repressive regimes in Brazil, Argentina, Uruguay, Paraguay, and Bolivia.³⁷

Moreover, Cubans today see tens of thousands of civilians killed in Iraq as a result of a war launched by the US with the pretense of building democracy, and hear US officials defend torture as standard operating procedure – torture that has been practiced in Cuba, but at the US base in Guantánamo – while doing business with such governments as that of Saudi Arabia, where the ruling family of the hereditary and theocratic monarchy are friends and partners of the family of the current US president. Since 1959, Cubans have lived with the certain expectation of new attempts by the US to re-colonize Cuba in informal annexation, knowing that, for the US, it can become necessary to destroy the village in order to save it.

From the US point of view, capital cannot move freely – nor, accordingly, can there be freedom – when individuals, groups, businesses, or political parties in Cuba are unable to make alliances with their more powerful neighbors independently of the government. From the Cuban point of view, national sovereignty cannot survive so close to those same neighbors without a centralized and restrictive social structure: for the Cuban government, the survival of the Revolution is a necessary precondition to reforming the Revolution.

The arguments over the character and observance of civil and human rights in Cuba continue. The issue of what kind of society the Cubans can and should build is properly of concern to all people – especially within Cuba – who stand for civil and human rights. That is not, however, central to understanding US–Cuba relations for the past two centuries, which are the focus of this essay and which, at this writing, remain at an impasse.

The Continuing Debate

As an expanding world power – from its defeat of British colonialism in America, to its imperial pursuits at the start of the 20th century, to its survival of two World Wars without the massive destruction suffered by the European nations and Japan, to its emergence from the Cold War as the sole superpower – the US has kept alive the original dream of John Adams of harvesting the ripe golden fruit of the Caribbean, and the later dream of William H. Taft to lead an American empire extending from Pole to Pole.

³⁷ See Menjivar and Rodríguez 2005.

Successive US governments have not been unanimous in their approach to Cuba. At the least, there have been tactical differences within an overall strategic goal. Some sectors argue, for example, that enveloping Cuba in the embrace of consumerism and open trade would make the island – and would have done so long ago – a very acceptable partner of the US, with perhaps some traces of a prickly nationalism and a penchant for public health, but otherwise well behaved.

With the Cold War over, can the United States change course in its approach to Cuba? The outcome of the Middle East wars and of the new relationships arising between countries and economies in Latin America may decide the answer. So may developments in Asia involving China and India and Viet Nam, a renewed attempt to overthrow the government of Venezuela, a collapse of the dollar, peak oil, or other events not yet on the horizon. But history holds little hope for a real change in the near future, and the current neo-conservative plans for the projection of US power worldwide make such a change even less likely.³⁸

Can Cuba accept the United States as just a large neighbor to the north, like Canada, and learn to quietly cohabit with it in a community of American nations? As long as the economic and political relationship of the US with the rest of Latin America and the Caribbean and the developing world does not change, that is not likely. Those who place their hopes on the death of Fidel Castro may be disappointed, for all of the history described above will not go away because of the absence of one man.

When Congress considered its resolution authorizing war against Spain in 1898, it adopted the amendment of Senator Henry M. Teller specifying that: "... the United States hereby disclaims any disposition or intention to exercise sovereignty, jurisdiction, or control over said Island except for the pacification thereof, and asserts its determination, when that is accomplished, to leave the government and control of the Island to its people." As war drew near, however, politicians, businessmen, and editorialists began to interpret the Teller Amendment to mean something other than what it said. The *New York Journal of Commerce* put it thus: "The Teller amendment... must be interpreted in a sense somewhat different from that which its author intended it to bear."³⁹ This, too, joined the list of events defining – at least for the Cubans – the history between the two countries.

³⁸) Cf. <http://www.newamericancentury.org/RebuildingAmericasDefenses.pdf>.

³⁹) Zinn 2001, pp. 304–305.

L. E. Rumbaut, R. G. Rumbaut / Societies Without Borders 2 (2007) 131–152 151

That history is connected to the present. Thus, while there is scarcely a trace in US collective memory of the US exclusion from Santiago de Cuba of the Cuban Liberation Army in the summer of 1898, sixty years later it would be remembered by Fidel Castro in a radio broadcast to the nation on 2 January 1959, the day after Batista fled the country and the victorious rebel army entered the city: "This time the revolution will not be thwarted... It will not be like the war of 1895, when the Americans arrived and made themselves masters of the country; they intervened at the last minute and later did not even allow Calixto García, who had been fighting for thirty years, to enter Santiago de Cuba."⁴⁰ Nearly half a century later, the Commission for Assistance to a Free Cuba and its transition plans of 2004 and 2006, representing the latest effort of the US to condition the recognition of the Cuban republic, can be summed up in one word: *platista*.

Fidel Castro's sign-off slogan at the end of every speech is *Patria o Muerte*: Fatherland or Death. It evokes the Hymn of the Republic, dating to the Ten Years' War: *Morir por la Patria es vivir*: To die for the Fatherland is to live. Patrick Henry and the revolutionaries of the Thirteen Colonies would understand it instinctively.

The US maintains in its official declarations that it wishes only to have Cuba join the US in the pleasures and benefits of industrialized democracy and the consumer society. Cubans with a sense of history from Hatuey to the Teller and Platt Amendments to the 2006 update of the transition plan may reply: "If that is heaven, we would rather go to hell."

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⁴⁰ Pérez, Jr., 1998, pp. 125–129.

152 L. E. Rumbaut, R. G. Rumbaut / Societies Without Borders 2 (2007) 131–152

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