

A SURVEY OF

*United States-
Latin American
Relations*

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"Cuba Libre": 1934-1959

For almost twenty-five years after the release of Cuba from all political restraint by the United States, relations between the two countries unfolded normally in the sense that there were no untoward events.⁹⁶ During the period from 1934 to 1959, Cuba experienced several different administrations, though Fulgencio Batista usually figured directly or indirectly as the real political power in the country. When he was not making or unmaking presidents, he himself was in personal power. Since Batista, as a matter of calculated policy, was generally on cordial terms and cooperative with the United States, this helps to explain the smooth current of relations. Batista was one of several Latin-American dictators with whom the State Department at the time found it profitable and congenial to do business.

Under Batista's guidance, after he became president in 1940, Cuba prospered fully, economically and militarily, with the United States in World War II.⁹⁷ Cuba was one of the nine Caribbean nations which, by December 1941, had declared war on the Axis powers. On June 15 Cuba entered into an agreement with the United States granting facilities for operations against enemy submarines. The agreement was later extended to provide for a coordination of all military and naval measures taken by the two countries. This brought Cuba into full cooperation with the United States. Cuba's active military participation in the war was largely confined to the antisubmarine campaign. For these operations, and for its general defense, the country was liberally supplied with war materials by lend-lease grants. Cuba was also the recipient of Export-Import Bank loans to diversify production and improve its sugar-refining facilities. As in World War I, Cuba's principal contribution to the United Nations cause was its sugar production, which was doubled.

After the expiration of Batista's term of office in 1944, the United States relations with his successors Grau San Martín and Carlos Prío Socarrás were without serious incident, although the United States witnessed uneasily the large and active Soviet embassy in Havana, which was apparently channeling Communist influence and propaganda throughout Latin America. When Fulgencio Batista returned to power by means of a bloodless *coup d'état*, only a few days despite his crude disregard for constitutionalism. Factors weighed heavily in his favor were his ability to insure stability and order, his long record of cooperation with the United States, and his promise to promote a strong anti-Communist policy.

Because two Soviet couriers were searched at a Cuban airport in violation of their diplomatic immunity, on April 3, the U.S.S.R. broke diplomatic relations with Cuba. In October, 1953, Batista declared illegal the Cuban Communist party, the Partido Socialista Popular. Most of the PSP leaders were

⁹⁶ For the problem of defaulted public works bonds, and its final settlement in 1949 under State Department pressure, see *ibid.*, 171-173.

⁹⁷ See Mechem, *op. cit.*, Chap. VIII, *passim*.

either arrested or went into exile. There were no embassies of Communist countries in Cuba during Batista's presidency. Batista set up a Bureau for the Suppression of Communist Activities. This agency, with United States aid, was in operation for years, but its effectiveness was spotty. At times it was necessary for the American ambassador to appeal for more vigorous action, but it seemed that Batista had entered into some kind of deal with the Communists.⁹⁸

To strengthen the defensive position of Cuba, and to make Communist subversion more difficult, the regime was bolstered by a Mutual Defense Assistance Agreement with the United States. The agreement, contracted in 1952, paved the way for grants to the Batista government of about \$1 million per year in military aid, and nonmilitary grants that mounted from \$40,000 in 1950 to \$176,000 in 1953, and \$561,000 in 1958.⁹⁹

The Castro revolution against Batista was not generated because of the failure of his dictatorship, so it serves no purpose to mention the constructive achievements of his administration, nor its many abuses. It was the *fact* of dictatorship, established by one of the most cynical floutings of legality in the history of the republic, which incited impatient and politically motivated young men to action. It was on July 26, 1953, that Fidel Castro and 170 followers launched a revolution against the Batista regime. The attack on the Moncada barracks at Santiago de Cuba was a disastrous failure. Captured and sentenced to a long prison term, Castro was released in May, 1955, in a general political amnesty. Soon he turned up in Mexico where he continued revolutionary activities. On December 2, 1956, Fidel Castro, his brother Raúl and Ernesto (Ché) Guevara, and companions, numbering eighty-two in all, landed from an old yacht on the shore of Oriente province. They were immediately discovered by the military, who attacked. Only twelve men survived to reach the nearby high and rugged Sierra Maestra. There it was that Fidel, Raúl, and Ché organized their remarkable guerrilla war against tyrant Fulgencio Batista. Up to mid-1958 the rebels in the mountains numbered fewer than 1,000 men.¹⁰⁰

It was not until early 1957 that Castro was able to make much headway. Improvement in his fortunes was due in no small measure to the publication by the *New York Times* of a series of articles by its reporter Herbert Matthews, who had secured an exclusive interview with Castro in his mountain hideout. The articles attracted wide attention to the Cuban "Robin Hood" and facilitated a flow of funds and recruits for the 26th of July Movement.

In the meantime a much larger urban resistance movement was being organized which employed terrorist tactics against the army and police. Dangerous disaffection made its appearance in Batista's armed forces. In September

⁹⁸ R. Hart Phillips, *Cuba, Island of Paradox* (New York: McDowell, Obolensky, 1959), 350-351.

⁹⁹ Wyatt MacGaffey and Clifford R. Barnett, *Cuba, its people, its society, its culture* (New Haven: HRAF Press, 1962), 315.

¹⁰⁰ *Ibid.*, 240.

ber, 1957, there was a revolt at the naval base of Cienfuegos. It failed, but it made Batista realize that he could no longer count on the blind support of the armed forces.¹⁰¹

Faced by these developments, Batista was guilty of a fatal error of judgment. Instead of instituting even moderate changes in his government he adopted the policy of suppressing all opposition by brutal police terrorism. Obviously these developments were viewed with concern by the United States. But, did Washington have a Cuban policy?

The American Ambassador, Arthur Gardner, who resigned on May 14, 1957, "had been so pro-Batista that he had actually embarrassed the President."¹⁰² The State Department was also embarrassed by his partisanship. Thus the new ambassador, Earl E. T. Smith, who presented his credentials to Batista on July 23, 1957, was specifically instructed "to alter the prevailing notion in Cuba that the American Ambassador was intervening on behalf of the government of Cuba to perpetuate the Batista dictatorship." According to Ambassador Smith, "my first mission (was that) of establishing the Embassy's position of impartiality in the political affairs of Cuba." His second mission was to persuade Batista to restore constitutional guarantees and lift the press censorship. The Ambassador was not successful in achieving either objective.¹⁰³

In connection with the first objective, the observance of impartiality by an American envoy in the political affairs of Cuba was completely unrealistic for in the view of Cubans there is no political middle ground — the United States is either for or against. And since it was clear from the record that the United States was not against Batista, it was idle to talk about impartiality. Also, it was a contradiction of fact to protest loyalty to the nonintervention principle, as did the State Department, meanwhile exerting pressures on the Batista government. "The United States was so important in the minds of the Cuban people," wrote ex-Ambassador Earl Smith, "that the American Ambassador was, to repeat, regarded as the second most important personage in Cuba." His official acts or words were usually magnified far beyond their importance, and often regarded as intervention. Such was the case, for example, when Ambassador Smith, on witnessing acts of police brutality, Santiago remarked, "Any form of excessive police action is abhorrent to me. Batista objected to this statement as intervention, but Castro regarded it as indicative of a change in United States policy."¹⁰⁴

In fact, a change of policy was apparently taking form in the State Department because of mounting pressures of public opinion against the practice of "doing business with dictators." Indicative of a desire by the policy maker to demonstrate United States impartiality in the Cuban conflict was the

¹⁰¹ Earl E. T. Smith, *The Fourth Floor, An Account of the Castro Communist Revolution* (New York: Random House, 1962), 31.

¹⁰² Phillips, *op. cit.*, 324.

¹⁰³ Smith, *op. cit.*, 20, 28.

¹⁰⁴ *Ibid.*, 23.

vision of arms shipments to the Cuban government. As justification for this action of March 14, 1958, the State Department cited a clause in the Mutual Defense Assistance Agreement with Cuba which by implication prohibited the supply of arms to a government which used them against its own people.¹⁰⁵

This effort by the United States to be "neutral and impartial" was probably the most effective step taken to bring about the downfall of Batista. Not only did the denial of arms by the United States impair his military strength, but, far more important, it undermined the morale of the armed forces and other adherents of the regime. The United States action was generally interpreted, not as neutral and impartial, but as anti-Batista. "I cannot understand," the dictator complained to Ambassador Smith, "why your government refuses to sell arms to my government which is friendly to you and an enemy of Communism."¹⁰⁶

If the United States expected to gain the confidence of Castro it was disappointed, for the rebel leader never abandoned his charges that American arms were being used by Batista against his revolutionaries. Castro chose to ignore the fact that his agents in the United States, and particularly the Cuban ex-President Prío Socarrás, were very successful in securing arms for the rebels in violation of United States neutrality laws.

Probably in an effort to attract attention to his revolt, Castro was responsible for a number of anti-United States incidents. First, there were a number of kidnappings of American citizens, the most notorious of these being the capture of Marines and sailors outside the base of Guantánamo. Second, American planes were hijacked and forced to land in Cuba. And finally, from July to November, 1958, the rebels harassed the Guantánamo base by turning the water supply on and off intermittently. From July 28 to July 31 a detachment of Marines took over control of the plant at Yateras, with Batista's consent, but Castro raised the cry of "intervention," and so the State Department hastened to oblige by withdrawing the troops.¹⁰⁷

Finally, in an eleventh hour response to State Department pressure for an electoral rather than a military, decision, Batista perpetrated another electoral fraud by having a puppet president elected on November 3, 1958. The gesture came too late: Batista was doomed because of the disintegration of his defenses. Also, the time had passed when it might have been possible, with effective State Department cooperation, to set up a provisional government without Castro, whose unacceptability should have been apparent at that date. It seems however, that the responsible policy makers preferred to hide behind the principle of nonintervention, that convenient alibi for inaction.

On January 1, 1959, the fallen dictator Fulgencio Batista fled into exile with a fortunate few of his associates. On January 7, 1959, Castro's designate, President Manuel Urrutia y Lleo, was recognized by the United States.

¹⁰⁵ Phillips, *op. cit.*, 351.

¹⁰⁶ Smith, *op. cit.*, 55.

¹⁰⁷ *Ibid.*, 109.