

CUBA vs. U.S. IMPERIALISM



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Jose Martí



by Edward Boorstein

Cubans were among the first people in the world to understand U.S. imperialism. They were among the first to be menaced by it, to suffer from it. American dreams of annexing Cuba go back to the early 1800's. Modern U.S. imperialism—capitalist imperialism based on the large corporation—began in Cuba. Cuba was the first great foreign market of American capitalism. In 1880, direct U.S. investment in the Cuban sugar industry began; by 1896 U.S. investment in Cuba totalled \$50 million.

Jose Martí, leader of the Cuban independence movement which later culminated in the revolutionary war against Spain in 1895-1898, became the first great analyst of imperialism. His views are of especial interest today because his focus was on U.S. imperialism and because he is the intellectual precursor of the Cuban and Latin American Revolutions.

Martí, exiled from Cuba in 1871, spent the years from 1881-1895 in the United States. "I have lived in the monster," he wrote, "and I know its entrails." In 1891—25 years before the appearance of Lenin's classic Imperialism—he pointed out that: "The people that buys, commands. The people that sells, serves. It is necessary to balance (diversify) commerce to assure liberty. A people that wants to die sells to only one people....The excessive influence of one country on the commerce of another converts itself into political influence." Martí was not thinking only of Cuba in these comments. They were made in an article on the problem of U.S. domination of all Latin America.

Martí knew Latin America. He lived in Mexico, Guatemala, and Venezuela for six years, was directly acquainted with several other Latin American countries from short visits, and wrote on the whole area. To him, Latin America was "our America," a term that Che Guevara later adopted. Always he stressed that to solve Latin America's problems, it is necessary to understand Latin America's conditions. And always Martí spoke of freedom. "The hour has come," he wrote in 1889, "for Latin America to declare her second independence."

Martí was a revolutionary. As early as 1882 he wrote, "Cuba... has once again arrived at the point of understanding the futility of a policy of conciliation and the need for a violent revolution." Martí's great fear was that Spain would be eliminated from Cuba only to be replaced by the United States. He wanted Cuban independence of the United States not only for its own sake, but for what it meant for the rest of Latin America. A Cuba and Puerto Rico enslaved would be "mere pontoons" for the spread of American power.

From a military camp in Oriente Province in 1895, Martí wrote a friend that his great aim was to assure the independence of Cuba so as to prevent the U.S. from spreading across the Antilles and then descending on all of Latin America. But two days after he wrote this, Martí was killed by the Spaniards. And soon thereafter, what he feared from the U.S. began to come to pass. The U.S. took over Cuba and Puerto Rico and began to spread its empire southward.

The Platt Amendment, which the U.S. forced into the Cuban constitution in 1901, gave it the right to "intervene" in Cuba while it imposed on the Cuban government the obligation to "sell or lease to the United States lands necessary for coaling or naval stations...." There were many gross interventions. The U.S. landed troops in Cuba in 1906, 1912, and 1917. In 1933, during the liberal presidency of Franklin D. Roosevelt, the U.S. sent a number of warships into Cuban waters to help bring down a government it did not like. Although the Platt Amendment was abrogated in 1934, part of it still lives on: the U.S. still occupies the Guantánamo Naval Base obtained under the Amendment.

But American domination of Cuba was far more than a matter of the Platt Amendment. There were the ordinary natural workings of the large American corporations and the U.S. government which backs them up.

Under the shelter of the American military occupation which followed the war with Spain, American corporations began to move into Cuba on an increased scale. Investments were made by the United Fruit Company, the National City Bank of New York, the Cuban-American Sugar Company, the Cuban Telephone Company. From \$50 million in 1895, U.S. investment in Cuba soared to \$205 million in 1911. Eventually in 1959, the year the Revolution came to power, it reached about \$1 billion.

The U.S. Department of Commerce reported in 1956: "The only foreign investments of importance are those of the United States. American participation exceeds 90% in the telephone and electric services, about 50% in the public service railways, and roughly 40% in raw sugar production. The Cuban branches of American banks are entrusted with almost one-fourth of all bank deposits...."

Even this does not give the full picture. American domination went far beyond ownership of assets in Cuba. American interests dominated all strategic sectors of the Cuban economy. The U.S. monopolized Cuba's foreign trade, accounting for over 75% of the exports and 80% of the imports. Cuba's tourist industry depended on Americans. The U.S. dominated Cuba's internal market; by far most manufactured goods consumed in Cuba came from the U.S. Most retail stores depended on American goods.

The American corporations turned Cuba into an appendage of the U.S. economy—a gigantic sugar plantation, an outlet for American manufactured goods. Sugar dominated the Cuban economy. It made up 80% of Cuba's exports and paid for the bulk of its imports. The sugar companies controlled 70% of the arable land; they owned two-thirds of the railroad trackage; most of the ports and many of the roads were simply adjuncts of the sugar mills.

The sugar industry was seasonal, unstable, and stagnant, and it imparted these characteristics to the whole Cuban economy. It employed 400,000 to 500,000 workers to cut, load and transport the cane during the 3-to-4-month harvest season, and left them to starve during the rest of the year. The price and demand for sugar rode up and down with war and peace, prosperity and depression, taking the whole Cuban economy with them. Since export outlets for Cuban sugar were growing only slowly, the whole Cuban economy stagnated.

The large American manufacturing corporations pumped their goods into Cuba. Most of these goods went to the local oligarchy and part of the middle classes which formed foreign oriented enclaves in Havana and the other large cities. In the countryside, where the average per capita income was less than \$100 per year, most people could afford rice, beans, dried cut fish and little else.

The U.S. corporations naturally operated in their own business interest, rather than for the benefit of the Cuban people. Because it was good business, they acquired enormous tracts of land, much of which they kept idle as a reserve. That there were several hundred thousand landless campesinos who could have used the idle land to grow food for their hungry families was not the concern of the corporations.

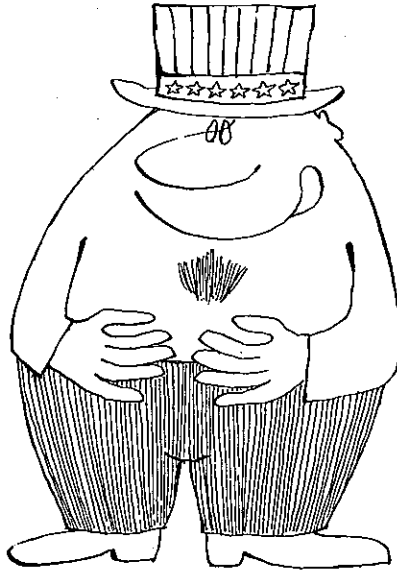
Just by selling their manufactured goods in Cuba, the giant corporations of the north were choking off the possible growth of Cuban manufacturing. But they were responsible for profits to their stockholders, not for Cuba's economic development.

Along with economic domination went cultural penetration. There were the American movies, American-type TV programs and commercials, American news services, American books and magazines including True Romances and the like.

On top of everything else was political domination. "Until the advent of Castro, according to Earl T. Smith, former American ambassador to Cuba, "the U.S. was so overwhelmingly influential in Cuba...that the American ambassador was the second most important man in Cuba, sometimes even more important than the president." Actually, the president and other Cuban officials could only act within limits fixed by the U.S. The United States wielded ultimate political power in Cuba.

Fidel and the other leaders of the Revolution understood the problem of American imperialism from the beginning. They were not—as some people have pictured them—simply well-meaning humanitarians, indignant over Batista's coup d'état in 1953. They knew about American imperialism from living under it and observing its day-to-day workings, from the U.S. intervention in 1933 which was still a fresh occurrence when they were at school and the university. And Fidel and the others were followers of Martí—Martianos. The importance of this has not been fully understood in the United States; it should be emphasized as the Cuban leaders themselves have done. Martí was proclaimed by Fidel to be the intellectual author of the attack on the Moncada Fortress in 1953. The Second Declaration of Havana and Che Guevara's Message to the Tricontinental begin with quotes from Martí.

The Cuban leaders enjoyed a rich Cuban revolutionary tradition. Since 1868, Cuba has been having revolutions at intervals of no greater than 40 years. For Cubans, revolution was not



something remote, to be read about in the book, but something vivid, close. And again there were the doctrines of Martí—on the futility of conciliation, on violent revolution.

This background helps explain many characteristics of the Cuban Revolution—its freshness and anti-dogmatism, its vision and firmness in the fight with imperialism, its emphasis on revolution throughout Latin America. Their own direct understanding of imperialism and revolution under Cuban conditions gave Fidel and the others self-confidence in dealing with doctrines from abroad. They studied seriously; Fidel has emphasized, for example, that he read Lenin's *State and Revolution* at the University. They read not for little formulas to follow slavishly and mechanically, but for basic ideas; not to copy, but to apply.

Fidel, Che, and the others knew from the time they went into the mountains that getting rid of Batista was the first, not the last, step in the Revolution. In a letter from the Sierra in June, 1958, Fidel wrote: "When this war finishes, there will begin for me a new one, bigger and longer, the one I'm going to carry out against them (the Americans)." Their perspective on the long, deadly struggle to be fought with imperialism helped the Cuban leaders to fight it well; they thought ahead, they prepared.

In his *History Will Absolve Me* speech in 1953 and in his public statements from the Sierra, Fidel was very careful in what he said about the United States. When you are about to enter into a struggle with an enemy as powerful as American imperialism, it isn't wise to telegraph your intentions and program. But Fidel was alert to the dangers from imperialism. Earl Smith, the U.S. Ambassador, has himself described how, as it became clear that Batista would be overthrown, he maneuvered behind the scenes to have

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him replaced by someone else satisfactory to Washington. But Fidel announced that the revolutionaries would accept nothing less than the unconditional surrender of Batista's army; he called for a general strike against a last-minute attempt at a coup d'état. The maneuver in which the U.S. was conniving to forestall the revolutionaries from taking power failed.

As soon as the Revolution came to power, Fidel and the other leaders began to prepare for the struggle against imperialism. They mobilized the people with speeches, rejecting U.S. attempts to tell the Revolution what it should and shouldn't do. They began to buy arms and build up the Revolutionary Armed Forces for the U.S. armed intervention that they knew would come.

The U.S. objected to the actions of the revolutionary government from the beginning—to the trial of war criminals, to the lowering of electric power and telephone rates. But the hostility jumped when the Revolution got into basic measures—land reform and increased trade with the socialist countries. Planes began to fly in from Florida and drop incendiary bombs on cane fields in June, 1959, the month in which the land reform law was signed.

As signs of Cuban independence grew, President Eisenhower unwittingly voiced one of Martí's points as seen from the imperialist's side: he could not understand Cuba's actions, he said. "After all, we are her best customer." Other American officials threatened even more openly that if Cuba did not behave, her sugar quota in the U.S. market would be taken away. Fidel responded by saying that there could be no political independence without economic independence and that Cuba proposed to trade with everyone. Cuba entered into trade agreements with the socialist countries, first in mid-February, 1960, with the Soviet Union, and then with others.

In June-July, 1960, things came to a climax. Crude oil from the Soviet Union arrived and the giant foreign oil companies—Standard, Texaco, and Shell—refused to accept it for their refineries. The U.S. eliminated Cuba's sugar quota and Cuba nationalized American property in Cuba. A few months later—in November, 1960—the U.S. imposed an embargo on exports to Cuba; for a time, food stuffs and medicines were excepted, but the exception was largely theoretical. And going beyond its own embargo, the U.S. pressured other countries—especially the Latin American countries—to break trade and other relations with Cuba. Eventually, all the Latin American countries except Mexico did so. In January, 1961, the U.S. broke diplomatic relations with Cuba.

The first American measures against the Revolution, aimed at choking it to death economically, failed. The next step was open, armed intervention. Preparations for this began in early 1960.

The Cuban revolutionaries quickly became aware of what was happening. In the spring of 1960, Fidel warned several times of the danger of invasion. "They want to destroy the Cuban Revolution," he said, "so that its example cannot be followed by the sister

"Down with Imperialism.... Long Live the U.S. Black People" Demonstration the Watts Rebellion. Sixty-five thousand Cubans showed up on five day



Photo by Barbara Dane

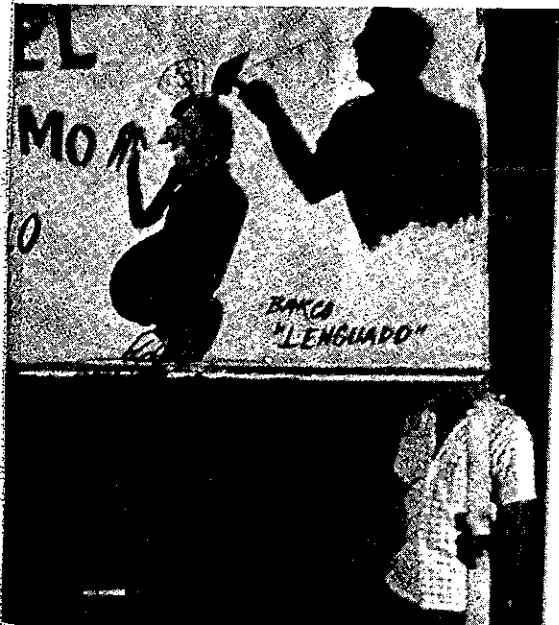
nations of Latin America." But, he thundered, "They will not be able to destroy us the way they did the Arbenz government of Guatemala in 1954; we will fight." After several preliminary invasion scares which forced Cuba into costly mobilizations, the attack finally came in April, 1961, at the Bay of Pigs. The revolutionaries defeated it in three days.

Once again the imperialists did not resign themselves to defeat and prepared for an armed attack on Cuba, this time not with Cuban mercenaries, but with American troops. The revolutionaries raced to build up and improve their armed forces, both to help deter an attack and to make it costly and unsuccessful if it came. As an additional measure of deterrence in defense, Soviet missiles were installed in Cuba. This phase culminated in the missile crisis of 1962. The Cuban efforts to build up their armed forces were not in vain. Robert F. Kennedy wrote that a major argument against an invasion of Cuba was the high U.S. casualty toll expected. The crisis was settled through an agreement between the United States and the Soviet Union, the highlights of which were that the Soviet Union would withdraw the missiles and the United States committed itself not to invade Cuba.

Here again Cuban independence showed itself. Cuba openly stated that it disagreed both with the manner in which the settlement had been made—by the U.S. and the Soviet Union without Cuba—and with its terms. One of the terms called for U.S. inspection flights over Cuba to see that the missiles were withdrawn. Cuba flatly rejected these flights as a violation of her sovereignty. The United States made the flights anyway.

After the missile crisis, U.S. policy on Cuba shifted somewhat. The basic hostility remained. Innumerable specific acts of aggression and sabotage continued. The U.S. and Latin American embargos continued. But the U.S. stopped actively planning and preparing to invade Cuba. The imperialists did not give up the hope of somehow, some day, crushing the Revolution; but they recognized that this could not be done in the immediate future.

ation in Havana commemorating the second anniversary of
notice.



After awhile, increasing U.S. involvement in Vietnam became a factor in the situation. It further decreased the immediate danger of invasion of Cuba. And it reduced the U.S. ability to intervene in any major revolutionary outbreak in Latin America or elsewhere.

From the beginning, the leaders of the Cuban Revolution had seen their struggle as only part of a Latin American revolution and supported such revolution. Now the support increased. The Cuban revolutionaries saw this support as an act of international solidarity and potentially great help to Vietnam. They felt it was strategically wise to take advantage of the U.S. being bogged down in Vietnam; the imperialist colossus could be forced into the hard choice of giving up intervention elsewhere or having to divide its forces. It is no accident that Che Guevara disappeared from Cuba in the spring of 1965 as a major escalation of the Vietnam war was getting underway.

The withdrawal of troops from Vietnam would increase the U.S. capability to act elsewhere, including possibly in Cuba and Latin America. It could be that after Vietnam, the imperialists will be cautious—but the troops will be there.

While imperialism is a system, not a matter of who is president or what is his policy, some specific characteristics of Nixon may be of significance. Nixon has been a hard-liner against the Revolution since its earliest days. He writes, "I wrote a confidential memorandum for distribution to the CIA, State Department, and White House in April, 1959....Early in 1960, the position I had been advocating for nine months finally prevailed, and the CIA was given instructions to provide arms, ammunition, and training for Cubans who had fled the Castro regime...."

And soon after his election, Nixon sent a message to a meeting of a Cuban exile group which is trying to form a Cuban government in exile. "Hopefully, the day is close when all your men will enjoy once again the liberty which you so much desire in the fatherland in which you were born." Maybe this is all just political verbiage on Nixon's part. But he will bear watching.

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