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Cuba: The Faces of Differing Narratives

Intro:

If one does not have the appropriate language background to communicate with a country's people, and lacks the experience needed to understand its culture first-hand in a variety of social settings, it may be safe to assume that whatever prior geo-political background one possesses, that knowledge may very well be based in a single, one-dimensional narrative. This is especially true in the case of the Republic of Cuba, in which its recent political and social history as well as accomplishments are framed in very differing ways by the commonplace narratives born out of countries such as the United States, as well as members of Latin America and the Caribbean. It is these differing narratives, primarily those centered around people and events that played an important role in shaping the country into what it is today, that I would like to make the focus of this paper in order to form a clearer, more holistic understanding for myself of what actually is the circumstances that lead up to present day Cuba. With this being said, I think it is important to begin by outlining briefly some of the not-so-recent history of Cuba in order to understand the more recent history that I will highlight later in this paper.

Pre-20th Century Cuban History:

An already inhabited Cuba was first stumbled upon by Christopher Columbus in 1492, and from that time on was treated as one of Spain's key colonies. The colonization of this island was began with a predictable tactic: the conquering and enslavement of the indigenous

population. The colonists were met with armed resistance from the indigenous populations of Cuba and surrounding islands, however this resistance was ultimately quelled some 20 years after the colonists initial arrival, from which the island's settlement began . From this point, a combination of new enslaved indigenous peoples and new brought African slaves were used as labors, especially in the areas of agriculture and the mining and extraction of gold present on the island (Hunt par. 1-7). Soon after came an indigenous uprising in which the armed natives persistently attacked the Spanish properties from the 1520's-1530's. Although this resistance too was for the most part pacified, the escape of slaves was still a common place. A couple hundred years later during the period of the 7 Years' War, Spain found itself having to defend Havana from the British, which for a short period resulted in the British occupation, and then Cuba was returned to Spain, Britain receiving Florida in exchange. This wasn't the end of the possession of Cuba switching of hands however. During the early 19th century the United States saw the possession of Cuba by another nation as unfavorable to American interests. Towards the end of this century after a series wars and the sinking of the USS Maine in the Havana Harbor, the Spanish-American War broke out, which was later concluded with the Treaty of Paris, the Article 1 of which states "Spain renounces all right of sovereignty and property of Cuba. In attention to that this Island, when it is evacuated by Spain, will be occupied by the United States" (Hunt). In the new Republic of Cuba's constitution was adopted what is known as a Platt Amendment, which authorized "authorizing the North American intervention in the matters of the country and the installation of two naval bases in Cuba, in compensation of privileges customs officers" (Hunt). With this taken into account, although on the surface it may seem as if Cuba had finally reached the time where it would gain its sovereignty, with the addition of the

Platt Amendment to its constitution it was more or less treated as a nation with “quasi independence”, as Vox’s video concerning the history between Cuba and America had phrased it (Harris, J., et al. [1:30-1:54])(WRFS [4:37-5:12]). To summarize this nearly 400 years of the history of the Republic of Cuba, it was under the indefinite rule of one nation or another throughout this entire period; however it was also during this period and those that follow that many armed struggles for true independence took place. Keeping all of this in mind, it will be interesting to see how two of Cuba’s most well known historical figures are framed depending on the framer of the narrative.

Fulgencio Batista and Related Events:

The narrative surrounding Fulgencio Batista is one of great interest in that the decisions that he made while in high positions of political power garnered both support of the American Government, as well as a variety of responses from the Cuban people themselves. The beginning of Batista’s rise to power was in the 1933 Revolt of the Sergeants in which he overthrew the government reigning over Cuba at that time. From the the time of this overthrow onward until his political career came to an end in 1959, Batista took on a number of different positions with the Cuban government, including high positions within the armed forces as well as serving as president of the Nation from 1940-1945, and later from 1952-1959. His later presidency was not necessarily won with the electoral support of the people: with their being prospect of defeat, he staged a coup against his presidential opponent, seizing the position with military force.

Perceptions concerning this strategic move to power taken by Batista differ depending on the party asked. According to the documentary titled “World Revolutions For Students - Castro And The Cuban Revolution”, Batista and his followers were not well liked by your typical Cuban

citizen owing to “rampant corruption, harsh repression, and social and economic inequalities” ([6:20-6:37]). To paint a more clear picture as to the kinds of happenings taking place from his reinstatement into the presidency until its end, according to a biography on the life and legacy of Che Guevara, “Television, radio, magazines, and newspapers throughout Cuba were filled with accounts of the horrible acts of torture, rape, and murder committed by Batista military and police officials” (Harris, Richard L., p. 93). To add further, it is written in this same biography that around the same time a series of revolutionary tribunals meant to punish those from the Batista regime that had abused their power were taking place, that the U.S. Government and media outlets based in the U.S. engaged in an attack campaign denouncing the credibility of these tribunals (p. 92). I certainly cannot speak for the Cuban citizens that fled to Florida at the time because in my opinion it is likely that a number of them, whether sympathizers of the Batista regime or not, were simply wishing to flee from the violence and political turmoil present in Cuba at the time; however, I find the propagation of attack campaigns by the U.S. Government to be rather dubious considering its primary reasons for having supported the Batista regime in the first place: economic and political interests. In a memorandum by Dean G. Acheson, the U.S. Secretary of the State of that time, to President Truman, it is written,

“The Batista regime has formally requested our recognition and has made satisfactory public and private statements with regard to Cuban intention to fulfill its international obligations; its attitude towards private capital; and its intention to take steps to curtail international communist activities in Cuba...The Department of State naturally deplores the way in which the Batista coup was brought about and is apprehensive that this kind of thing may occur in other countries of Latin America where elections are being held this year. Consequently, the Department and Ambassador Beaulac in Habana have been proceeding with great caution in this matter despite our very special position in Cuba which includes heavy capital investment, enormous international trade, the

Nicarao nickel plant operation, the Guantánamo Naval Base, three armed services missions and the recent signing of a bilateral military assistance agreement which requires implementation” (Par. 3-4).

With this it should be rather clear: regardless of the fact that the statement department found the methods by which Batista used to regain his authority in Cuba, political and economic opportunities that favored U.S. interests were ultimately more important than things such as the immediate health and welfare of the Cuban citizenry, hence why they went to such lengths as to try and delegitimize the reasoning behind the revolutionary tribunals.

Fidel Castro and Related Events:

The son of a wealthy Spanish farmer, Fidel Castro enjoyed some of the luxury that many of his Cuban peers did not have growing up. Despite this, rather than adopting a pro-private industry outlook, he instead adopted left-wing anti imperialist ideology. Around the time that Batista had taken the presidency through military force, Castro was also running for legislature. Due to these course of events, Castro decided that trying to change the system through bureaucratic channels wasn't going to work, and took matters into his own hands by staging a revolt in 1953. Although the revolt was not successful, he was very successful building a case as to why he and his group of over 100 soldiers planned the attack in the first place. In his own words, “More than half of our productive land is in the hands of foreigners. How can batista's presence and power be justified when he gained it against the will of the people? And by violating the laws of the republic through the use of treachery and force?” (WRFS [9:10-9:29]). It is here that we can clearly see the definite difference between Batista's reasoning for gravitating towards a position of political power and that of Castro's. Regardless of any respectable ideals that Batista may have (or not) once held, his assumption to the presidency was

clearly illegitimate. Furthermore, actions taken during his presidency such as the violence and corruption, and the clear disregard for the needs of the average person were primary forces that originally seemed to drive Castro to relieve Batista of his power. When looked at in this way, it may seem rather difficult to understand why the U.S. government of that time backed Batista's reign. If we however consider the fact that these events took place soon after the Second Red Scare we can begin to connect the dots. Batista was an ally to the U.S. in the sense that they were aligned on the same page in terms of political/economic policies. Notably Batista would give information to the U.S. State Department concerning communist activities in Cuba, but in a despatch from the Embassy of Cuba to the U.S. Department of State it was mentioned that Eusebio Mujal, (Secretary General of the Cuban Confederation of Workers) had provided much more accurate information on the numbers of communist supporters as well movements of those groups (Par. 2-4). Castro on the other hand, was by no means in any friendly relationship with members of the U.S. Government, and furthermore was a communist in terms of political leaning, consequently making him a nearby threat within the region once he had overthrown Batista and assumed control as Prime Minister of Cuba. The event that notably put Castro at odds with U.S. foreign policy was none other than the Cuban Missile Crisis.

The narrative seems to be often spinned in such a way that the Cuban Missile Crisis is an event in which Cuba was used out of Convenience by the then Soviet Union to gain leverage on the United States. In a document written by the Central Intelligence Agency (CIA) concerning the actions of Cuba, it is written...

“A major Soviet objective in their military build up of Cuba is to demonstrate that the world balance of forces has shifted so far in their favor that the US can no longer prevent the advance of Soviet offensive power even into its own hemisphere... At the same time, they expect

their missile forces in Cuba to make an important contribution to their total strategic capability vis-a-vis the US.” (CIA, p. 4).

Written in a separate paper concerning this same event, Gregory J.K. Garcia Jr. actually touches upon this same issue, pointing out that while the Soviet Union is often referred to as something like a puppet master, Cuba is normally only treated in these government reports as like a puppet guided by its Soviet puppet master, or as the “1st Soviet Satellite in America”. As Garcia points out though, this framing of the situation does not even factor in either the Soviet or the Cuban perspective concerning this situation (p. 2-3). This one sided framing of the situation doesn’t even take into the account that at the time of the Cuban revolution Castro himself did not align himself with Marxist Ideology. There is plenty of reasoning for why this is the case, much of which is laid out in detail in a book entitled “Cuban Communism” by Irving Louis Horowitz and Jaime Suchlicki. One of the more compelling reasons mentioned is that if Castro, or more appropriately, if Cuba were to have adopted the orthodox communist doctrine, it “would crush the revolutionary will of the people,” and would “extinguish the human quality that had overcome so many hardships and had actually made the Cuban revolution possible” (Horowitz). Of course though, these thoughts concerning the will of the Cuban people and what they invested into the Cuban Revolution were not a pressing enough matter for the U.S. Government of that time to take it into consideration it seems.

Conclusion:

Having primarily assembled the documents (primarily DOS and CIA declassified documents) that reference what I feel as an American is the narrative most representative of what I read growing up in the U.S. states public education system, and having now read and reflected on sources that have provided me a far differing narrative, I feel I have a far clearer

understanding as to why there has been so much animosity between my own nation and Cuba. To say that I truly understand the situation though would be giving myself too much credit; however, among the many things that I have taken away from this research is that I have a newfound respect for the revolutionary spirit I encountered in the Cuban narrative.

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