

THE REVOLUTION IN CUBA

It Symbolizes a New Sweep of Democracy in Latin America

James Finn

The exchange of criticism that swept back and forth between Cuba and the United States early this year caught many people in both countries largely by surprise. The victorious rebel leaders and the Cuban people were disconcerted when even Americans who welcomed the overthrow of General Fulgencio Batista criticized harshly the rapid trials and executions of those who had been imprisoned as war criminals. And Americans were taken aback at the resentment with which their criticism was met, and often slightly bewildered to find that the resentment has been building up for years.

This mutual criticism, it becomes increasingly clear, marks a watershed between two views of Cuba: the definite but distorted picture presented to the United States when Batista was dictator, and the shape of present Cuba which is only gradually emerging out of the successful revolution and which is yet to be sharply defined.

Almost as soon as I arrived in Havana it became obvious that practically all Cubans, from Fidel Castro to the cab drivers, felt impelled to correct misconceptions they attributed to the American people. Only misinformation, they felt, could account for the critical sentiments so prevalent in the United States.

This was strikingly evident during the great rally which formed to hear Castro speak from the President's Palace. As he spoke of the terror and corruption of the Batista regime, of the difficulties of the insurrectionist rebels and the ideals of the revolutionary government, the crowd reacted enthusiastically. And when he asked if they approved of the conduct of the war trials the response was loud and prolonged. This, Castro said, was a manifestation to the world of "the will of the people," by which the new government would be guided. He hoped that the several hundred foreign newsmen who had been assembled there and had seen this demonstration would return to their respective countries to clear up the falsehood about Cuba.

Mr. Finn, an associate editor of *The Commonwealth*, is one of the American journalists who covered the recent trials in Cuba.

After asserting defensively that the present regime had no reason to defend itself before indictments from abroad, he launched into an explanation and a defense of the "revolutionary justice" that was being practiced. The prisoners, he stated, were guilty of the most gross and inhuman crimes. The aftermath of the revolution was more controlled and orderly than any other revolution one could call to mind only because the people trusted the rebels swiftly to mete out justice. If these trials were not held, the government would be responsible for the havoc that would surely follow. The trials themselves might well be compared to the Nuremberg trials held by the victorious Western powers. Further, the United States had forfeited the right to criticize because it had for so long continued support to Batista, and to this day supported corrupt regimes in the Dominican Republic and Nicaragua. Let these faults be remedied before criticizing those of others.

• These brusque and repeated assertions, the expression of an exposed sensitivity and a desire to appear justified in world opinion, were also evident, though to a lesser extent, in Castro's press conference. But here he was preceded by other speakers whose main purpose was to offer detailed and documented accounts of the crimes perpetrated under the dictatorship of Batista. It was a catalogue of horrors: of pierced eyes and extracted fingernails; of beatings, castration and hangings; of a range of tortures reminiscent of Nazi ingenuity. With these outlined before one—and they were intimately familiar to the people of Cuba—it was easier to understand the strong emotion which supported the war trials.

And in these early days, when the newsmen and journalists descended upon Cuba, the war trials were the first item of discussion. The trial of Major Jesus Sosa Blanca, which followed the press conference, was held in the large, circular Sports Coliseum, quite obviously so that the observers would be favorably impressed with the due process accorded even to one of the most widely known and deeply hated prisoners. That American papers repeated past criticisms

and compared this particular trial to performances in the Coliseum of Rome—a comparison that occurred to Sosa Blanca himself—merely bewildered the Cubans. They had concentrated on putting their best foot forward only to be told that they were headed in the wrong direction. This bewilderment, and the subsequent retrial of Sosa Blanca, are marks of the uncertain stance of the new government and of an almost inevitable naiveté.

But this naiveté has been more than matched in the commentary that has issued from the United States, where the naiveté is less justified. The disappointed and censorious reactions which Americans early extended to Castro's forces can, of course, be partially attributed to poor press coverage. Batista had clamped a tight censorship on the island and only a few American reporters, notably Herbert Matthews of the *New York Times*, broke through this.

The little news that filtered out did scant justice to the intense terror which was the daily companion of the Cubans. When Batista did flee and Castro suddenly—as it seemed—emerged triumphant under the banners of democracy, Americans wished upon him their own “democratic” feelings and attitudes. Since he had thrown off press censorship and opened the doors to the press, news about the immediate events was plentiful. And when the rebels acted differently from the ideals that had been established for them, Americans were shocked. The war trials were torn from the only context in which they could be fairly considered, and pronounced barbarous.

But however one judges the trials and however indicative they may be of the temper of Castro and his followers, they will fade into the past as more insistent and more lasting problems press upon the new government. The first and largest question which now faces Cuba is what kind of government is the new government to be. And, following that, what relations will Cuba establish with the United States? These questions are of more importance to the United States than is immediately apparent, for the answers given to them will directly influence our relations with the entire Latin American world.

The government Cuba is to have, at least initially, depends largely on Castro. Although he has said, “I am not the Government,” the provisional government which was headed by President Manuel Urrutia and Premier Jose Miro Cardona was of course designated by him. And, if we leave aside the Communists, there is at this moment only one effective party in Cuba—the *Fidelistas*, those who are united in support of

their country's liberator. This support cuts across all levels of society; it extends from the *guajiros*, the Cuban peasants, to the middle-class professional and the intellectual. It combines large elements of confidence and trust in Castro precisely because he is regarded as a liberator, as one who opposed and overthrew a corrupt, brutal regime. This, more than any specific, enunciated program is, therefore, the reason for his present support. It is clearly insufficient to be the basis for terminal judgments about the future course of Castro, or of Cuba.

Castro has, of course, on numerous occasions outlined most sketchily his political and economic goals. What he has said has always been some variation of the statement he made during the press conference: “My political ideals are clear as spring water. We are defending only the interests of our peoples; we want only economic independence along with political independence. We must stop exploitation to establish a regime of social independence, but always within the framework of full human freedom.” And he has constantly reiterated that “I am a democrat, a *true* democrat.”

In more particular terms he has stated that “basic objectives” of the revolutionary regime are social reforms, including social security, more and better housing, equal land distribution, and improved education. Before these can be fulfilled, or even fairly undertaken, the economy of the island must be stabilized. The principal industries upon which that economy is based are sugar, tobacco and tourism, and concerning these Castro has made some definite proposals.

An experimental land reform movement has already been launched under Castro's aegis. Since there is little diversification on Cuba's rich farms the work is largely seasonal. Thus in 1958 more than a third of Cuba's working force was unemployed or averaged only a few hours a week. This does much to account for the fact that in a nation which has a yearly national income of close to two billion dollars for its six million inhabitants, the Cuban peasant lives on twenty-five cents a day. The agrarian reform which is just getting under way will, if it develops, do much to alleviate these conditions and strengthen the entire economic structure.

Tourism, the other large industry, has been the source of tension and disagreement among members of the revolutionary regime and, it seems, the cause of the first break in the seeming unity. For it depends to a large extent upon the large gambling casinos in the big tourist hotels. These casinos, most of which are owned by citizens of the U. S., symbolized for

Cubans the corruption of the Batista dictatorship and many were smashed during the last days.

Castro, who is personally opposed to gambling, at one time said that the casinos would stay closed. While President Urrutia and various members of the provisional government have maintained this position, Castro has shifted ground. In the interest of the economy, he has said, and of the ten thousand workers who depend for their livelihood on the tourist trade, he favors reopening the casinos.

It was evidently the opposition between what Premier-designate Cardona advocated and what Castro proclaimed in many speeches that led Mr. Cardona to resign. Now that Castro himself is Premier, and the law has been changed so that his age will not disqualify him for the Presidency, Castro's power has been politically affirmed. But he has also formed his first direct, vocal opposition.

Castro's action here is worth examining, for it seems to reveal deep inconsistency. He has shifted ground on the gambling casinos, an issue which stirs strong emotions in Cuba. After proclaiming that he was not the Government, he spoke as if he were and, when difficulties developed, he took over the Premiership. Even further, the law has been changed so that he will not have to wait until he is thirty-five, three years from now, to be President.

There are some who will find in these actions only confirmation of their general thesis, that Castro's idealism was only rhetoric deep, or at least not deep enough to withstand the pressures and temptations allotted to a national leader and spokesman. But it is also possible to view these actions as the result of an idealism that has yet to find its way in the labyrinthian realities of governing.

In everything he has said and done, during and after the revolution, Castro has displayed vitality, imagination and thoughtfulness. He has also, however, been oddly assertive and erratic. Even those who have a substantial faith in his good intentions cannot say how he intends to cross the terrain between present conditions and his goals for the future. This uncertainty about the particulars of his intentions does not necessarily indicate insincerity on Castro's part. It is indeed probable that he lacks, not sincerity, but certainty, that he has no fixed ideology and is responding to conditions pragmatically.

This very sensitivity and uncertainty, which seem to be a part of Castro and the Government, make the early expressions of United States attitudes more important than they would ordinarily be. There is an

anti-dictatorial spirit sweeping all Latin American countries. While democracy does not automatically replace a fallen regime, in Latin America any more than in other parts of the world, the democratic rhetoric and sentiment which derive from heroes such as José Martí are becoming increasingly meaningful.

The changing structure of many Latin American countries, among which Cuba can be included, is creating a middle class which wishes to moderate the traditional abuses so long associated with dictatorial reigns in Latin America. That within the last four years six Latin American dictators have been replaced is only the most striking manifestation of the profound transformation Latin America is undergoing.

In one form or another the changes in South America have paraded across the headlines of our papers. And the ambivalent feelings which many South Americans have toward the United States were known and evaluated in our State Department before Mr. Nixon made his recent unhappy trip. But such knowledge has only recently, and still insufficiently, altered the course of our South American policy. More than once in the last several years, the United States has been in the embarrassing position of seeming to give aid and friendship to a regime that maintained itself only by suppressing popular sentiment. When the Latin Americans see what at least appears to be cordiality between our representatives and those of a corrupt regime, when the new, "safe" governments see aid go to doubtful allies while they are taken for granted, and when they know that private interests in the United States resist the national development of resources in South America, it is not surprising that they look askance at United States protestations of good will and friendliness.

Cuba now has a new leader. He is only one of many in Latin America and his country is a relatively small island with a total population less than that of New York City. But he is young, vigorous and articulate, and he speaks to other Latin Americans in accents they can understand. While the relations the U. S. forms with his government will not be all-determining, they will be influential throughout Latin America.

A realization of these factors is not a recommendation to silence U. S. criticism or to rush all-out support. It does commend us, however, to make greater efforts to understand what is taking place, what is likely to take place, and to encourage those forces which are most likely to bring political and economic strength to the many countries that lie below our border.