

# AMERICAN DIPLOMACY AND THE FIRST CUBAN REVOLUTION

What Are the Political and Moral Choices in U.S.-Cuban Relations?

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To date, most interpretations of Cuban-American relations since Castro's revolution have depended in great part upon the assumption of either unqualified benevolence or sordid malignancy in American diplomacy towards Cuba. Both these prejudices are false; American diplomacy has been of a highly ambivalent nature.

To understand this it might be useful to recall what few students of recent Cuban events have remembered, namely, that Castro's was only the second radical reconstruction attempt in Cuba to have posed problems for the United States. The passage of more than thirty years since the first attempt means that it is now possible to study the revolution of 1933 with greater detachment than that of 1959; it also means that many official documents are now available to supplement one's personal observations. The story they confirm provides an instructive and, in all but outcome, amazingly exact parallel of more recent events.

On August 12, 1933, General Gerardo Machado y Morales, Cuba's President, emplaned for Nassau, Bahamas, together with his family and an unaccountable number of millions of dollars worth of loot. Thus ended his nine years of tyrannical, bloody, larcenous rule. Machado, however, had not been brought down by a revolution. After much unrest a general strike of almost universal Cuban participation had paralyzed the country's economy to the detriment of foreign and domestic business. Machado had served both well in the past, and had been rewarded accordingly—for instance, with a share in the electric power monopoly granted to the American-owned Cuban Electric Company.

Machado fell because he had outlasted that usefulness, both to Cuba and to the United States, both to "economic progress" and to the budding democracy of "our little brown brothers." In co-operation with interested Cuban parties and through the instrumentality of the Army High Command, Sumner

Welles, the American Ambassador specially sent by the State Department to deal with the crisis, had arranged for a peaceful transfer of power to a non-entity, Carlos Manuel de Céspedes; as long as Machado continued in power, Sumner Welles had reported to Secretary of State Cordell Hull, "there is no possible chance of improving economic conditions in Cuba, and there will be immense loss to the Cuban people themselves and as a natural corollary to all of the American interests doing business in or with Cuba." Welles had recommended withdrawal of recognition, but Hull preferred less open means. On August 9, in a message personally delivered by President Roosevelt to the Cuban Ambassador, Machado was told to go. The Army's *coup* of the evening of August 11 had been part of Machado's request for "a face-saving device." His life and property had been guaranteed as part of the bargain.

Sumner Welles had been neither Roosevelt's strap nor his Machiavelli. He was not the former because he thought, indeed, that intervention in Cuba's domestic politics should rapidly give way to "influence exerted behind the scenes and not apparent to the public," as had been the case with the Machado affair. Even so, Welles represented the more conservative wing of American diplomacy, which at that time was in transition as a result of Roosevelt's recent accession. But the division within the State Department was not so much about ends as about means. Both sides opposed continued reliance on Theodore Roosevelt's "Big Stick." The school of thought which Welles represented placed reliance on the open use of American military power only as an absolutely last resort. In the meantime, it was thought, every effort should be made to avoid that eventuality. Machado, for instance, should be made to go peacefully; he could be easily persuaded if he were allowed to keep his profit. A more reasonable person should be put in his place.

It would be as incorrect to say that this policy was either cynical or idealistic as it would be to ascribe to the United States *either* economic (i.e. neo-colonial, "bad") or political (i.e. democratic, "good") motives. In its eyes a less ambitious, more democratic Cuban regime—certainly a less murder-

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ous one—would be both desirable in itself and more advantageous economically to both Cuban and American business. Tyranny excited people to revolt—this could be said without a trace of irony—and revolt and unrest were bad for every economic interest.

Sumner Welles was not, of course, the first American diplomat, nor John Foster Dulles the last, sincerely to believe that sound business conditions are convertible to a sound social and political order. One must insist, then, that the policy represented by Sumner Welles cannot be interpreted either as caring for nothing but what furthered American business interests in Cuba or as concerned with Cuba's political freedom as such. No doubt, Welles would have admitted that what was good for the Cuban Electric Company was good for the United States. But Cuba's interests, too, were definable in terms of American interests—a sort of extension of the foregoing principle to mean that what is good for the United States must be good for everybody. To care for Cuba's true welfare was to care for American investment. This was honestly thought to be neither selfish nor unfair: it was simply mutually advantageous, politically and economically, to both Cuba and the United States.

The more "liberal" wing in the State Department had its own version of mutual economic advantage. Let us first note that whatever the justice of Welles' pragmatism, his pragmatism was not sufficiently pragmatic: it contained a diplomatic flaw. Sumner Welles' exclusive reliance on American power as a last resort, a sort of minor anticipation of the concept of massive retaliation, presupposed the unlikelihood of physical power being needed to support a peaceful transition from Machado to a "more democratic" regime.

On September 4, President Céspedes, Ambassador Welles and the Cuban people woke up to the sound of the news that a *coup d'état* had been accomplished at dawn. A five-man Junta, representing all those factions that for one reason or another were dissatisfied with a mere American-sponsored transfer of power and wanted an autochthonous revolution, had deposed Céspedes with the backing of a mutinous Army. The five had discerned that since the Army, Machado's former instrument, had remained morally discredited though physically intact, President Céspedes lacked a power base—and that whoever took control of the Army would rule Cuba. The "pentarchs," an unlikely mixture of the ambitious, the utopian, the opportunist, the idealist and the venal, had therefore availed themselves of a clever, knowledgeable Army sergeant equipped with good connections, a flair for organization and the percep-

tive idea that the soldiery would readily co-operate with any organized attempt to gain moral ascendancy by loading all the guilt for the Army's support of Machado (quite falsely, of course) onto the shoulders of the officer caste. The Junta had made him a colonel and instructed him (or conspired with his proposal—the details are not clear) to take over the Army. The sergeant's name was Fulgencio Batista y Zaldívar. By dawn, September 4, working quietly, quickly and efficiently he had delivered the Army's support to his five principals.

But in its own way the Junta had repeated the same mistake made by Sumner Welles three weeks earlier. Batista, evidently, had a second thought—there is no evidence that he had planned from the beginning to go as far as the next step. Whatever the case, it now loomed large to him that the Junta was totally dependent upon him for its power. Why should he continue to put the Army at its disposal? But first he consolidated his strength. Having already deposed the General Staff and most of the officers, he now proceeded to dismiss the remainder of the officer caste and to distribute new commissions quickly and adroitly. Within a week he had deposed the Junta and installed one of its members, Ramón Grau San Martín, as Provisional President.

But now it was Batista's turn to find himself in an awkward position. He had controlling power within Cuba, which the United States lacked. But having seized that power on his own initiative he lacked American support. Grau's government, therefore, lived under the constant threat of the application of the Platt Amendment, that is, military occupation by the United States. American power was effective only as a last resort. Batista's power was effective in the case of any but the last American resort. Batista and the State Department, thus, had maneuvered themselves into mutual need. They were bound to come to terms before long.

The full collaboration of Batista and the United States, however, would be delayed more than two months. There were two reasons. First, some domestic dangers still menaced Batista's power. The State Department wanted to wait until all the dust settled. Batista would have to prove "worthy" of American support. He was judged worthy when, by the end of November, his military power had become absolute and incontestable.

In the meantime, however, a second event had taken place. Grau's government had unexpectedly sprouted revolutionary ambitions and had gathered momentum, and in the wake of its reforms came massive popular support. The prime mover was not Grau himself but a bright, relatively unknown, very young (twenty-seven years old), Philadelphia-born, veteran revolutionary called Antonio Guiteras Holmes whom Grau had appointed to his cabinet. Guite-

ras brought to Grau's government several rare qualities: not only an uncompromising incorruptibility and the idea of radical reform, but also a plan of action and, most unprecedented of all, the selflessness and determination required to attempt its execution come what might. He coaxed, cajoled, bullied and threatened (with popular opinion) the Grau government into an extensive program of social and economic reconstruction. He usually drafted his own laws, such as those which introduced to Cuba the 8-hour day, minimum wage, social security and workers' pensions. He put through a decree confiscating the property stolen by the *machadistas*. Convinced, moreover, that it was not only they, but all Cuban politicians and their customary style who were really to blame for Cuba's political disorder, he decreed the dissolution of all the traditional political parties.

Before the end of 1933 Guiteras had become as popular a political leader as Cuba had seen since 1902 and as no one would again be until 1959. Among the masses only the Communists opposed him—and those who agreed with the Communist estimate of him, the upper and a rapidly increasing proportion of the middle classes. Guiteras, they all thought, was too nationalistic, and he was going "too fast." He even talked of land reform. The United States would not stand for any of it. Guiteras should not last long. Move by move, almost word by word, the same "disillusionment" of the "moderates" with Castro would take place in early 1959. One heard the latter, at the time, and one shuddered with the discomfort of the *déjà vu*.

It is not known precisely when the United States and Batista reached a working agreement. Sumner Welles was recalled to Washington for consultations while recognition of the Grau government continued to be withheld. Roosevelt's "Good Neighbor" policy, as worked out by Cordell Hull, prevailed over Welles' more simplistic idea: implementation of the Platt Amendment. Ambassador Jefferson Caffery was charged with the execution of the new policy. On December 18 he instituted daily talks with Batista.

Not surprisingly, by this time Guiteras had antagonized not only a large number of Cuban interests, but many American ones as well. Among the latter was the Cuban Electric Company, which had resisted the new labor legislation. Guiteras now ordered the Company to reduce its consumer rates (they were as high as 22 cents per kilowatt/hour). This time the Company not only resisted but refused to comply. Guiteras decreed the Company's administrative seizure, a move that Castro was to emulate in June, 1960, in relation to the oil companies that refused to refine Russian crude oil. On January 14,

1934, Guiteras personally delivered the seizure order to the Company's general manager. Units of the U.S. fleet lay at anchor in Havana Harbor, literally within sight of the Cuban Electric Building.

On the morning of January 15 the revolution was over. At dawn of that day Batista had compelled Grau to resign and had ordered Guiteras' arrest. (Forewarned, Guiteras escaped; he remained at large for more than a year and organized his *Joven Cuba* movement. On May 8, 1935, betrayed by a friend, he was surrounded by Batista's men and after a prolonged gun battle shot dead.) Two days after Grau's resignation Batista installed Carlos Mendieta as Provisional President and thereafter ruled through a succession of puppets until 1940, when through fraudulent elections he became Cuba's constitutional President. Six days after Mendieta's elevation the United States recognized his government. Things had finally come under control. The transition from Machado to "stable government" had been effected, after all, without a reversion to the Big Stick. A new basis for American diplomacy in the Caribbean had been found.

In 1959 American policy still worked under the same assumptions, towards the same ends and, in the beginning, through the same means as had been operative with but minor modifications since 1934. But for all the parallels between Guiteras and Castro's reform movements there were also some differences that had to be reckoned with. Guiteras had attempted his program without any power basis other than moral strength and popular support. Therefore it was possible to bring him down by the strategy devised by Cordell Hull and executed by Caffery through the instrumentality of Batista. Castro, however, had come into office wielding effective power on his own behalf. Therefore Christian Herter's early attempt to impress into service the *bastianos* and other Cuban discontent and ambitious elements was in reality only an anemic copy of Hull's: even with American help they did not have the effective power within Cuba that Batista and Cuban big business had had in January, 1934. It was indispensable for American diplomacy to adapt itself accordingly, and to some extent it did so. Castro did not suffer the fate of Guiteras because this adaptation was not radical enough.

Some domestic critics of American diplomacy have suggested that the United States should have severed its connections with Batista in good time, exactly as it once did with Machado. These critics ignore the fact that August 12, 1933 was good enough time for getting rid of Machado because there had never been any serious power threat against him. But in 1958 Batista's rule had not been merely shaken by

the economic disadvantages of popular unrest or by any concerted popular movement such as a general strike. It had been toppled by the armed force of Castro's (and other organization's) guerrillas which despite ridiculous military inferiority had succeeded in demoralizing Batista's Army.

On the other hand, Castro's accession to full military power in Cuba was highly problematic until the very last moment. Batista's rule, in fact, actually ended by a departure from Cuba which was not entirely spontaneous on his part. Though we do not know with certainty to what extent American and Cuban interests were behind the move to discard Batista, it is part of the public record that on Christmas Eve, 1958, General Eulogio Cantillo, of the Cuban General Staff, sought out Castro with a proposition: the Army would dismiss Batista and shift its support to Castro. There was a provision: the Army would accept the separation of some of its elements most closely associated with Batista, but it would have to remain substantially intact. Castro refused. He would accept nothing short of unconditional surrender.

The General Staff, having no better alternative and hoping by this stratagem to salvage some power, arranged nevertheless for Batista's resignation and flight, as well as for the simultaneous departure of some of the principal military and political *batistianos*. On December 31 General Cantillo personally saw Batista's plane off. He then announced that he had effected a *coup* and publicly invited Castro to come to Havana and take over the Presidency with his, Cantillo's, and the Army's support. Castro's response was to order Ché Guevara to march into Havana to capture the Army command and, in particular, to place Cantillo under arrest. Guevara executed Castro's orders on January 1, 1959. On January 2, according to previously announced plan, Castro installed Manuel Urrutia as Provisional President at a public meeting in Santiago de Cuba's *Céspedes* Park.

Castro, thus, was not only a radical reformer of highly independent mind: he also was in effective control of Cuba. His confidence—for evidently he thought that the United States would acquiesce in his program—probably derived from an appreciation of the relatively weak diplomatic position of the United States. But just as Cordell Hull once discovered a force *within* Cuba which he could draft in the service of American diplomacy, Herter devised, though only very gradually, a new if rather more complex agency which he could convert to American advantage. That force was an abstraction. Its name was anti-communism. Now, anti-communism did provide a rallying point as well as a blind

for the Cuban upper and middle classes, particularly since, as I have tried to show elsewhere, in this strategy American diplomacy was abetted, unconsciously at first, quite willingly in the end, by Cuban Catholicism. Why, then, did American diplomacy not succeed?

Let us leave aside all questions concerning international justice. The ineptness of Herter's strategy is made evident, in the first place, when we consider that anti-communism does not of itself possess physical power. To have opposed the revolution on the plane of communism may have made perfect sense as a demagogic appeal to American public opinion, but the domestic advantages of this procedure were bought at the price of internationalizing the Cuban problem. It matters little whether Castro was a Communist or not. Even had he been oriented by Marxism from an early date, which he was not, the United States has managed to live with dozens and dozens of revolutions oriented by Marxism in Africa and Asia without experiencing the need to define them as "Communist," i.e. as allied with the Soviet Union and as intolerable to the United States. To impose upon the Cuban revolution the definition "Communist" really meant to forbid Cuba's neutralism. Anti-communism would have been efficient only if the United States had been prepared to fight Russia in order to repress Castro. Since it was not, the issue ought not to have been raised.

In short, Herter's re-adjustment of the standard Caribbean policy was not sufficiently basic—in fairness one should also note that the architects of later policy have been even less flexible than he. American diplomacy might have achieved its purposes more efficiently if it had questioned not only its operational techniques but also its most fundamental assumptions. It might have questioned, perhaps most profitably of all, that assumption which it shares with Marxism, that economics determines politics. International justice still aside, this was the time to question the idea that the international political interests of the United States are necessarily best served by the international preservation and expansion of capitalism. As it was, American diplomacy cannot be said to have been either economically or politically wise. As long as the United States was not prepared to attack Cuba wantonly or to fight Russia for it, reconciliation to the Cuban revolution, though not immediately economically advantageous, would not have led to the political consequences which obtained in the event and which have proven disadvantageous both to Cuba and to the United States and, beyond them, indeed, to the whole world.