

IN SEARCH OF FULGENCIO BATISTA

A REEXAMINATION OF PRE-REVOLUTIONARY CUBAN SCHOLARSHIP

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Abstract

This article reviews a wide-ranging bibliography of scholarly studies from both sides of the ideological divide concerning academic and official representations of the Prerevolutionary period in Cuba. The research points to a variety of factors which have influenced scholarly studies in the past -avoidance of the period altogether, the absence of reliable biographies of the principal pre-revolutionary figures of the 1930-1959 period, restricted access to archives, promotion of official interpretations-, amongst others. This study also points to the ground-breaking work of leading specialists who seek to bridge the ideological chasm between US and Cuban versions of their recent history. The article centres on the figure of Fulgencio Batista and aims to use his career as a window to the period, a means by which to suggest a variety of issues that need to be re-examined and challenged. A central point of this analysis will be the need to study the leading political figures within their historical context, and to being aware of different and contrasting stages in their complex political careers, and to the variety of implications that result.

Key words: Fulgencio Batista, Prerevolutionary period (Republican); Cuban Revolution; US-Cuba relationship; bibliography of scholarly studies.

Resumen

Este artículo revisa una extensa bibliografía de estudios realizados por académicos de ambos lados de la separación ideológica, sobre las representaciones del periodo Republicano en Cuba (prerrevolucionario) y señala una variedad de factores que han influenciado a estos académicos. Esta propuesta también llama la atención hacia los trabajos pioneros de destacados especialistas quienes buscan superar los obstáculos y tender puentes sobre el abismo ideológico entre las versiones cubanas y norteamericanas de la historia reciente. El artículo se centra en Fulgencio Batista. El análisis parte de la necesidad de estudiar a las principales figuras políticas en su contexto histórico y de considerar las distintas etapas de sus carreras políticas complejas y la variedad de implicaciones que resultan. *Palabras claves:* Fulgencio Batista, Periodo prerrevolucionario (Republicano), Revolución Cubana, Relaciones EEUU-Cuba, bibliografías especializadas.

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EN BUSCA DE FULGENCIO BATISTA

UNA REVISIÓN DEL TRABAJO DE LOS ACADÉMICOS
CUBANOS ANTES DE LA REVOLUCIÓN

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Résumé

C'est une révision de l'ample bibliographie consacrée aux études sur les représentations de la période Républicaine à Cuba (pré-révolutionnaire) effectuée par des universitaires idéologiquement séparés. Cette révision montre qu'ils ont été influencés par divers facteurs. Cette étude souligne aussi l'aspect "pionnier" des travaux spécialisés qui tentent de jeter un pont sur l'abîme idéologique séparant versions cubaines et versions nordaméricaines de l'histoire récente. Un article centré sur le personnage de Fulgencio Batista.

Samenvatting

Het artikel beschrijft een uitgebreide literatuuroverzicht van Cuba tijdens de Republikeinse (pre-revolutionaire) periode. Er wordt verwezen naar een veelheid van factoren die academici van beide ideologische kampen had beïnvloed. Ook wordt pionierswerken geprezen, die deze belemmeringen probeerde te overstijgen en die bruggen bouwden tussen de Cubaanse en Noordamerikaanse interpretaties van de recente geschiedenis. Het artikel behandelt vooral de figuur van Fulgencio Batista. De centrale stelling is dat de voornaamste politieke figuren in hun historische context geplaatst moeten worden, en dat in beschouwing moet worden genomen de verschillende fasen in hun politieke carrière en de consequenties hiervan.

The time has come to reexamine aspects of the career of Fulgencio Batista during the “pre-Revolutionary” period (1902-1958) of Cuban history. For more than 40 years, Batista and many of the political leaders of the period have been depicted as stick figure caricatures, spineless lackeys of the United States, corrupt and decadent politicians with no political agenda beyond lining their own pockets. These stick figures have served Fidel Castro and the Revolutionary government very well. By debasing pre-Revolutionary leaders, with a few choice exceptions, Castro has succeeded in casting himself as the spiritual heir to José Martí, while everyone else pales in comparison. In an article on the uses of history by the Revolutionary government during the first two decades in power, Louis A. Pérez, Jr. wrote:

The rendering of the Cuban past in the last twenty years may be in part dishonest, in part mythical, perhaps contrived. It has often functioned as a deliberate device for garnering loyalty and sacrifice. Indeed, Cubans have used history to affirm, define, and defend the beliefs basic to the enterprise of Revolution [Pérez, 1980, 79-89].

Little has changed during the subsequent twenty-plus years up through 2001. Inside Cuba, serious scholarship on the period, also known as the Republican era or the “pseudo-republic,” must walk the ideological tightrope set by the *Revolution*. The official interpretation of the period is on display at the Museo de la Revolución (the former Presidential Palace), which has designated Batista for a special place of shame – *El Rincón de los Cretinos* – The Cretins Corner, along with former United States Presidents Ronald Reagan and George Bush. In the exhibit the corruption, decadence and racial discrimination of the pre-Revolutionary period are elaborately detailed. The exhibit leads one to believe that these social ills vanished with the triumph of the Revolution of 1959.

With few exceptions, such as the work of Lionel Soto¹ and José Tabares del Real,² most Cuban scholars avoid the pre-Revolutionary period altogether and concentrate on the nineteenth century, a field much less likely to offend the government and its official version of history. The lack of scholarly attention to the period between 1902 and 1958 might lead one to believe that little of importance happened in the period between the independence wars and the Revolution of 1959. More than four decades after the triumph of the Revolution many Cuban archival collections focusing on the military and the Presidency of Fulgencio Batista remain off-limits, available for review by only select scholars.³

In the Cuban exile community, the attacks against the Castro government are impassioned and incessant, and still capable of sparking a political crisis between the United States and Cuba as the events surrounding the Elián González case recently illustrated. The two Cuban communities see the pre-Revolutionary period in fundamentally different ways. After 40 years, there is still little in the way of dialogue. A brief review of the bibliographies and footnotes of many of the scholarly works produced by the two sides reveals a lack of engagement. The other often overlooks the scholarship of one. Until the two sides begin a conversation progress in reinterpreting the pre-Revolutionary period will continue at a slow pace.

Outside Cuba, our understanding of the period has benefited from the work of the prolific Louis A. Pérez, Jr., whose works span the entire era and Marifeli Pérez-Stable, whose ground-breaking study, *The Cuban Revolution: Origins, Course and Legacy*, strives to deal with the pre and post- Revolutionary eras as part of a continuous whole rather than disconnected pieces (Pérez,

¹ Soto analyzes the period from a Marxist perspective and brings together a wide range of primary and secondary sources. One of the most thorough works on the period.

² Tabares del Real reviews the entire period from 1902 to 1935, but concentrates on the 1930s.

³ Repeated requests on my part to review military records from the period have been ignored or denied.



"Gracias Cretino por ayudarnos A HACER LA Revolución"
Batista en el "Rincón de los Cretinos" del Museo de la Revolución de La Habana
(Foto: Frank Argote-Freyre)

1986a, 1990, 1995; Pérez-Stable, 1999).⁴ Carlos Alberto Montaner raises a number of thought provoking questions in a recent essay in which he argued that the Revolutionary ethos of twentieth century Cuba created a political climate which made it inevitable that *caudillos* would rule. Among the *caudillos* he includes, José Miguel Gómez, Mario García Menocal, Gerardo Machado, Batista and Castro (Montaner, 2001). A recent book and article by Robert Whitney attempts to place the Batista of the 1930s within a populist framework and suggests additional topics for further study, including the role of corporatism and state efforts to “discipline” the Cuban masses (Whitney, 2000, 2001a). Earlier works by Hugh Thomas, Jorge Domínguez, Luis E. Aguilar and Herminio Portell-Vilà made significant contributions to our understanding of the period (Thomas, 1971; Domínguez, 1978, 1998; Aguilar, 1972; Portell-Vilà, 1986).

Nonetheless, pre-Revolutionary Cuba remains the stepchild of twentieth century Cuban historiography and scholarship. The dramatic events of the Cuban Revolution – The Bay of Pigs, the Cuban Missile Crisis, the effort to spread *Revolution* throughout Latin America, Cuban involvement in Africa, the Mariel Boatlift, the aftermath of the Soviet collapse and ongoing efforts to tighten the United States embargo – have dominated scholarly efforts in the United States. As a result, scholarship on pre-Revolutionary Cuba has been spotty at best, except for works on the process of fomenting *Revolution* in the 1950s for which scholarship and first-hand accounts abound.⁵ Pérez-Stable argues that there has been a failure to incorporate pre-Revolutionary Cuba into our understanding of modern Cuba and notes that there is a “great divide” between the scholarship on the pre-Revolutionary and Revolutionary periods. “Caricatured views of pre-Revolutionary Cuba have too often sustained explanations

⁴ Pérez-Stable is currently working on an ambitious project to reinterpret Cuban politics of the period, entitled *Cuba's Long Twentieth Century (1868-2000)*.

⁵ It is well beyond the scope of this essay to even begin to address the voluminous nature of the literature on this topic, which ranges from accounts by former Batistianos to first-hand accounts by rebel commanders and later interpretive volumes.

for the origins of the *Revolution*," she writes (Pérez-Stable, 1999, 3-13).⁶ Evidence of this lack of attention can be found in the fact that there are few scholarly biographies of the major figures of the period, including Batista,⁷ Ramón Grau San Martín, Carlos Prío Socarrás,⁸ Eduardo Chibás,⁹ and Machado¹⁰ (Chester, 1954; Acosta Rubio, 1943; Vega Cobiellas, 1943; Lancís, 1985; Hernández-Bauzá, 1987; Rodríguez Morejón, 1944; Riera Hernández, unpublished manuscript; Conte Agüero, 1987; Argote-Freyre, 2002; Machado y Morales, 1982). The writings that do exist are frequently first-person reminiscences, sprinkled with hero worship that more appropriately should be classified as hagiographies, rather than biographies. This is in contrast to a vast number of works on Antonio Guiteras, a figure of great symbolic importance to the Revolution of 1959, but arguably of less historical significance than Batista, Grau, Prío or Machado. The body of work on Guiteras, done by scholars such as Tabares del Real, Newton Briones Montoto and Olga Cabrera is qualitatively better than for any other figure of the pre-Revolutionary period (Tabares del Real, 1990; Briones Montoto, 1998; Cabrera, 1974a, 1974b).¹¹ Many other important areas of research have been largely ignored. The role of women in the pre-Revolutionary political

⁶ In attempting to bridge the divide, Pérez-Stable cites six factors that contributed to the likelihood of a radical Revolution in Cuba: mediated sovereignty, sugar-centered development, uneven modernization, a crisis of political authority, and the weakness of the upper classes and the relative strength of the popular classes.

⁷ The author is working on a biography of Batista. So was José A. Tabares del Real until his untimely death in December 2001. The author is uncertain of the status of Tabares' work. The earlier works, while useful as primary sources, frequently cross the divide between biography and hero worship.

⁸ Prío remains one of the most ignored figures of the period. There are no significant scholarly works on his life.

⁹ Conte Agüero's work is a good example of a friendly biography. It was written by one of Chibás' closest friends and political followers. As a primary source document it is invaluable; my article reviews his use as a symbol after his death.

¹⁰ Machado wrote an account of his eight years in power, a historical document that has been largely ignored.

¹¹ In addition to chronicling the life of Guiteras, Briones Montoto provides a useful biographical sketch of Batista's life.

process requires further study, as does the issue of race and its impact on political process and culture.¹² The work by K. Lynn Stoner on women's issues and Aline Helg and Alejandro de la Fuente on race are among the most significant contributions to those fields of study (Stoner, 1991; Helg, 1995; de la Fuente, 2001; see also Brock and Castañeda, 1998; Fernández Robaina, 1994; Reyes Castillo Bueno, 2000; Pérez, 1986b).

The pre-Revolutionary period awaits rediscovery, a process that can only enrich our understanding of twentieth century Cuban history. This essay aims to use the career of Fulgencio Batista as a window into the period, a means by which to suggest a variety of issues that need to be reexamined and challenged. One of the major problems with the scholarly work on Batista is the failure to distinguish between his early career in the 1930s and 1940s and the Batista of the 1950s. There are in fact at least two, maybe three, Batistas. There is the Revolutionary/dictator of the 1930s, the democratic leader of the 1940s, and the dictator of the 1950s. Attributing the same motives and goals to all three Batistas amounts to superficial and deterministic scholarship.

In the first portion of the essay I will review Batista's career and suggest some general topics, which have either been ignored or made the subject of political propaganda by either the Revolutionary government or the Cuban exile community. In the second part of the essay, I will analyze two specific issues regarding Batista's early career, specifically the events surrounding the Revolution of 1933, in which "facts" have been constructed to reflect the Revolutionary government's interpretation of history. This, despite the fact, that ample source material exists to question and challenge that interpretation. The first issue will challenge the contention that Batista was a minor figure in plotting the Sergeants' Revolt, a movement among the enlisted men that led directly to the ouster of the United States backed government of Carlos Manuel de Céspedes and paved the way for what has become known in the historiography as the "Revolution of 1933". His political enemies alleged Batista was the "admin-

¹² The political role of Afro-Cubans in the early Republic leading up to the "Race War of 1912" has begun to receive much needed scholarly attention.

istrative secretary” of the movement and that in fact the real mastermind was Sergeant Pablo Rodríguez (Adam y Silva, 1947, 101; Tabares del Real, 1973, 140-141). After that, I will go on to challenge the assertion that Batista was planning to betray his Revolutionary allies, in a conspiracy with United States Ambassador Sumner Welles, within hours of the Revolution’s triumph on September 4, 1933.

BATISTA’S CAREER

To best understand the issues raised in this essay, a brief synopsis of Batista’s career is in order. Batista was born in 1901 into abject poverty in Banes, a municipality in what was then northern Oriente Province (now Holguín Province). Financial necessity forced him to leave school at an early age and work in the sugar cane fields near the giant Boston sugar mill, owned by United Fruit (a United States corporation), which economically dominated the region (Zanetti and García, 1976). He supplemented his education by attending a Quaker missionary school in the evening, where he probably learned some English. It’s also likely he picked up a working knowledge of the language from the many Jamaican immigrants living in his neighborhood. At the age of 18, he found employment as a railroad brakeman, where he worked for a little over a year. Batista joined the Cuban Army in 1921. His early military career was modestly successful. He served as a bodyguard for President Alfredo Zayas at his country estate where he made liberal use of his extensive library, earning the nickname “bookworm” (*El Filomático*). After Zayas left office in 1925, he was transferred to Army Headquarters where he specialized in stenography and typing. During his first twelve years in the army he advanced from private to major, all this time living in a series of apartments throughout Havana, and teaching business courses in his home or at small local academies.

The chaos created by the struggle against the dictatorship of Gerardo Machado gave Batista his opportunity to emerge as a Revolutionary leader. After Machado fled Cuba in August 1933, the army command structure was in disarray and the public held

the military in low regard. Furthermore, the replacement of Machado by Céspedes, in a deal orchestrated by United States Ambassador Sumner Welles, left nationalist aspirations unfulfilled. In this climate, Sergeant Batista and a group of enlisted men organized an uprising against the officer corps, which was put into action on September 4 1933. Batista quickly emerged as the military leader and formed an alliance with several civilians Revolutionary groups, principally the Directorio Estudiantil Universitario (University Student Directory), to topple the Céspedes government. After solidifying his control of the military, he was promoted to the rank of Colonel and Army Chief of Staff.

The alliance between the students and enlisted men was a study in uneasy contrasts from its inception. Batista's followers were primarily men of action from the poorest segments of society, many of them Afro-Cubans. The students were idealists and ideologues. They were men and women with years of academic and political training, who spent hours in meetings vigorously debating every nuance of political and public policy. For the most part, the students were from the middle and upper classes of Cuban society. Their leader was Ramón Grau San Martín; a man of inherited wealth, augmented by a successful medical practice. He was the consummate aristocrat with his finely clipped mustache, nicely tailored suits, cultured Spanish and fencing expertise. The coalition of students and soldiers was a troubled one and destined to be short-lived. After four months, Batista's relationship with the Directorio and Provisional President Grau San Martín soured and he removed the president from power.

The removal of Grau in January 1934, inaugurated what has become known as the "Period of the Puppet Presidents" (1934-1939), in which Batista dominated Cuban political life behind a constitutional facade. The period takes in the presidencies of Carlos Mendieta (1934-1935), José Antonio Barnet (1935-1936), Miguel Mariano Gómez (1936) and Federico Laredo Brú (1936-1940). However, Batista preserved much of the far reaching labor legislation enacted by the Revolutionary government. In addition, the United States agreed to abrogate the hated Platt Amendment, which gave it the right to directly intervene in Cuban political affairs. In the late 1930s, Batista reached agreement with

most of his former allies, including Grau, many of the student leaders, and the other major political parties on a transition process to democracy, beginning with elections for a Constitutional Assembly in 1939. A new constitution was drafted the following year.

In 1939, Batista resigned as Army Chief of Staff to run in the 1940 presidential elections. Batista, with the help of an unusual alliance forged with the Communist and Conservative parties, defeated Grau, and served as Chief Executive from 1940 to 1944. During World War II, Cuba strongly backed the United States and entered the war just days after the attack on Pearl Harbor. The Constitution prohibited Batista from seeking a second term and when Grau defeated his handpicked successor, he peacefully transferred power to his old rival. After he left office, he toured Latin America and was hailed as a great democratic leader. He went into self-imposed exile in Daytona Beach, Florida, a sleepy and wealthy coastal city, far different from the booming vacation resort of today. Batista lived there for several years, all the while keeping tabs on Cuban politics and regularly receiving visits from political allies.

If his career had ended there, he might be remembered as the man who established/restored democracy to Cuba. But, it did not. Batista was elected to the Cuban Senate in 1948 and shortly thereafter began to prepare for the presidential election of 1952. Polls indicated that Batista was unlikely to win the race and he began to plot a military coup to take power, which he did on March 10, 1952, toppling the government of President Prío Socarrás. He was never able to establish legitimacy and, despite assurances to the contrary, he remained in power for more than six years. His third stint in power would degenerate into an orgy of corruption and political violence.

The Batista government captured Fidel and Raul Castro after the failed attack on the Moncada army barracks on July 26, 1953. But, as a result of internal and external pressure, Batista signed an amnesty bill two years later setting them free. In the late 1950s, the Batista government was buffeted by an urban guerrilla campaign and a military uprising led by Fidel Castro in the Sierra Maestra. He was nearly killed during an attack on the

Presidential Palace in 1957. After the defeat of the Cuban Army in the summer of 1958, high-ranking military leaders began to plot against Batista (Batista Zaldívar, 1960, 119-138). A master political strategist, Batista knew it was time to leave. He surprised many friends and foes by departing in the middle of the night on January 1, 1959.

At the age of 58, Batista fled into ignominious exile, first to the Dominican Republic, then Portugal and, finally Spain, where he died in 1973. He never set foot in Cuba or the United States again. Batista would spend the last years of his life, writing book after book, none of which would garner much attention, in a vain effort to rebuild his image as the "Revolutionary leader" of the 1930s.

PUPPETS, PRESIDENTS AND COMMUNISTS

One of the most interesting aspects of Batista's early career was his alliance with the Communists in the 1930s and 1940s, a relationship that unofficially persisted into the 1950s. The alliance was born of necessity on both sides. In the late 1930s, Batista needed an ally capable of quelling labor unrest, which was widespread throughout the period, and which in March 1935 nearly toppled the Mendieta/Batista government. The communists, relatively small in numbers, needed an ally with whom they could gain a foothold in the government. Repeated efforts to form an alliance with Grau and the students were rejected. The two sides took gradual steps towards each other in 1937 and struck a deal in 1938. As part of the deal, Batista legalized the Communist Party and allowed it to reorganize the labor movement. For their part, the communists agreed to support Batista's political aspirations.

Although the relationship between Batista and the communists is one of the more interesting political alliances of the period, there have been few comprehensive studies of the subject (Córdova, 1995; Ordoqui, 1961; Rito, 1961; Tellería, 1984).¹³ The

¹³ There are no lack of studies on the labor movement and communist influence therein.

works of Robert Alexander and Jorge García Montes and Antonio Alonso Ávila suggest the many intricacies and facets of the alliance, but there are still many details to be uncovered about the day-to-day functioning of the alliance (García Montes and Alonso Ávila, 1970; Alexander, 1957; Thomas, 1971; Sims, 1985; Goldenberg, 1970; Alba, 1959).¹⁴ There has been little written about the personal/political relationships between Batista and the communist leaders of the period, such as Blas Roca, chairman of the party, Joaquín Ordoqui, one of the party's principal leaders, Carlos Rafael Rodríguez, the party's chief intellectual, and labor leader Lázaro Peña. What pressures did Batista receive from more conservative factions within his coalition to cut his ties with the party? Was there any opposition within the Communist Party to forming/maintaining the alliance? The alliance doesn't fit the neat picture of Batista as a United States puppet. Clearly, World War II and the emphasis on a popular front against fascism influenced communist decision-making in Cuba as it did in many countries. But, the affinity between Batista and the communists lasted well into the 1950s. In fact, it was not until 1958 that some members of the party, then known as the Partido Socialista Popular (Popular Socialist Party — PSP) officially broke with Batista and declared their support for Castro. In fact, some have deridingly declared Batista the "father" of Cuban Communism (Álvarez, 1959).¹⁵

The United States perspective on the alliance between Batista and the communists has received even less scholarly attention. In fact, United States officials never felt that they could

¹⁴ The work of García Montes and Alonso Ávila is virulently anti-communist, but despite its strong ideological bent, the authors, former political allies of Batista, have amassed a wide array of sources and information from within and outside Cuba; Alexander's dated, but classic study provides a brief synopsis of the origins of the Batista/Communist alliance. Alba provides an overview of popular front policies.

¹⁵ This curious pamphlet by Vladimir Álvarez seeks to discredit the communists for their association with Batista. It is dedicated to Carlos Rafael Rodríguez "[a] quien el Dictador recompensó sus valiosos servicios con un Ministerio sin Cartera, y que hoy padece una cruel y dolorosa amnesia". It is held by the Otto Richter Library, Cuba Collection, University of Miami.

control Batista and the relationship with the communists was one of great concern. Diplomatic and military records from the period are full of warnings about the growing communist threat in Cuba and Batista's slide towards Communism. In a February 23, 1944 report by Colonel Egon R. Tausch, military attaché to Cuba, he writes:

Several reports received by the Military Attaché, and as yet not substantiated, are to the effect that one of BATISTA's reasons for wanting to remain the power behind the throne after he relinquishes the Presidency, is so that he can better serve the Communists, and that he is planning to become a power not only among Cuban Communists, but also in the Communist organizations of other Latin American countries. His scheming, self-confident, and unscrupulous character does not decrease the possibility of such an ambition on his part. His hatred of the United States and Americans in general spells added trouble in the future.¹⁶

This relationship merits further study not only for what it reveals about Batista, but more importantly for what it says about the day-to-day functioning of the Communist Party in Cuba. Such a study would provide a fuller understanding of the relationship between the Cuban and United States government. It would add a richness that would move us away from the perception that all actions in the Caribbean in general, and Cuba specifically, were/are orchestrated by the United States. Batista and other political figures were acting in their own self-interests and not just taking orders from Washington.

The alliance between Batista and the communists is a politically inconvenient one for the Revolution and for members of the Cuban exile community that considered themselves "batistianos". Clearly, the Revolutionary government interested in drawing parallels between the Revolution of 1959 and the glorious struggles of the past would have little interest in studying the fact

¹⁶ Col. Egon R. Tausch, military attaché, "Growing Power of Communism in Cuba," February 23, 1944, Military Intelligence Division, Folder 000.1 Cuba, RG 319.

that the Communist Party had in fact supported the most reviled of dictators. In fact, Carlos Rafael Rodríguez, a member of Batista's cabinet in the 1940s, would go on to serve as a member of the Political Bureau of the Communist Party up until just prior to his death in 1997.¹⁷ In academic circles outside Cuba, the alliance between Batista and the communists is often overlooked because of the tendency to see Batista through the perspective of the 1950s. "The tendency of historians – especially in light of the Revolution of 1959 – to view Batista solely as a counter-Revolutionary figure has obscured the reasons behind his populist phase of 1937-40," Whitney writes in a recent article (Whitney, 2000, 458).

Even more neglected than the alliance between Batista and the communists are the events leading to the election of Miguel Mariano Gómez as President in 1936 and his subsequent impeachment seven months after taking office on December 24, 1936. The elections of January 1936 were clearly rigged to give the victory to Gómez, a defeat that former President Mario Menocal reluctantly accepted. Gómez, son of Cuba's second president José Miguel Gómez, and Batista clashed from the very onset. The younger Gómez was independently wealthy and a member of Cuba's upper class, a group which had never quite accepted the poor, country boy from Banes with the questionable racial and ethnic antecedents. A political acquaintance of Gómez remembered that the discomfort even filtered down to the two families who were uneasy around each other.¹⁸ The political issue that propelled Gómez and Batista into confrontation was rural education. Batista wanted to establish schools in the poorest rural areas of the island, regions where teachers and class-

¹⁷ Blas Roca, 1908-1987, held a variety of prominent positions in the Revolutionary government, including President of the National Assembly until his health declined in the 1980s.

¹⁸ Santiago Rey Perna, interview by author, Tape recording, Miami, Fla., 29 April 1998. Rey, an adviser and ally of Menocal, who lost the 1936 election, said that Menocal did not challenge the outcome because of his "great love of Cuba". Even after Batista handed him the election, Gómez failed to appreciate the precarious nature of his presidency. Rey goes on to argue that class issues exacerbated the relationship between Batista and Gómez.

rooms were scarce. As part of the plan, Batista planned to send sergeants into the countryside to build the schools and then offer classes to the students. Gómez opposed the plan arguing that it would “militarize” the education system. In December 1936, a bill creating a one-cent tax on every bag of sugar to finance Batista’s rural education plan was passed by the House of Representatives, but was promptly vetoed by Gómez. The decision enraged Batista and he worked behind the scenes with his political allies to impeach the president, which he succeeded in doing.

The corrupt elections of 1936, the relationship between Gómez and Batista, the behind-the-scenes machinations leading to the impeachment and the success or failure of the rural schools program have yet to be adequately researched (Johnston, 1999; Read, 1950).¹⁹ The effort by Batista to use the military to improve education in the countryside cries out for comparative treatment with later efforts by the Castro government to improve rural education. The impeachment of Gómez leads to another, larger question about the entire “Period of the Puppet Presidents”. Scholarship of the period has done little to distinguish among the “puppets”. Clearly, the incident over the rural schools indicates that Gómez was not a very compliant puppet. Perhaps, with more political skill and finesse, it might have been possible for Gómez to carve out a sphere of power from which to resist Batista. Clearly, all the “puppets” were not the same and should not be treated as such. Preliminary research indicates that President Mendieta, because of his age and relationship with Batista, exerted considerably more power and influence than the three presidents that followed him did. Barnet and Brú were clearly the weakest. These distinctions can and should be made if we are ever to gain a more profound understanding of the period.

¹⁹ Laurie Johnston of University College London has begun to tackle the issue of rural education in Cuba and the military’s role under Batista. Johnston argues that the rural schools were an attempt by Batista to pacify resistance in the countryside and further his political ambitions.

THE PABLO RODRÍGUEZ'S THEORY

Moving from the general to the specific, lets focus on efforts by Batista's political enemies to strip him of his central role in the "Sergeant's Revolt," the uprising that ultimately evolved into the Revolution of 1933. In January 1934, Batista forced President Grau San Martín from office and installed Mendieta as president. The students, allied with Grau, lost their positions of influence and power. It was, perhaps, inevitable that in a showdown the army would win, because they had the majority of the weapons. However, the students had the majority of the pens and with them they unleashed a powerful series of attacks against Batista in an effort to write "the history" of 1933. The efforts began just months after Grau left office in a series of articles published in *Bohemia* by student Revolutionary, Rubén de León. Articles by Juan A. Rubio Padilla, Justo Carrillo and other student leaders would follow (de León, 1934; Carrillo, 1994).²⁰ Throughout his life, Rodríguez gave a series of interviews promoting himself as the mastermind of the revolt (Tabares del Real, 1990; Adam y Silva, 1947).²¹ Their collective writings are the foundation of a powerful historical argument that remains the dominant interpretation of the 1930s and specifically the events of 1933 and 1934. The student interpretation dovetails nicely with later efforts to discredit Batista and has been adopted wholesale by the Revolutionary government. Like all interpretations, it must be dissected and analyzed to see what should be kept and what should be discarded. One of the items worthy of discard is the notion that Rodríguez was the principal leader of the revolt.

The students, having joined Batista in revolt on the night of September 4 and morning of September 5 needed to justify an alliance with a man they would later find reprehensible. They

²⁰ Carrillo's book is a blistering attack on Batista and United States intervention; Rubio Padilla worked closely with Carrillo on his book.

²¹ In his bibliography for *Guiteras*, Tabares del Real lists an interview with Rodríguez as a source, along with an unedited essay on the 4th of September by Rodríguez; Adam y Silva, who wrote one of the best works on the Revolution and the role of the military, also cites Rodríguez as a source.

did this by promoting the theory that Pablo Rodríguez was the mastermind of the military conspiracy, a conspiracy that was hijacked by the conniving and treacherous Batista. Shortly after the September 4 takeover, Rodríguez, an original conspirator with Batista, was assigned to head the military contingent at the Presidential Palace and he developed a close relationship with President Grau and the students. In fact, Grau's last decree, before being forced from office was to fire Batista as Army Chief of staff and promote Rodríguez to that position. The decree was ignored by the army and led to Rodríguez's incarceration.

The following excerpt by Rubén de León from "La verdad de lo ocurrido desde el cuatro de septiembre," *Bohemia*, February 4, 1934, summarizes the student's argument regarding Rodríguez/Batista:

Batista, through work and by the luck of an accident, was the Sergeant Chief of the Army. He was not the Leader of the Group of Sergeants; he was only the most prepared of them all. And, from the very beginning, relying solely on the accidental leadership of his companions, he dictated the first orders, which made it appear as if he were the Leader of the movement. All of the Sergeants, companions of Batista, received the orders, which made it appear as if he were the Leader of the movement. All of the Sergeants accepted the orders without objection. The moment was one of grave responsibility. One had to obey the first person to give an order. Batista was more audacious and he was the one who dictated the orders and the most established within the group obeyed them. Pablo Rodríguez, who was, perhaps, the guiding force of the conspiracy, did not object in complying with the orders. He, like the others, did not believe that those orders given by Batista would be the ones that later, would lead to his incarceration on two occasions at Columbia, he who had been the biggest promoter of the conspiracy within the group, a victim of his trust, he was displaced from the Army by recent order of Batista. [Translation mine]²²

²² In Spanish the excerpt is as follows: "Batista, por obra y gracia de un accidente, era el Sargento Jefe del Ejército. Él no fue el Jefe del Grupo de

By León's own words, Rodríguez was a leader who took orders. What sort of "leader" takes orders from a subordinate in the midst of a crisis? In reality, he was no leader at all. Early accounts of the conspiracy, such as those by M. Franco Varona, give no special role to Rodríguez in the planning stages (Franco Varona, 1934).²³ On the day of the Sergeants' Revolt, Rodríguez went to Matanzas Province with another conspirator to secure allegiance there rather than coordinate events at Camp Columbia, the center of military power in Cuba (Tabares del Real, 1990, 155).²⁴ It was left to Batista to coordinate events at Columbia. In later years, another of the original conspirators, Ramón Cruz Vidal, in Florida exile, recognized the central role of Batista. Cruz Vidal remembered Rodríguez as a half-hearted Revolutionary, who came to conspiracy meetings "very well dressed, but was always the first to leave".²⁵ Batista's leadership of the movement was never questioned, according to Cruz Vidal. "He was the one who knew the most".²⁶ At best, one could argue that Rodríguez shared a leadership role with Batista in the early days of

Sargentos; él fue, tan sólo, el más listo de todos. Y desde los primeros momentos, valiéndose más que de la Jefatura accidental del compañerismo, dictó las primeras órdenes, que lo iban haciendo aparecer como el Jefe del movimiento. Todos los Sargentos compañeros de Batista recibían las órdenes sin poner obstáculos. El momento era de grave responsabilidad. Había que obedecer al que primero diera la orden. Batista fue más audaz y él las dictó, y los más destacados dentro del grupo las obedecieron. Pablo Rodríguez, que fue quizás el espíritu máximo de la obra, no objetaba en cumplirlas. Él, como los otros, no creería que aquellas órdenes de Batista serían las que más tarde, a él, al más grande propulsor de la idea dentro del grupo, lo harían prisionero por dos veces en Columbia, víctima de su propia confianza, siendo separado del Ejército por reciente disposición de Batista." (Rubén de León, "La verdad de lo ocurrido desde el cuatro de septiembre," *Bohemia*, 4 February 1934).

²³ Varona, a journalist of the period, was one of the firsts to write an account of the Sergeants' Revolt.

²⁴ Tabares del Real argues that Batista took advantage of Rodríguez's absence to take control of the movement, but he does not address the question of why the leader of the movement would go to Matanzas when the most important military installations were in Havana.

²⁵ Fulgencio Rubén Batista, interview by author, Tape recording, Coral Gables, Fla., 19 May 1998.

²⁶ Cruz Vidal to Fulgencio Rubén Batista, October 5, 1990, Batista family papers, Coral Gables, Fla.

the conspiracy. Some of the early meetings were held at Rodríguez's office at Camp Columbia, but others were held at Batista's Havana apartment on Toyo Street.

The students also tried to portray Batista as a Machado supporter. Carrillo, another student Revolutionary, accused Batista of helping to organize an honorary dinner for Machado at Camp Columbia in October 1930, although he provides no proof for the charge. Ironically, the dinner was sponsored by the Enlisted Men's Club, of which Pablo Rodríguez was the president. In his book, *Cuba 1933: Students, Yankees and Soldiers*, Carrillo described Batista as a "privileged stenographer" under Machado, specifically chosen to handle the cases of political opponents at the Council of War. Batista enjoyed "great preferential treatment within the Machado regime, to the point of being sinful," Carrillo wrote (1994, 66-67). In his influential work on the military and the events of 1933, Ricardo Adam y Silva, a junior officer displaced by the Sergeants' Revolt, accused Batista of being a Machado collaborator (Adam y Silva, 1947, 125).

The problem with these claims is that there are no proofs. In fact, there is ample evidence to the contrary. There are numerous examples in which Batista either gave or sold information to the ABC underground movement, including a clandestine radio station, fighting against Machado (Pérez Moreno, 1983, 97).²⁷ In fact, Batista was a member of an ABC cell operating within the army for two years prior to the fall of Machado, a fact that is seldom noted by scholars of the period. The ABC Revolutionary movement was a secret society dedicated to ousting Machado from power. In the early 1930s, they orchestrated a formidable campaign of assassinations and bombings against the Machado government. Batista's ABC cell dedicated itself to gathering information about the government and disseminating it to the opposition. The information was occasionally used to write political tracts and pamphlets (Acosta Rubio, 1943, 123).²⁸ Batista had

²⁷ Batista's involvement in the clandestine radio station is not widely known. Dr. Luis Pérez Moreno, former owner of the radio station, mentions Batista in passing in the epilogue to his book on caring for the blind.

²⁸Acosta Rubio identifies one such tract as *Pro Esto Pro Patria*, which argued in favor of dropping the charges against Eduardo Chibás Guerra, a prominent

been conspiring against the Machado government for two years when he joined forces with Pablo Rodríguez in mid-August 1933. Each had been conspiring separately and a union of forces was a logical step, perhaps facilitated by fellow Sergeant José Pedraza, who knew both men. Batista was not a central figure in the Machado opposition, but neither was he a Machado collaborator.

Batista became the leader of the Sergeants' Revolt after giving an impassioned speech at the burial of Sergeant Miguel Ángel Hernández on August 19, 1933. Hernández, a member of the ABC, was captured, tortured and murdered by Machado's allies in the military. His mutilated body was discovered in Atarés Fortress after Machado fled. In his speech, Batista called on the enlisted men to cleanse the military of Machado supporters, a speech that was considered threatening by some in the military high command. The speech gave Batista visibility and popularity among the enlisted men and solidified his claim to leadership (Adam y Silva, 1947, 125).²⁹

Pablo Rodríguez was and remains a leader on paper, a creation of the students who tried to justify their alliance with the military, an alliance that would turn sour and lead to their ouster from power.

BATISTA AND WELLES

The Sergeants' Revolt caught United States officials by surprise. They believed the officers were incapable of a military coup against President Céspedes and did not perceive any threat at all from the enlisted men. What little information U.S. officials had was largely incorrect. The first dispatches from military intelligence identified the leaders as sergeants "Juan Batista" and Pedro Santana, a conspirator of secondary importance. In his dispatch of Sept. 5, 1933, Military Attaché T.N. Gimperling wrote:

Cuban engineer, and the father of Eduardo Chibás Ribas, who would become one of Batista's fiercest political opponents.

²⁹ Captain Mario Torres Menier, who attended the Hernández burial, told his superiors of Batista's speech.

"This Revolutionary movement is extremely radical with strong leanings toward Communism." U.S. Ambassador Welles thought the revolt was "fomented by the extreme radical elements".³⁰

On the day the conspirators took power, both Batista and Grau made separate visits to Welles to court United States acceptance of the new government. Batista went to the U.S. Embassy on the morning of September 5, sometime around 11 a.m. Batista asked the ambassador about the likelihood of formal recognition, but Welles declined to comment. In fact, Welles would use the issue of recognition in the coming months to destabilize the Revolutionary government and create strife among the different Cuban political factions, ultimately bringing about the downfall of the government. The ambassador concluded the meeting with Batista by telling him that he would be "glad" to see him at "any time". Grau visited Welles that evening, sometime after 9 p.m. As he had with Batista, Welles emphasized the importance of protecting the "life and property of American citizens". Welles was unimpressed with Grau and described him as "utterly impractical".³¹

The first meetings between Welles and Batista/Grau shed a good deal of light on the importance of United States approval in the Cuba of the 1930s. But, the Batista meeting is particularly significant because of the importance ascribed to it by scholars and polemicists. Some scholars have chosen to look back on Welles parting offer to Batista to come and visit again as an indication that a Judas kiss was already in the works. With this initial visit, "Batista began his double game," writes Lionel Soto (Soto, 1985, 45; Aguilar, 1972, 210-211). Its convenient to look at the outcome of an event and then interpret backwards to make everything fit a nice and easy framework. But, simplicity has its limitations. Ultimately, Batista, to maintain his own power, would break with Grau and the students and install a government more

³⁰ Lt. Col. T.N. Gimperling, military attaché, Cuba (Political), "Stability of Government. Armed Revolutionary Movement," G-2 Report, September 5, 1933. File 2657-330 (201) RG 165; Welles to Secty. of State, September 5, 1933, Dept. of State, Decimal File, 1930-39, File 837.00/3747 RG 59.

³¹ Welles to Secty. of State, September 5, 1933, Dept. of State, Decimal File, 1930-39, File 837.00/3756 RG 59.

to the liking of the United States and its internal political allies. However, that break would come four months later. At the time of his initial visit to the embassy, Welles saw Batista as part of the problem, rather than part of the solution. In the first days after the Sergeants' Revolt, Welles envisioned a limited United States military intervention coupled with the formation of a "national unity government", which would include the ABC Revolutionary society and the followers of Carlos Mendieta and Miguel Mariano Gómez, to replace the student/soldier alliance. One observer, a fellow conspirator with Batista, remembered that the initial meeting between Welles and Batista was less than warm (Adam y Silva, 1947, 187). Another eyewitness recollected that it was "extremely formal with no handshaking or other usual demonstrations of courtesy". Oddly, scholars have written little about Grau's first visit to Welles and the fact that he would continue to meet with the ambassador throughout his short-lived presidency. The two visits, by Batista and Grau, need to be seen for what they were: efforts to gain acceptance from the United States for the new government. For his part, Batista installed Grau and the other pentarchs on the night of Sept. 4. It seems unrealistic that a few hours later he would begin to plot against them.³²

The relationship between Batista and Welles gradually evolved over the course of the next few weeks as the ambassador began to dissect the different coalitions within the Revolutionary government looking for weakness. For much of September, Welles concentrated on negotiations between Grau and the political opposition to bring about a change in the government. On September 17, Welles broached the subject of Batista's growing power and the vulnerability of the students with Grau.

³² Aguilar mentions the Batista visit, but omits the visit by Grau; Adam y Silva cites Pablo Rodríguez as the source for the anecdote about the frosty reception Batista received at the U.S. Embassy; United States Military Attaché Gimperling was also in attendance and reported on the atmosphere. Lt. Col. T.N. Gimperling, military attaché, Cuba (Combat) (Loyalty), "Summary of Army Mutiny of September 4-5, 1933," G-2 Report, September 26, 1933, File 2012-133 RG 165; Welles early strategy emerges in a series of dispatches sent to Washington throughout September 5. As an example, see: Welles to Secty. of State, September 5, 1933, Dept. of State, Decimal File, 1930-39, File 837.00/3756 RG 59.

(Grau) he admitted that Batista 'had to be handled' and that no orders could be given to him with any expectation of their being carried out. (Grau) he said there was no alternative whatever to leaving Batista in his present post as Chief of Staff and that if any attempt were made to remove him the army would at once become unmanageable.³³

The second meeting between Welles and Batista did not occur until September 21 and centered on the prospects of a national unity government. At the meeting, a proposal was made for the Revolutionary government to present a list of "five non-political Cubans" to the political opposition. The political opposition was to select one of the five to replace Grau. The replacement was then "to appoint a neutral cabinet composed of individuals acceptable to all concerned". Welles made it:

thoroughly clear that (he) had not come to the interview to make suggestions as to the nature of the formula and that my government had no desire to offer its view as to how a solution should be found...³⁴

Batista, now a colonel and chief of the army, made it clear that he was not particularly loyal to Grau, but he did express a desire to maintain the support of the Student Directory.

(Batista) expressed the belief that (a) solution was imperative but that some solution must be found which would not result in open hostility on the part of the students and at the same time not result in open hostility on the part of the important groups and factions opposed to the present regime.

At this second meeting, it is clear Batista was willing to strike a deal to gain United States recognition, but he clearly did not

³³ Welles to Secty. of State, September 17, 1933, Dept. of State, Decimal File, 1930-39, File 837.00/3908 RG 59. Welles maintained that the meeting was a "secret conversation of two hours" held at the home of a friend.

³⁴ Welles was forever claiming neutrality, while all the time trying to manipulate Cuban politics.

wish to abandon the students. Furthermore, Batista left the meeting with Welles promising to present the compromise to the students for consideration. There is no talk of his imposing a solution on the students. "I am by no means confident that (Batista) can force the students to accept his point of view in which I think he is sincere," Welles writes.³⁵

The nature of the relationship between Welles and Batista changed dramatically after the defeat of the deposed officer corps, by Batista and the enlisted men during the siege of the Hotel Nacional on October 2. The elimination of the officers as a viable force consolidated Batista's power within the military. A new officer corps, loyal to Batista, was now in place and he was clearly the most powerful man in the country. At the third meeting between Welles and Batista on October 4, the ambassador put forth the scenario by which the Revolutionary government could be removed from power. The first part of the meeting consisted of Welles massaging Batista's ego. The ambassador told Batista that "he himself was the only individual in Cuba who today represented authority". The commercial and financial interests supported him because they are "looking for protections and can only find such protection in him". Most of the political factions were in favor of his remaining as Army Chief of Staff, Welles noted. The ambassador went on to observe that "the events of the National Hotel had diminished very materially that very small amount of popular support which the Grau San Martín regime may previously have possessed". And, in a clear warning to Batista, Welles said, "should the present government go down in disaster, that disaster would necessarily inextricably involve not only himself but the safety of the Republic...".

As if the underlying point of the conversation were not clear enough, Batista went right to the heart of the matter. Batista "expressed the belief that should any rapid change in the government be made it might be difficult to control his troops without further bloodshed which he desired at all hazards to avoid".

³⁵ Welles to Secty. of State, September 21, 1933, Dept. of State, Decimal File, 1930-39, File 837.00/3982 RG 59. The political solution was proposed by Félix Granados, a member of the Havana Rotary Club.

After further discussion of the political situation, Batista requested regular meetings with Welles to “talk over conditions”. The ambassador knew he had crossed the frontier in his dealings with Batista, so much so that he felt it essential to explain the relationship in the last paragraph of his dispatch.

The situation as regards my relations with Batista is, of course, anomalous. I feel it necessary to make plain, however, that there does not exist at the present time in Cuba any authority whatsoever except himself and that in the event of further disturbances which may endanger the lives and properties of Americans or foreigners in the Republic it seems to be essential that this relationship be maintained.³⁶

Welles and Batista struck an alliance of convenience. Batista wanted United States recognition, a stable government and guarantees that the next president would keep him on as chief of the army. Welles wanted to restore his reputation as a diplomat tarnished by the failure of the Céspedes government. The ambassador and the colonel were in agreement that each would need to use the other to accomplish his goals, beyond that they could agree on little else. Welles clearly wanted the ouster of Grau, while Batista was willing to accept a wide variety of presidential candidates, even Grau, if it assured his leadership of the military. The two men were not particularly fond of each other, and it is not surprising given their very different socioeconomic backgrounds and personal styles. Welles was a product of privilege, an urbane, condescending and tight-lipped diplomat, while Batista was a product of abject poverty with a gregarious, outgoing style. Batista described Welles as “*pesado*” (a bore) and a man more concerned with diplomatic formalities than personal relations (Chester, 1954, 150). As part of his nature, Welles was considerably more circumspect regarding his feelings towards Batista. The ambassador never criticized Batista publicly, but one

³⁶ Welles to Secty. of State, October 4, 1933, Dept. of State. Decimal File, 1930-39, File 837.00/4131 RG 59.

writer noted that Welles did not “disguise his disdain whenever (Batista) was mentioned” (Adam y Silva, 1947, 358).³⁷

The two men had to appease very different constituencies in order to maintain their respective positions. Welles needed to preserve his position as architect of the State Department’s Cuba policy and more specifically its position of non-recognition, which was constantly challenged by his superior, Secretary of State Cordell Hull (Gellman, 1973, 63-75). Batista needed to placate and satisfy his fellow sergeants, now commanding officers, before he made any move to change governments. A failure by Batista to secure consensus from his fellow commanders could lead to a military coup against him. Welles and Batista were playing for radically different stakes. A mistake by Welles could lead to a bruised ego. A miscalculation by Batista could lead to a firing squad. The difference in their relative stakes helps explain why Welles was adamant about ousting Grau, while Batista was more flexible about finding a political solution. As late as December 13, Batista and several student leaders met with U.S. Embassy official H. Freeman Matthews, after Welles’ departure, to urge the United States to accept Grau.³⁸ The final deal to remove Grau from power was struck between Batista and Welles’ replacement, Jefferson Caffery in January, after Batista deduced that the Grau government would never receive United States recognition.³⁹

The relationship between Batista and Welles and Batista and Caffery would take many forms during the four-month period in which the Revolutionary government held power, a subject that is beyond the scope of this essay. However, it is quite clear that the negotiations between Batista and Welles over the fate of the Revolutionary government did not begin on September 5. Batista was not plotting to overthrow the Revolution within hours of its taking power. As late as December 13, Batista had not ruled out keeping Grau. Batista was a product of and a participant in the Revolution. He would evolve into a military dic-

³⁷ Years later, Welles described Batista as “extraordinarily brilliant and able”.

³⁸ Matthews to Secty. of State, December 14, 1933, Dept. of State, Decimal File, 1930-39, File 837.00/4521 RG 59.

³⁹ Caffery to Secty. of State, January 13, 1934, Dept. of State, Decimal File, 1930-39. File 837.00/4605 RG 59.

tator in the 1934-35 period, but at the time he removed Grau from power (Jan. 1934), it would be more accurate to say that he represented a faction within the Revolutionary coalition (the military). The sergeants had in fact created a Revolution in the armed forces toppling the entrenched officer corps and creating opportunities for the elevation of the enlisted men, most of them from the poorer classes.

Like Grau, Batista met regularly with Welles in an effort to safeguard his precarious position and gain political advantage. There was no grand Batista/Welles conspiracy to topple the Revolutionary government from its inception. The factors leading to the toppling of that government would evolve over time influenced by a wide range of constituencies and events. The intricacies and the twists and turns of the relationship between Welles and Batista, and their respective constituencies, are much more enlightening than the deterministic notion that Batista was plotting to overthrow the Revolutionary government within hours of having installed it. The confusion comes from the conspiratorial notion that they were virtually one and the same person – Welles the puppet master and Batista the puppet – rather than competing personalities serving different interests.

CONCLUSION

Every generation reinterprets history. In the case of Cuba, the scholars of the 1930s and 1940s challenged the “historiographical imperialism” of academics who viewed Cuban history through North American or European eyes and who credited foreigners for Cuban accomplishments and sacrifices. The most blatant example being the early historical works on the “Spanish-American War” with their emphasis on North American intervention, the minimization of the long bloody struggle by Cubans dating back to at least 1868 and even the omission of the word “Cuban” from the name of the conflict (Smith, 1964, 64-73). In the same way that Cuban politicians worked within or tried to redefine the neocolonial structures of the Republican era so did Cuban scholars challenge the ideology underlying United States eco-

conomic and political domination of the island so clearly represented by the hated Platt Amendment. It was upon this scholarship that the historical justification for the Cuban Revolution of 1959 was built (Smith, 1964, 68-69; Pérez, 1980, 82-86).⁴⁰

But, more than forty years have passed since the Revolution took power. Several generations have in large part failed to reinterpret pre-Revolutionary Cuban history based on their own experiences and new sources. The Cuban communities, on and off the island, are locked in a seemingly timeless political battle. To some extent, the long overdue reinterpretation of the pre-Revolutionary period has been held hostage to that political struggle. Its interpretation is too important to both sides to allow for a dialogue. For the Revolutionary government, it was in large part an era of corruption, decadence and toadyism to Yankee demands. For the exiles it was a time of struggle against U.S. domination accompanied by the development of an imperfect democracy which was in the process of righting itself when Communism derailed Cuba's march to progress.

These are fine as starting points for any analysis of the period, but it is time to look deeper, to consider the similarities and continuities between the pre and post Revolutionary eras. We need to take up the call of Robert Whitney, who in a recent article asks us to avoid "teleology" and the "general tendency to view Cuban history as a series of political and economic processes that would eventually (perhaps inevitably?) lead to Fidel Castro's victory" (Whitney, 2001b, 221-223). To begin with, we need to develop the basic tools, such as substantial, scholarly biographies of the major figures of the era. This should be supplemented with prosopographical works focusing on the military leadership, political leaders, journalists, etc. Such a study would be particularly useful regarding the sergeants, who along with Batista toppled the Céspedes government. Regional studies would enable us to view how political power was exercised far away from Havana, the political center of the country. We need to move

⁴⁰ Smith notes the lively dialogue among Cuban scholars of the revisionist school, such as Portell-Vilà, who challenged the importance of the United States in the Independence Wars and more conservative scholars, such as Cosme de la Torriente, who argued the United States played a crucial role.

beyond the easy and simple stereotypes. The academy needs to uncover the complexities of the historical figures and processes enveloping them. We must dispense with the caricatures made of stick and the deterministic notion that Revolution was the only and inevitable path for Cuba. The Cuban government should provide free and unfettered access to its historical archives, as it recently did in the case of the Bay of Pigs, so that all historical interpretations can be pursued.⁴¹ My research on the pre-Revolutionary period and the work of countless other scholars would benefit from such an opening.

In the case of Fulgencio Batista, we need to look at the complexities of his historical persona and its evolution over time. He was not simply a Yankee lackey plotting against any and all change — a puppet of Wall Street and Washington. As I have demonstrated by chronicling his relationship with Sumner Welles, there were a wide range of factors at play beyond the notion that Batista was out to please the United States and thwart the Revolutionary movements of the period. Moreover, the Batista of the 1930s operated in a different arena than the Batista of the 1940s or 1950s. To treat them the same is to impoverish the historical record. Cuba was not the same in the 1930s as it was in the 1950s, so why should we believe that the political actors and forces were the same? It is time to search for the historical Batista rather than continue to live with the stereotype we have inherited.

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⁴¹ There was an international conference in Havana from March 22-24, 2001 to review and release documents pertaining to the Bay of Pigs.

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