

Obama – on the campaign trail in Cuba

By Tom Whitney

Many Cuban observers reacted to President Obama's recent visit to Cuba in terms of Cuban history. But that was precisely what Obama in his televised address to the Cuban people urged them to overlook. He recognized that "barriers of history and ideology, barriers of pain and separation" do exist, but he called for removing "the shadow of history from our relationship."

Media in the United States followed suite. Reports there charged Cuba with harboring political prisoners. [One](#) recalled "mass slaughter and brutal crackdown." [Another](#) remembered a "communist hellhole" and "violent military dictator." Attention to the history of U. S. - Cuban relations was absent or scanty.

In Cuba, historian Fernando Martínez Heredia apparently finds history useful for diagnosing society's problems. Days before Obama's visit, he described [for an interviewer](#) Cuba's "rightwing nationalism opposing the U. S. economic blockade and the Revolution too." Its adherents fondly recall Cuba's pre-1959 republic as "working well in terms of elections, representative government, and freedom of expression ... but it took the military, political victory of the revolutionaries to bring about agrarian reform. That is an historical experience."

That sector is heir to "[sugar barons](#) that made war against the Haitian Revolution [in 1802] and the bourgeoisie that supported [Spanish general] Weyler exactly 100 years afterwards."

So for Martínez, Cuba is vulnerable "not only to neo-colonial North American domination, but also to rule by the bourgeoisie of Cuba." They were the ones who "before the triumph of the Revolution denied health care and education to almost half of all Cubans."

Martínez regards Cubans' current propensity to attach U. S. flags to clothing and possessions as an example of "symbolic annexation." They think that "because Obama comes to Cuba, the material situation of a lot of Cubans is going to improve." Such symbolic annexation "blinds us and we lose a vision of the present and future."

Journalist Patricio Montesinos warns of a U. S. attempt "[to foment divisions](#) between revolutionaries and the Cuban people in general, and create

discrepancies between the generations." And unity "has been Cuba's greatest success."

President Obama used more than words in communicating the U. S. approach to Cuba. He proved himself to be a master of showmanship. Prior to the visit Obama's handlers arranged for an amusing video encounter between Obama and "Pánfilo," the "everyman" star of Cuba's most popular TV show. In Cuba, Obama projected himself as a regular guy taking days as they came, little concerned about past troubles. The Obamas ate out at family restaurant (a "paladar"), he attended a baseball game, and his children and mother-in-law accompanied him on a state visit.

He was marketing a compelling story, a poor boy who made good, a black man who "made it" within a racist society. Cubans [observers credited](#) him with highly developed acting abilities, dwarfing those even of [Ronald Reagan](#). Someone held up Obama's "Hollywood smile" as representing the "banality of evil." His "hypnotizing oratory" was such that Cubans would be "[voting for the Obama](#) candidate."

In short, in Havana Obama was on the campaign trail. Casting himself as their model, he was delivering a simple message to humble, plucky, and intelligent Cubans; as individuals they too can overcome. History no longer matters.

Ex-President Fidel Castro had something to say. In an article, he delved into history: the life and death of José Martí, social achievements of the Revolution, and Cuban soldiers in southern Africa, where "we wrote an honorable page in the struggle for liberation of the human being."

Castro instructed Obama "to think about [this history]" and "try not to elaborate theories on Cuban politics." For the leader of Cuba's revolution, Obama's "honeyed" words heightened the "risk of a [myocardial] infarction."

Castro reminded Obama of "a despised blockade," the bombing of a fully loaded Cuban airliner in flight, U. S. - inspired sabotage, military incursions, and an invasion. His conclusion: "We don't need the empire to give us anything."

Influential Cuban journalist [Iroel Sánchez](#) applauded the response of Cuban "intellectuals" to Obama's visit. They are critiquing "the way the North American president underestimated the intelligence of Cubans and thought of them as ripe for manipulation." Cardinal Jaime Ortega of the Havana diocese added his voice in this regard.

In the wake of Obama's visit, Cubans unhappy with the United States were pointing to what they interpreted as U. S. duplicity. Obama had told people

in Cuba that: "The United States has neither the capacity nor the intention to impose change on Cuba."

Within days, however, the U. S. State Department [announced](#) it was seeking proposals from U. S. community organizations ready to provide internships in the United States for "young emerging leaders from Cuban civil society." The program will continue for three years and cost \$753,989.