

## **Solidarity with Cuba in a time of change**

By Tom Whitney

President Obama recently announced changed U.S. policies toward Cuba. He gets high marks for defying an entrenched, hardline political opposition. Euphoria, however, is brief. Cuban suffering is recalled that could have been avoided, if only he or his predecessors had taken steps earlier.

Obama announced the release of the last three anti-terrorist “Cuban Five” prisoners. He indicated diplomatic relations with Cuba would be restored and travel restrictions eased. Obama invited Congress to begin dismantling the U.S. economic blockade. He spoke of preparations to drop Cuba from the U.S. list of terrorist-sponsoring nations. U.S. banking, credit card, and communications services would be available in Cuba.

Cuba’s victory was clear. All Cuban Five prisoners are home now. The Cuban people outlasted strong-arm policies that caused immense grief. The Cuban Five triumphed, having preserved dignity, revolutionary fervor, and optimism. Now the *New York Times* celebrates dissident bloggers in Cuba, Cuba’s supposedly grim economic prognosis, and the prospect of market forces prevailing in Cuba. The U.S. media remains silent on history that matters: anti-Cuban terror attacks, injustices visited upon the Cuban Five, half a century of suffering at U.S. hands, and Cuba’s socialist achievements.

What’s ahead now for Cuba solidarity activists in the United States? They will agitate for Congress to legislate the economic blockade out of existence. They will weigh in against money and bureaucracy earmarked for destabilization in Cuban society, also pressure Obama to use his full executive authority to modify embargo regulations. Residual travel restrictions would be first in line. They’ll demand that the Cuban Adjustment Act of 1966 go. It privileges Cuban immigrants, has always been a travesty, and now is an anachronism. They’ll press their government to return control of Guantanamo land and sea to Cuba.

What about the long term when, according to the official script, the U.S. government no longer plays the bully? Force, including brute force, has led to outcomes so misbegotten as to draw people into the struggle concerned primarily about fairness, international law, basic human rights, and/or morality. They may or may not have been socialists.

Henceforth under toned-down U.S. intervention, money, consumer goods, and wheeler-dealers would be flooding the island. Transgressions - targets for outrage - may be hiding. Some solidarity activists may fade away.

The proportion of holdovers identifying with socialism and/or anti-imperialism would rise in such circumstances. They would bring talk and analysis to solidarity work. A battle of ideas would ensue as free-wheeling self-aggrandizement contends with notions of justice, dignity, and societal planning.

Combatants in a battle of ideas ought to have in mind a model of what they want. Many U.S. progressives are accustomed to taking lessons from Cuba's socialist project. The idea of an alternative reality, a society dedicated to justice for all, becomes an essential tool as they confront crisis-ridden U.S. capitalism. That would be Cuba. Maybe they'll reciprocate the gift of mentoring by strengthening their solidarity.

Cuba provides yet another model. Cuban national hero José Martí was Cuba's penultimate teacher on waging a battle of ideas. For him, as he organized and propagandized for Cuba's second War for Independence (1895-1898), the battle of ideas was about preparation.

Martí showed how participants shape, restructure, and teach both values and purposes – ideology, some would say. They study ongoing political and social developments and unite, organize, and recruit.

Martí's modus operandi was evident as he analyzed two gatherings held in Washington: an international congress in 1889 at which the U.S. government proposed a continent-wide commercial union and a multi-nation conference in 1891 staged for promotion of a regional common currency. Martí attended that session as Uruguay's representative and reported on both for Latin American newspapers.

As Martí observed, "This is a powerful country (the USA), full of products it cannot sell, and determined to extend its sway over Latin America ... The time has arrived for Spanish America to declare her second independence." (*La Nacion*, Buenos Aires, Nov. 2, 1889)

To a friend: "In regard to our land (Cuba) ... There's a darker plan ... which is the wickedness of forcing the island into war, of precipitating war in order to have a

pretext for intervening and in the role of mediator and guarantor, staying there.” (Source: Luis Toledo Sande, “Cesto de Llamas”)

Reporting for *La Nación* March 31, 1890, Martí writes that “when the Argentinian delegate Sáenz Peña, in challenging the commercial union, concluded his speech with the phrase ‘Let America be for all humanity,’ they all stood up in appreciation, understanding what was left unsaid. That phrase is our banner and a barrier to the union.” The “America” referred to was Martí’s “Our America” — all land south of the Rio Grande.

Martí sets the stage for contemporary “free trade” agreements and for Cuba’s second War for Independence. The last quotation anticipates the words “Homeland is Humanity” displayed at Havana’s Jose Martí International Airport. It speaks of Cuban doctors in Sierra Leone fighting Ebola and Cuba’s crucial role in projecting Latin American integration.

So Cuba solidarity activists in the United States looking for a job description in a time of uncertainty would do well to sit at Cuba’s feet. Shared, Cuba’s almost two-century-long experience of resisting U.S. presumption and haughtiness will come in handy. If under new circumstances activists’ numbers do decline, then socialists among them could take the cue to build their own movement for the sake of revolutionary Cuba.