A Taste of Your Own Medicine

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Relations between Cuba and the United States have not always been good. Most Cubans began to disregard the United States during their involvement in the War of 1898. Hostilities escalated during the 20th century due to continuous American intervention, creating unwanted political pressure in Cuba. Despite the damaged political relationship between both countries, the flow of Cuban immigrants into the United States has always existed. Cuban immigration into the United States has continuously been a direct result of various events that have occurred between these two countries. Both nations have gone as far as utilizing Cuban immigrants as political weapons. By viewing the strenuous relationship between these two countries, one can see that violence and political unrest during the late 19th and early 20th century, and the rise of Fidel Castro in Cuba, directly impacted the flow of Cuban immigration into the United States. Although the United States had always welcomed Cuban immigrants with open arms, as time evolved U.S. politicians sought to change this way of thinking.

Perspectives from U.S. and Cuban leaders during the late 19th century represent their country’s attitude toward one another. Since 1823, interest in annexing Cuba into the United States was often debated due to the island’s close proximity and natural resources. This idea of acquiring the Spanish colony was expressed by U.S. diplomats in a secret meeting held in Ostend, Belgium. During this meeting, U.S. diplomats discussed purchasing Cuba for economic and security reasons and also considered violence. They stated that the United States would be “justified in wrestling [Cuba] away from Spain” if Spain failed to comply with their offer.¹ Cuban leaders living in the United States were suspicious of American intentions and recognized their ideologies for expansion.

In 1882, José Martí, along with other Cubans in the United States, formed the Cuban Revolutionary Party in an effort to promote *Cuba Libre*, meaning liberation from Spain. While in New York, Martí became educated on American Imperialism and recognized that annexation of Cuba by the United States was probable. Back in Cuba, he composed a letter to his friend expressing his motivation to fight against the Spanish during their war for independence. In the letter, Martí stated that his motivation was derived from his attempt “to impede in time…the extension of the United States throughout the Antilles and to prevent its full weight from falling upon our American soil.”

By 1898, three years after Martí’s death, his fears had become a reality when the United States declared war on Spain and intervened in Cuba’s movement toward liberty. The roots of intense hostility between these two countries began with the Teller and Platt amendments along with American intervention during the War of 1898. After the sinking of the *USS Maine* in Havana harbor, Congress enacted the Teller Amendment in an attempt to intervene in Cuba’s war with Spain. Although the United States declared Cuban independence, a loophole in the amendment was installed claiming that a continual military presence would not occur in Cuba “except for the pacification thereof.” This passage secretly justified military occupation after the war and paved the way for the Platt Amendment in 1901. This amendment was added to the Cuban constitution and forbid Cuba from entering into foreign alliances while allowing continual American intervention, and establishing a U.S. military installation in

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Guantanamo Bay. The justification for military intervention and continuous American presence from these amendments infuriated the Cuban people before and after the war.

American behavior toward Cuban soldiers during the War of 1898 also increased hostilities. This behavior was described in Louis Pérez’s book, *The War of 1898*. Pérez argues that prior to war; Cuba was on the verge of independence before the United States intervened. He argues that American troops glorified themselves as saviors of *Cuba Libre* during the war while perceiving Cuban soldiers as “incompetent, worthless as allies, [and] useless as soldiers who could not be relied on.” In his analysis, Pérez shows that American troops were ordered by Washington to neglect Cubans soldiers on the battlefield “as a means to reduce…Cuban demands to participate in the negotiations of postwar settlements.” After Spain’s defeat, the peace negotiations excluded Cuba’s involvement, made Cuba a protectorate of the United States and ceded Guam, Puerto Rico, and the Philippines to the United States. These actions, along with the Teller and Platt amendments, increased hostilities toward the United States.

Despite these hostilities, early Cuban migration into the United States as a safe haven resulted from political unrest before and after the war. Author Felix Piloto in *With Open Arms* states that by 1870, over 1,100 Cuban immigrants had flocked to the United States in attempts to politically organize due to the push toward *Cuba Libre* from Spain. Not until after 1902 when the Platt Amendment was added and American troops continuously intervened did Cuban migration increase. Piloto states that “smaller groups of Cuban migrants came to the U.S. to escape political turbulence in Cuba” due to

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multiple regime changes and the overthrow of Cuban president Ramón Grau by United States backed Fulgencio Batista.\footnote{Piloto, \textit{With Open Arms}, 11.} Although Cuban immigration remained steady, the events of the Cold War along with hostile relations between the United States and Fidel Castro would produce three massive waves of Cuban migrations into the United States.

The rise of Fidel Castro in the mid-20\textsuperscript{th} century escalated the already present hostilities with the United States. Castro first took center stage when he presented his “History Will Absolve Me” speech in court after failing to overthrow the Cuban Army Moncada Barracks in 1953. In his speech, Castro vowed to fix social issues that plagued Cuba due to corrupt policies backed by Washington and the Batista regime. By 1959, Castro’s M-26-7 movement overthrew Batista and claimed victory. Cubans were overwhelmingly supportive of Castro and felt that their independence over American Imperialism was truly achieved. In his victory speech, Castro stated that, “This time the revolution will not be thwarted…It will not be like the war of 1895, when the Americans made themselves masters of the country.”\footnote{Revolución, January 3, 1959, in Pérez, \textit{War of 1898}, 126-127.} After successfully invoking past tensions, Castro began implementing his plans for Cuba by executing land reform, expropriating foreign businesses, and nationalizing the majority of the state. Due to the nature of the Cold War, Washington had to retaliate against Castro’s supposed communist policies.

During the Cold War, U.S. politicians viewed nationalization throughout Latin America as a move toward communism. Castro’s expropriation of foreign businesses in Cuba infuriated American investors. By 1960, the United States “controlled 90 percent of Cuba’s mines, 80 percent of its public utilities, 40 percent of its sugar production, and 25 percent of its bank deposits [along with] American firms profiting over $77 million
from their Cuban investments.”10 After Castro expropriated American businesses, President John F. Kennedy authorized a group of Cuban exiles trained by the CIA to attack the Castro regime. The failed Bay of Pigs assault in 1961 embarrassed the Kennedy administration while enhancing Castro’s popularity. As a result, Castro declared his Cuban Revolution as a socialist revolution and began economic ties with the Soviet Union. Shortly after, the Cuban Missile Crisis between the United States, Cuba, and the Soviet Union nearly brought the world to the brink of nuclear war. From this, Washington altered its attacks on Castro by opening its borders to Cuban immigrants.

Washington’s attempt to disrupt Castro’s regime had a direct impact on the first wave of Cuban migration into the United States. In 1959, President Eisenhower accepted the flow of over 7,000 Cuban elites into the country that were affected by Castro’s policies. His decision was an attempt to “overthrow the revolution [and] embarrass the Cuban government” by bringing in their brightest citizens.11 After placing a trade embargo on Cuba in 1960, the United States welcomed in thousands of Cuban children during Operation Peter Pan. This policy promoted fear throughout Cuba claiming that Castro was covertly sending children to the Soviet Union for communist indoctrination. In Castro’s memoirs, he called Washington’s claims “pure fantasy” and stated that “due to the unfounded and absurd fear [in Cuba], 14,000 of this country’s children were clandestinely sent to the United States.”12 In 1961, Kennedy instituted the Cuban Refugee Program which also brought thousands of Cuban immigrants into the country. According to Piloto, Kennedy’s administration considered Cuban refugees as a “political,

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physical, and psychological force that could be used to bring about the ‘liberation’ of Cuba.”  Although these policies hurt Castro, he would retaliate by giving Washington a taste of its own medicine, by releasing more Cuban immigrants into the United States.

In September 1965, Castro initiated a second wave of migrations by opening the Camarioca port in Cuba to exiles living in Miami allowing them to take their relatives to the United States. Author Kelly Greenhill in *Engineered Migration* claims that Castro skillfully orchestrated this move to overwhelm and politically punish Washington by “ridding the island of political dissidents [that had] close ties to the exiled community.”

In addition, Castro’s goal was to flood the United States with immigrants in an attempt to get Washington to lift the trade embargo. President Lyndon Johnson considered these migrations a temporary move with the hopes that they would return to Cuba once Castro was overthrown. Nevertheless, Castro had succeeded his political attack on Washington. The incident “carried with it a threat, namely that Havana, not Washington, controlled Florida’s coastal boarders.” The events of the Camarioca Boatlift and subsequent airlift from 1965 to April 1973 brought 277,242 Cuban immigrants to the United States settling them throughout the country but mainly in Florida, California, and New York.

The Mariel Boatlift was another successful attack by Castro. In the midst of domestic turmoil during the 1980s, several Cubans sought asylum outside of Cuba by wreaking havoc on the Peruvian embassy in Havana. President Jimmy Carter capitalized

on this event in a speech stating the United States would continue to “provide an open heart and open arms to refugees seeking freedom from Communist domination…brought about primarily by Fidel Castro and his government.”\footnote{Jimmy Carter, “U.S. Opens Arms to Cuba Exodus,” \textit{Miami Herald}, May 6, 1980. A copy was emailed to me by David Blasco from the Miami Herald on November 10, 2015.} Infuriated by Carter’s speech, Castro opened the Mariel port and allowed people to leave illegally. According to author Mario Rivera in \textit{Decision and Structure}, Castro had dictated policy again while attacking the United States by “using [the Cuban] people like bullets” in attempts to alleviate tension in Cuba and negotiate an end to the trade embargo with Washington.\footnote{Mario A. Rivera, \textit{Decision and Structure: U.S. Refugee Policy in the Mariel Crisis} (New York: University Press of America, 1991), 23.}

After the boatlift commenced, an overpopulation crisis emerged in Florida resulting in tent cities erecting throughout Miami to house refugees. Cubans who came over were quickly “stigmatized as ‘Marielitos’ implying that they were criminals” due to the rising crime rates in Florida.\footnote{Piloto, \textit{With Open Arms}, 94.} Even though Castro allowed criminals and the mentally ill to leave Cuba, the majority of Marielitos were honest people seeking opportunity in the United States. The Mariel Boatlift lasted from April 1980 to October 1980 and brought over 125,000 Cuban immigrants into the United States. These unorganized migrations injured Carter’s chances for reelection. In his memoirs he says, “the refugee question hurt us bad…it made us look impotent when we received [them] from Cuba.”\footnote{Jimmy Carter, \textit{Administration of Jimmy Carter, 1980-1981}, in \textit{The Public Papers of the Presidents of The United States}. http://quod.lib.umich.edu/p/ppotpus4732203.1980.003/771?view=image&size=100 (accessed November 2, 2015), 2693.} Although many U.S. citizens supported Washington’s acceptance of Cuban immigrants, these feelings would soon change with the last wave of migrations.

The final wave of Cuban migrations came in 1994 with the Balseros. During the 1990s, extreme violence erupted in Cuba due to extreme economic issues that resulted
from the collapse of the Soviet Union. In evading these issues, Cubans sought asylum outside of the country and began hijacking airlines, boats, and customizing their own rafts in an attempt to flee. However, sympathy in the United States for this new wave of migration was vastly different than the previous. Fearing another population crisis in Florida, governor Lawton Chiles declared a state of emergency and began advocating for stricter immigration policy. A Gallup poll in Florida in September 1994 showed that “79 percent of a sample population did not believe that Cuban refugees should be allowed into the U.S” while the exiled community in Miami felt that they could not relate to the Balseros because they “were not political refugees, but rather economic migrants.”

From this, President “Clinton announced a major shift in U.S. policy: no Cubans seeking to enter the US illegally would be allowed to enter U.S. territory.”

Rescued Balseros at sea were detained at Guantanamo Bay and were ultimately accepted into the United States after a negotiated meeting with Castro. By 1995, the string of massive Cuban migrations into the United States along with the political war with Castro had declined.

U.S.-Cuban relations have always brought Cuban immigrants into the United States despite their animosities. At first, Cuban refugees had always been welcomed in the United States. However, as time progressed, they were caught in the middle of a political war, with Washington using them as political weapons to topple Castro, and Havana using them to overwhelm the United States in order to get them to the negotiating table. Ultimately, massive migrations into the United States halted due to the growing discontent among American citizens and the exiled community. Currently, there are over two million Cuban immigrants living in the United States, with most residing in Florida.

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Bibliography

Primary Sources


Secondary Sources


