

COMPLEX PATH TO DEMOCRACY

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On April 17, 1961, a U.S.-sponsored, 1,500-strong brigade landed at Bay of Pigs. Two days later, the men were routed, and Fidel Castro sealed his David against Washington's Goliath. A tiresome script, it's true, but one that still credibly entangles the Cuban story. But, it's not the whole story.

Yes, the United States went to inordinate lengths to annihilate Cuba's revolution. The Fidelistas benefited mightily from U.S. prepotency and the indignation that it stirred in most Cubans at the time.

Alas, Cuba's story is not, at heart, about the United States.

It is about Cubans and our struggles for, yes, sovereignty but also good government -- freedom and democracy. The 1,500 brigadistas had Cuban reasons -- as green as the palm trees -- to fight communism, no matter their image as pawns that is so embedded but also so partial. It renders simple what is complex.

Anyone familiar with Cuba knows about the invasion. Few can say much about the home-grown insurgency (1960-1966) in the Escambray Mountains and other rural areas. Bandidos, the Fidelistas called them, but they were mostly veterans of the anti-Batista movement, peasants and other citizens of humble origins fighting for freedom.

Their actions truly imperiled the revolutionary government. Sadly, the invasion that took place 44 years ago on Sunday may have unintentionally undercut them.

The late Enrique Baloyra (1942-1997) -- life-long democracy activist and scholar -- pointedly grasped the dilemma:

``I don't think that there was a hell of a big chance in April 1961 for us to overthrow the government. I cannot blame the Americans for failure there. It was not your responsibility to liberate Cuba. It was ours. I can blame you for getting into a fight, trying to take over, diverting the fight and not allowing for the maturation of the indigenous resistance. Your fault was to get into the fight, to set it up in a way that would accomplish your objectives with our means, not our means with our objectives."''

What was the fight? For the United States, it was simple: removing a Soviet outpost in the Western Hemisphere. For Cubans, it was considerably more.

Those who opposed the revolution saw its communist turn as a betrayal of freedom and democracy, ideals that had moved Cubans since the 19th century.

For the revolutionaries, communism took a back seat to national sovereignty and social justice, ideals strongly fixed in the national pantheon. It was, in short, a civil war.

Historians have taken the revolution's coming to power in 1959 as a watershed. No doubt, it was -- but that's not the whole story. As significant as anything else that happened in 1959-1961 was the breakup of the coalition that overthrew Batista. The overwhelming majority of those who took up arms against the Fidelistas had also been anti-Batistianos. In that sense, Cuba experienced a civil war, but one that spanned 1956 to 1966, with a respite in 1959.

By late 1956, the likelihood that negotiations would end Batista's dictatorship had greatly diminished. A civic-resistance movement had petered out, and the Fidelistas were making their way into the Sierra Maestra. With lightning speed, Batista crumbled, and Castro rose as the undisputed opposition leader. In 1959, almost all Cubans exuberantly welcomed the revolution. A year later, the civil war resumed, lasting until 1966 when the government claimed victory.

The peace has yet to be signed, though. Accepting the civil-war paradigm (1956-1966) could be salutary.

After Franco's death, the Spanish Civil War bound all sides to compromise for fear of repeating it. In Chile, the Allende and Pinochet experiences had a similar effect on the return of democracy.

Cuba's day will also come. Normalizing relations with the United States is a future imperative, which could be endangered by having Washington too close for comfort now. ¡Nunca más! has been a powerful call in most democratic transitions. We must grapple with the full complexities of our "Never again!" so that Cuba's coming day is as Cuban as the palm trees.

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