

and city as, over the years, hundreds of thousands fled communist rule.

The confining shadow of Fidel's tropical curtain, on the fiftieth anniversary of the revolution, was captured in the emptiness before me — of the Malecón, but even more so of the sea. I noticed over subsequent days that Cubans perched on the scafront wall rarely looked outward. When I asked Yoani Sánchez, a dissident blogger (www.desdecuba.com/generacion/), about this, she told me: "We live turned away from the sea because it does not connect us, it encloses us. There is no movement on it. People are not allowed to buy boats because if they had boats, they would go to Florida. We are left, as one of our poets put it, with the unhappy circumstance of water at every turn."

It is unnatural to perceive the sea and a distant horizon as limiting. But in Cuba a lot of things are inverted, or not as they first appear. A repressive society long under a single ruler — the ailing eighty-two-year-old Fidel still holds Cubans in his thrall even if he formally handed the presidency to his younger brother, Raúl, in 2006 — develops a secret lexicon of survival.

Through a labyrinth of rations, regulations, two currencies, and four markets (peso, hard currency, agro, and black), people make their way. Stress is rare but depression rampant in an inertia-stricken economy. Truth is layered. Look up and you see the Habana Libre, the towering hotel where Fidel briefly had his headquarters after the revolution: it began life as the Hilton. The scafront Riviera hotel, now so communist-drab it seems to reek of cabbage, once housed the rakish casino of the mobster Meyer Lansky.

Turning west along the scafront that first gusty day, I encountered a strange sight that summoned the United States from its tenuous presence: a phalanx of poles, topped with snapping flags displaying a five-pointed Cuban star against a black backdrop, bearing down on the eastern facade of a boxy concrete-and-glass structure that houses the U.S. Interests Section in Havana. The flag barricade was put up to block an electronic billboard on the side of the building. In 2006, U.S. officials put political slogans on the billboard; it now transmits news not otherwise accessible to Cubans.

This scafront tableau is laughable: the United States unreeling red-lettered strips of unread news into a sea of black flags and defiance. It captures all the fruitless paralysis of the Cuban-American

ROGER COHEN

The End of the End of the Revolution

from *New York Times Magazine*

ON MY FIRST DAY in Havana, I wandered down to the Malecón, the world's most haunting urban scafront promenade. A norte was blustering, sending breakers crashing over the stone dike built in 1901 under short-lived American rule. Bright explosions of spray unfurled onto the sidewalk.

I was almost alone on a Sunday morning in Cuba's capital city of 2.2 million people. A couple of cars a minute passed, often limed '50s beauties, Studebakers and Chevrolets, extravagant and battered. Here and there, a stray mutt scrounged. Washing flapped on the ornate nonwork balconies of crumbling mansions. Looking out on the ocean, I searched in vain for a single boat.

It was not always so, ninety miles off the coast of Florida. In 1859, Richard Henry Dana Jr., an American lawyer whose *To Cuba and Back* became a classic, sailed into Havana. He later wrote: "What a world of shipping! The masts make a belt of dense forest along the edge of the city, all the ships lying head into the street, like horses at their mangers." Over the ensuing century, Cuba became the winter playground of Americans, a place to gamble, rumba, smoke *patros*, and sip *mojitos*, the land of every vice and any trade. Havana bars advertised "Hangover Breakfasts." They were much in demand. The mafia loved the island, the largest in the Caribbean; so did the American businessmen who controlled swathes of the sugar industry and much else.

Then, a half-century ago, on January 1, 1959, Fidel Castro brought down the curtain on Fulgencio Batista's dictatorship. America's cavoring-cum-commerce ceased. Miami became Cuba's sec-

confrontation, a tense stasis Barack Obama has vowed to overcome. Diplomatic relations have been severed since 1961; a U.S. trade embargo has been in place almost as long; the Cold War has been over for almost two decades. To say the U.S.-Cuban relationship is anachronistic would be an understatement.

But changing it won't be easy. As with Iran — the only country with which noncommunication is more pronounced — bad history, predatory past U.S. practices, and the expediency for autocratic regimes of casting the United States as diabolical enemy all work against bridge-building. When, a little farther west down the Malacón, I met with Josefina Vidal, the director of the Foreign Ministry's North American department, I found her anger as vivid as her elegant purple dress.

"I once saw a slogan on that U.S. billboard saying Cuban women have to prostitute themselves because they do not have the resources to survive," she told me. "This is totally unacceptable, a violation of the Vienna Convention!" (The Vienna Convention of 1963 regulates consular relations.)

Vidal continued: "The U.S. wants to punish Cuba with its blockade. It cannot accept us the way we are. It cannot forgive us our independence. It cannot permit us to choose our own model. And now along comes Obama and says he will lift a few restrictions, but that in order to advance further Cuba must show it is making democratic changes. Well, we do not accept that Cuba has to change in order to deserve normal relations with the United States."

But on Havana's streets the name Obama is often uttered as if it were a shibboleth. Many people want to believe he offers a way out of the Cuban web that Fidel's infinite adroitness and intermittent ruthlessness have woven over a half-century.

Wayne Smith, who ran the U.S. Interests Section under the Carter administration, has observed that "Cuba seems to have the same effect on American administrations that the full moon used to have on werewolves." There is something about this proximate island, so beautiful yet so remote, so failed yet so stubborn, that militates against the exercise of U.S. reason.

It's not just the humiliation of the botched 1961 Bay of Pigs invasion, when 1,500 CIA-backed Cuban exiles tried to overthrow the nascent Castro regime. It's not just the memory of the Soviet intro-

duction in 1962 of missiles to the island that almost brought nuclear Armageddon. It's not just the traded accusations of terrorism, the surrogate conflicts of the Cold War from Angola to the Americas, the downed planes, the waves of immigrants, the human rights confrontations, the espionage imbroglios, or the custody battles. It's something deeper, and that something has its epicenter in Miami.

Just before the Obama victory, I lunched in the city's Little Havana district with Alfredo Durán, a former president of the Bay of Pigs Veterans Association. Inevitably, we ate at the kitschy Versailles Restaurant, long a social hub of the Cuban-American community. Durán, who was imprisoned in Cuba for eighteen months after the Bay of Pigs fiasco, is a man mellowed by age. Furious with Kennedy and the Democrats in the invasion's aftermath — "there was a feeling we were sacrificed, left to eat possum in the swamps around the bay" — he decided after the Cold War that anti-fidel vitriol was a blind alley and the trade embargo counterproductive. Fellow veterans were furious; they stripped his photo from the premises of the veterans' association.

"I say, 'Lift the embargo unilaterally, put the onus on Cuba,'" Durán told me. "If we negotiate, what do we want from them? They have very little to give."

As he spoke, a little ruckus erupted outside between Republicans and Democrats. Durán smiled: "You know, the only place Cuba still arouses passions is right outside this restaurant. Yet U.S. policy toward Cuba is stuck with old issues in Florida rather than logical strategy."

The old Florida issues boil down to this: it's a critical swing state with a significant Cuban-American vote, and a hard line toward Fidel has been a sure-fire political proposition. Once again this year, Miami's three Cuban-American congressional Republicans won reelection. And yet: their victory margins narrowed. Some 35 percent of the Cuban-American vote in Miami-Dade County went to Obama, a big bounce, ten points better than John Kerry's showing in 2004. Fifty-five percent of those under twenty-nine voted for Obama.

Obama's victory is particularly significant because he bucked conventional wisdom on Cuba during the campaign. He lambasted Bush's "tough talk that never yields results." He called for "a new

strategy" centered on two immediate changes: the lifting of all travel restrictions for family visits (limited by Bush to one every three years) and the freeing up of family remittances (now no more than three hundred dollars a quarter for the receiving household). Obama also called for "direct diplomacy," saying he would be prepared to lead it himself "at a time and place of my choosing," provided U.S. interests and the "cause of freedom for the Cuban people" were advanced. He said his message to Fidel and Raúl would be: "If you take significant steps toward democracy, beginning with the freeing of all political prisoners, we will take steps to begin normalizing relations."

Three generations on from the revolution, being a Democrat is no longer equated by Cuban-Americans with being a Communist. The fixation on removing Fidel, the dreams of return, and the raw anger of loss have faded. "We have gone from the politics of passion to the politics of reality," Andy Gómez, an assistant provost at the University of Miami who left Cuba in 1961 at the age of six, told me. "We are here for the long haul. We worry about the economy, health care. Next Christmas in Havana — that's over."

So could the convergence of a president who is as *mestizo* as countless Cubans, a new pragmatism in Miami's Little Havana, and the looming passing of Cuba's revolutionary gerontocracy provide a framework for that elusive U.S.-Cuban reconciliation? Durán is hopeful. "I'm seventy-one, and I know I'll see the day," he told me. "The day you can get in your speedboat in Coconut Grove after work and be in Havana at nine p.m. for dinner."

Nonsense, Jaime Suchlicki, a conservative Cuban historian who teaches in Miami, told me. Raúl is a Soviet admirer "and no Deng Xiaoping." The Cuban situation — buoyed by Chinese, Venezuelan, Russian, and Iranian support — is not desperate enough to force concessions. Every past rapprochement has turned to rancor: "Cuba is an absolute disaster, but it will not fall apart," Suchlicki said.

Yet Cuba does stand at a fulcrum of generational shift, from those formed by Fidel to those who will hardly know him. Seizing this opportunity will require a measure of American humility. Obama has a strong sense of history and the historical moment. He would understand the deep roots of the conflict, going back to the U.S. military intervention in 1898 that left Cubans with the finger-

ing sense that their own hard-won independence from Spain had been snatched from them. What followed were four years of direct U.S. rule and Cuba's emergence as a nearly independent republic in 1902 — "nearly" because, under the Platt Amendment, the United States kept the right to intervene in the island's affairs. It also got Cuba to cede in perpetuity a little thing called Guantanamo Bay, a forty-five-square-mile area in the southeast of the island.

"All this left a deep frustration in the popular imagination," Fernando Rojas, the vice minister of culture, told me in Havana.

It is this history that has allowed Fidel to claim that his revolution was, in effect, a second war of independence. It is this history that has made the United States the enemy of choice for Cuba long after the exigencies of Cold War confrontation vanished.

This is the history that turns otherwise rational heads in both Washington and Havana, as if the full moon had got to them. My impression is that Obama has the cool temperament that can factor the charge of this past — similar to the heavy legacy of the CIA-organized 1953 coup in Iran — into his diplomacy. Cuba is certainly ready for a change it can believe in.

Lealtad (loyalty) Street runs from the Malecón down through the densely populated district called Centro Habana. I first went there at night. The city is dimly lighted, but one of Fidel's achievements, along with an impressive education system and universal health care, is security. It might be said that's because there is very little to steal, but that would be uncharitable. The revolution, anything but puritanical, has nonetheless instilled a certain ethical rigor.

A residential street, Lealtad beckoned me with its silhouettes lurking in doorways, its clatter of dominos being banged on tables, its glimpses through grated windows of lush interior courtyards, its old men playing cards in high-ceilinged living rooms of brocaded furniture and sagging upholstery, its melancholy. As I wandered, I stumbled on a bar called *Las Alegrías* — joys. What I saw struck me with the force of a vision. Under harsh fluorescent lights, drinking shots of rum, were a white man with a bulbous red nose pickled by drink, a black man with unfocused eyes, and a black woman with head bowed, all of them at a distance from one another and seemingly inhabiting an Edward Hopper painting

where each lonely element etched another detail of despair. The feeling of being transported is very Cuban: Hopper's "Nighthawks" was painted in 1942.

I resolved to return to Lealtad in an attempt to understand the despair at Joys, but also in the conviction that the secret lexicon of fifty-year dictatorships can be read only in the details of daily life. Secrecy and obfuscation are the lifeblood of such regimes. They alone preserve the mysticism that absolute leadership requires, allowing an aging man with severe intestinal problems to remain Zeus on Olympus. It's not for nothing that the whereabouts of Fidel, who has not been seen in public since he fell ill in July 2006, are an official secret.

The next day I came back and, dodging boys playing baseball with a ball made from tightly rolled paper, stopped at a chicken-egg-fish store with nothing in it. Antonio Rodríguez, fifty, the affable, bald Afro-Cuban running it, explained to me the mechanics of rationing, in which he is an often-immobile cog. Every month, each Cuban is allocated ten eggs (the first five at 0.15 pesos each, the second five at 0.90 pesos); a pound of chicken at 0.70 pesos; a pound of fish with its head at 0.35 pesos (or eleven ounces without the head); and half a pound of an ersatz mince at 0.35 pesos a pound. It's hardly worth converting these sums; they're trifling. Suffice to say that, at twenty-five pesos to the dollar, you get the whole lot for no more than twenty-five cents.

That may sound like a steal, but there are catches. Rodríguez, after seventeen years at the store, where the broken cash register is of prerevolutionary vintage and the antique refrigerator of Soviet provenance, earns \$15.40 a month. The average monthly salary is about twenty dollars. I asked him when some chicken or eggs might arrive. Beats me, he said. As many as fifteen days a month, he's idle, waiting for something to be delivered so he can announce it on the blackboard behind him and get to work crossing off "sales" in his clients' frayed ration books. Rodríguez pointed to a man outside. "That guy standing on the corner, and me working, there's no real difference," he said. "We get paid almost nothing to spend the day talking."

Luiz Jorjín, the man in question, approached. "This is all due to the U.S. blockade," he said, pointing a finger at me and using the exaggerated term that Cubans favor for the embargo. "Look at

your financial crisis! Maybe you'll get over it with time. Well, we'll get over this with time. I don't believe in capitalism. Look what it did in Africa and Latin America. It's destructive."

This was too much for Javier Aguirre, a slim fellow who helps Rodríguez. "We're wrecked, and after three hurricanes, we're even more wrecked," he said. "I just don't believe in the system. Give me Switzerland! Of all the Cubans who have gone to the United States, how many want to come back?"

The question prompted a silence. Aguirre, it transpired, tried twice to escape, only to be caught, once by the Cubans and once by the U.S. Coast Guard. Under the current "wet foot, dry foot" policy, most Cubans who reach U.S. soil are allowed to stay, while most intercepted at sea are repatriated. Go figure.

Now twenty-nine, Aguirre, an aspiring artist, is waiting. Cubans are used to waiting. Along with baseball and quiet desperation, it's the national sport. They talk; they joke at the Beckett play that is their lives; they tap their fingers to the beat of drums and maracas. They lament the billions of dollars of damage caused in recent months by Hurricanes Gustav, Ike, and Paloma; an offer of U.S. assistance was rebuffed. At least, they laugh, there's no traffic problem.

The little storefront exchange was typical, I found, in its surprising openness, in its mention of the U.S. embargo as the source of misery, and in its vindicating reference to the global economy's collapse. Cuba, it has to be said, is one of the very few places the Dow's meltdown has scarcely touched. But tumbling oil prices may affect Venezuelan and Russian largess over time, and slumping European economies may hit tourism. Meanwhile, Cubans go on trying to make sense of the senseless.

"Obama should ask Congress to lift the blockade for ninety days after the hurricanes," Rodríguez suggested.

"We're always asking for the kindness of strangers," Aguirre retorted. "This is not communism or capitalism, it's a Cuban mess."

The more I learned of the centralized Cuban economy, the more that seemed a fair summary. Cuba has two currencies, one for communism and one for a limited, state-dominated capitalism. The pesos that people get their salaries in are essentially good for nothing but rationed or undesirable items. By contrast, the convertible dollar-pegged pesos known as "CUCs" (pronounced "kooks") are

good for international products. Pass a dimly lighted peso store and you might see a bicycle tire, a yellowing brassiere, and a set of plastic spoons. Pass a convertible-peso store and you will see cell phones, Jameson whiskey, and Heineken in a bright, air-conditioned environment.

As a result, many Cubans spend their lives scrambling to get in on the convertible-peso economy, which largely depends on getting access to foreign visitors. A highly qualified electrical engineer opts to work in a cigar factory so he can hawk Havana cigars to tourists. Others offer to be their guides. Whatever goods can be sneaked out of state-run businesses are good for black-market sale. Cell phones — recently permitted in what was portrayed as a liberalizing measure by Raúl — cost about \$110. That is half a year's salary for most Cubans. A gallon of gas goes for about six dollars, or nearly a third of an average monthly salary. No wonder Cubans see access to the CUC universe of tourists as salvation.

A kind of economic apartheid exists. People are stuck in a regulation-ridden halfway house. They want to escape the socialist world of Rodríguez's store for the capitalist world of the mini-García on the Varadero peninsula east of Havana, a hotel-filtered ghetto of white sand and whiter Scandinavians snapping up Che Guevara T-shirts without worrying too much about what Che wrought on Lealtad Street.

The Cuban government gave me a courteous welcome. I was escorted to a few official meetings, but otherwise left without a minder (as far as I could see) to do what I wished. One official stop was with Elena Álvarez, who was fifteen when Fidel's revolution came and now, at sixty-five, works as a top official at the Ministry of Economics. She tried to make sense for me of the voodoo economics I'd seen.

Here's what she wanted me to grasp. Cuba, at the time of the revolution, was "one of the most unjust, unequal, and exploited societies on earth." Illiteracy was running up to 40 percent, a quarter of the best land was in U.S. hands, a corrupt bourgeoisie lorded it over everyone else. Fidel's initial objective was a more-just society, but U.S. pressure radicalized his revolution and pushed it toward all-out socialism within the Soviet camp.

Álvarez reeled off some numbers. There were six thousand doctors in Cuba at the time of the revolution; there are now close to

eighty thousand for a population of 11.3 million, one of the highest per-capita rates in the world. The U.S. embargo has cost Cuba about two hundred billion dollars in real terms. When the Berlin Wall crumbled, 80 percent of Cuba's international trade was with Soviet-bloc countries. About 98 percent of oil came from them. Back to the Communist bloc states, at inflated prices, went Cuba's sugar and rum.

"We've had to reinvent ourselves in the global economy twice in thirty years, once in 1960 and again in 1990," Álvarez said.

Okay, I said, that shows some resilience, but when the Soviet Union collapsed, why didn't Cuba do what Moscow's other satellites did: take down totalitarianism, become a market economy, and set people free? The real totalitarianism, she countered, was Batista's. Cuba now has different values. Despite scarcities, attributable in large part to the embargo, it's a society that wants to protect everyone. The rationing system guarantees that all citizens have a minimum. Everyone gets low-cost food at work. Free health care and education mean a twenty-dollar monthly salary is the wrong way to view the quality of Cuban life. Going to a market economy in 1990 would have meant wholesale factory closures, as in East Germany, and 35 percent unemployment. "We decided we had to protect our workers," Álvarez said. "We have another philosophy."

That "philosophy" has produced results. According to the World Health Organization, life expectancy for men and women in Cuba is seventy-six and eighty years, respectively, on par with the United States. The comparative figures in Haiti are fifty-nine and sixty-three, and in the Dominican Republic they are sixty-six and sixty-four. The probability of dying before the age of five is seven per thousand live births in Cuba — nearly as good as the U.S. figure — compared with eighty per thousand live births in Haiti and twenty-nine in the Dominican Republic. Illiteracy has been eliminated. United Nations statistics show 93.7 percent of Cuban children complete high school, far more than in the United States or elsewhere in the Caribbean.

That raises the question: Why educate people so well and then deny them access to the Internet, travel, and the opportunity to apply their skills? Why give them a great education and no life? Why not at least offer a Chinese or Vietnamese model, with a market economy under one-party rule?

Álvarez said there was some "space for the market." She insisted,

"We are not fundamentalist." But the bottom line, of course, is that the authorities are scared: opening the door to capitalism on an island ninety miles from Florida is very different from doing that in Asia.

In the so-called Special Period, initiated in the 1990s, Cuba did open to foreign investment in sectors like nickel and tourism, allowed tourists in, introduced the convertible peso, and began putting more farmland in private hands. But it stopped there. Just how much land is now private is disputed, although one thing is clear: not enough to prevent Cuba from having to import more than \$1.6 billion worth of food a year. Those imports, in a development remarkable even by upside-down Cuban standards, have included sugar. Domestic production has collapsed.

So I put it to Álvarez: at the half-century mark, with Fidel fading, was it worth persevering with a revolution that has left Cuba with dilapidated buildings, deserted highways, and a need to import sugar?

"The revolution has been a success," Álvarez said. "It overthrew a tyrannical regime. We got our national sovereignty. We got our pride. We survived aggression by the most powerful country in the world for fifty years. We preserved the essence of what Fidel fought for."

But did he really wage guerrilla war in the Sierra Maestra mountains so that countless talented Cubans might sit idle, plotting means to get out?

The challenges were great, Álvarez said, but Cuba would again prove Miami wrong. She pointed to joint-venture oil exploration off the northern coast and a growing "knowledge economy" that has produced patented vaccines and medicines sold throughout the world. Cuba would now export services, like that of the thirty thousand medical personnel it sent to Venezuela in an innovative barter deal bringing in ninety thousand barrels of oil daily.

"We are an example to others," she said, "an example to all those looking for an alternative to capitalism."

I did sense something hard to quantify, a kind of socialist conscience, particularly among doctors. When I met Dr. Verena Muzio, the head of the vaccine division at the Center for Genetic Engineering and Biotechnology — another official stop — she said her commitment to the revolution's achievements outweighed the

knowledge "that I could go to Chicago and earn three hundred thousand dollars a year." Her salary is forty dollars a month.

At the Latin American School of Medicine, founded a decade ago to educate doctors unable to afford school in other countries in the Americas, Dr. Juan Carrizo, the rector, spoke of the universal right to health as the new humanist banner of the Cuban revolution: out with Angolan guerrillas, in with the medical brigade. Among the students are more than one hundred U.S. citizens. Patricia Jackson, twenty-six, an African-American from South Central Los Angeles, told me: "I came here because I could get an education for free for just being me. I feel more valued here than where I grew up. And when I finish, I'm going to go back to my community and bring that same philosophy."

These young U.S. medical students have joined a growing number of foreigners, tourists, and businesspeople. Sherritt International, a Canadian natural-resources company, has made major investments in nickel mining and oil. Sol Meliá, the Spanish hotel operator, has opened a number of properties. Tour buses are a frequent sight, ferrying groups that take in Hemingway's Havana bars (La Florida and La Bodeguita del Medio) and the Che memorial in Santa Clara before heading back to the beach. Although this invasion has brought Cubans more contact with foreigners, its impact has been limited by the fact that the Cuban government does rigorous background checks on any job seekers in the international sector. Over all, most tourists seem happy with sun, sand, rum, and cigars — and to heck with totalitarian politics.

At a time when Hugo Chávez's Venezuela has replied to Fidel's "*Patria o Muerte*" with its own "*Socialismo o Muerte*"; and Evo Morales is pushing Bolivia toward socialism; and Steven Soderbergh's epic-length "Che" is about to hit American theaters, it's hard to argue the revolution has lost all its glow — especially with Wall Street bloodied. A moderate Latin left that is friendly with the Castros, most conspicuously President Lula da Silva in Brazil, has also emerged. But Fidel claimed he wanted to free Cubans from oppression. Instead, his revolution has oppressed them.

I found Héctor Palacios at his cluttered apartment in the leafy Vedado district of Havana. He was thrown in prison in 2003 along with seventy-five other dissidents charged with subversion and col-

But of course Cuba is not totalitarian East Germany. Fidel has been nothing if not a brilliant puppet master. He once said that some revolutionary fighters "let their enthusiasm for the cause overwhelm their tactical decision-making." Not Fidel, whose training as a lawyer has been evident in his mastery of maneuver and brinkmanship, not least in his dealings with the United States. There have been hundreds of executions, especially in the early years, but he has never been a bloodthirsty dictator, a Caribbean Ceausescu. Nor has he tried, in the style of some despots, to sweep the past away; he has merely let it wither.

"There's a very intelligent repression here, a scientific repression," Yoani Sánchez, the dissident whose blog is now translated into twelve languages, told me. "They have killed us as citizens, so they do not have to kill us physically. Our own police is in our brains, censoring us before we utter a critical idea."

At thirty-three, Sánchez is half Palacios's age. She represents something new: digital dissent. The authorities seem unsure how to deal with it. Sánchez, a slight and vivacious woman, started her blog in 2006. It was, she told me, "an exorcism, a virtual catharsis." "Who is last in line for a toaster?" she asked in one blog entry this year, noting that a ban on sales of computers and DVD players had been lifted but toasters would not be freely sold until 2010. Now her biting dissections of the woes of Cuban life have a wide international following — to the point that "the intelligence services know if they touch me there will be an explosion online."

Still, they harass her. When she won Spain's prestigious Ortega y Gasset prize for digital journalism in April, she was prevented from going to collect the award. She would like to take up an invitation from New York University, but permission has been denied without explanation.

I asked if she was optimistic about change. She said she was pessimistic in the short term because "apathy has entered our bloodstream, and a lot of people are just waiting for a bunch of leaders over seventy to die." Democracy, national reconciliation, and change demand a new civic involvement, not apathy. But she was optimistic in the long term because we "are a creative, capable people, with no religious, ethnic, or other conflict, who have developed an allergy to what we have: a totalitarian system."

Sánchez looked at me — an intense, intelligent, brown-eyed gaze with humor twinkling near its surface. We were seated in the

laboration with the United States. Sentenced to twenty-five years, he was released in late 2006 for health reasons. But fifty-five of those arrested are still in captivity, among the more than 200 political prisoners in Cuba.

"My crime was simple: thinking that the government has to change from totalitarianism," Palacios told me.

He's a big man, and when he talked about his cramped cell and isolation, his eyes darted here and there, and he began to sweat. The memory of what was his third spell in prison was still harrowing. Palacios, the leader of the banned All United opposition group, was an organizer of the Varela Project, a petition calling for a referendum on democratic change. Orchestrated by another prominent dissident, Oswaldo Payá, the movement brought ripples of a Cuban spring before the 2003 clampdown.

Palacios, sixty-five, has traveled since his release to the United States, where, last May, he met with Obama in Miami. He asked Obama to show flexibility. He urged him to allow wealthy Cuban-Americans to send money to dissidents. "Obama is the new clearing government, the hard-line generation of Cuban-Americans is dying out. Significant change is possible within two years."

"Why do you stay here?" I asked.

"I stay because I am a patriot."

That's not the official view. Dissidents are routinely called "traitors to the homeland." Palacios showed me a copy of a congratulatory letter he sent to Obama on November 4. It ends, "With the hope that I will be heard and confidence that your mandate will bring the renewal that eliminates the obstacles preventing us from putting an end to the tyranny suffered by our people." A restoration of the battered moral authority of the United States could have a significant impact in Cuba, Palacios said.

Cuba's dissidents are marginalized. The press is muzzled. The print organ of the regime, *Granma*, named after the cabin cruiser that bore Fidel, Raúl, Che, and their followers from Mexican exile to Cuba in 1956, is a study in Orwellian officialese. State television is a turgid propaganda machine. Cuba can show *The Lives of Others* at its annual Havana Film Festival, where a few thousand people see it, but that remarkable study of the all-hearing Stasi in totalitarian East Germany would never be shown on national television. Too many Cubans might want the movie renamed *The Lives of Us*.

gardens of the Hotel Nacional, looking out over the Malecón to that empty sea. Here, I thought, is Cuba's future, a Blogostroiika, if only the repressive gerontocracy would let it bloom; a Blogostroiika that will fill that sea with bright vessels.

"You know," Sánchez said, "when a nation gets on its knees before a man, it's all over. When a man decides how much rice I eat a month, or whether or not I can leave a country, that country is sick. This man is human. He commits errors. How can he have such power? Like a lot of people of my generation, I have willed myself to stop thinking about him, as a therapy. I think there will be relief when Fidel dies. We will breathe out. The mystical and symbolic weight of his presence is very heavy, for his opponents and even for his supporters. It's hard to right his errors while he's still there."

I think Sánchez is right. Only after Mao's death could China unshackle itself by officially determining that he was "70 percent right and 30 percent wrong." Perhaps Cuba will come down somewhere like that on Fidel — say 75-25 — and move on.

While I was in Cuba, everyone I spoke to referred to Fidel as "Comandante," even though Raúl formally became commander in chief when he assumed the presidency. Rambling, almost daily "Reflexiones del Compañero Fidel" — signed commentaries on everything from capitalism to the U.S. election — appear in *Granma*, pored over like Kremlin utterances of old.

Fidel published a book last month called *Peace in Colombia*. Its presentation, the occasion for a collective genuflection by hundreds of guests in a large hall, merited hour after hour of coverage on national TV. At the gathering, I ran into Randy Alonso, host of a TV news show and the director of the information office of the Council of State, the main governing body. I asked him where Fidel is. "He's lucid, but in a secret place," Alonso said. "If he wants to reveal it, he will."

It's hard in any circumstances for a seventy-seven-year-old to be an innovator. But for Raúl, with his far-more charismatic brother looking over his shoulder, it must be near impossible. No wonder Raúl, the former defense minister who hates the limelight, has appeared faltering. He has freed up cell phones (at a price), allowed Cubans into international hotels, and intimated that some salaries might be paid in convertible pesos or even be tied to performance. But in essence all he has done in two and a half years is tinker. Per-

haps that's not surprising. He has a vested interest in the existing system: the military runs conglomerates, like Gaviota, that control most of the tourism industry.

"We are at the fading of an era, and it is fading into the unknown," Juan Carlos Espinosa, a political scientist at Florida International University, said.

In Miami, I caught up with Giselle Palacios, Héctor Palacios's twenty-three-year-old daughter, who managed to get out of Cuba a few months ago, having been thrown out of the University of Havana because of her father's activities. She told me she is still in shock. She has realized that the place she was living in is not the real world. There are things happening in Cuba, she said, that don't happen anywhere else. You carry that knowledge inside you, and you feel lonely.

"Revolution was supposed to mean equal opportunity for all, but it has become a word the Castro brothers own," she said. "Young Cubans don't believe in the Castros' version of revolution. They don't believe in a world where the Internet is forbidden and your whole world is Cuba with the rest blocked out."

"Will you stay in Miami?" I asked.

"No, I want to go back one day when other jobs are possible. I think I will always be lonely here. I want to help democracy emerge."

When I returned to Lealtad Street, I found a flurry of activity: the chicken had arrived! Rodríguez, in his green overalls, had the news up on his blackboard. He was unpacking frozen chicken legs and thighs. Chicken breast is available only on the convertible-peso market. He held up the box with a big smile. It said, "Made in U.S.A."

Since 2000, when Congress bowed to the farm lobby, it has been legal to sell food and agricultural products to Cuba. That means everything from chicken legs to telephone poles. At the Miami airport, I had run into Randal Wilson, who was just back from Havana, where he was trying to sell Alabaman wine. "They seem to prefer my blueberry wine, just loved that," he told me. "You know, Alabama is very big on trade with Cuba."

In fact, the United States is now the largest exporter of food to Cuba, earning upward of six hundred million dollars this year. It's

among Cuba's five biggest trading partners. (The others are Venezuela, China, Spain, and Canada.) So much for the embargo; it's as arbitrary as the wet-foot, dry-foot policy toward Cubans trying to escape. While America took in hundreds of millions of dollars from Cuba, it sent back 2,086 sea-borne refugees in fiscal 2008. Principle has nothing to do with current Cuban policy. It's just an incoherent mess.

I asked Aguirre, the young would-be escapee working with Rodríguez, if he understood U.S. policy. "It's like the situation here, you have to understand it because it is what it is," he said. "I try not to think too much, I just talk about girls, baseball, whatever."

I looked down the street, at the kids playing, a guy selling lighter fluid, the carved doors, the extraordinary baroque flourishes on the three- and four-story buildings. A gentleness inhabits Cuba, the island that Columbus, landing in 1492, called "the most beautiful land that human eyes have ever seen." It is the gentleness of time passing very slowly.

The absence of visual clutter — no ads, no brands, no neon signs — leaves the mind at peace. Fidel's colossal subbornness has delivered a singular aesthetic, striking in the age of globalized malls. I found myself thinking of a phrase of Pico Iyer's in the excellent *Reader's Companion to Cuba*, edited by Alan Ryan: "Cuba catches my heart and then makes me count the cost of that enchantment."

That cost is high. Fifty yards down the street, I talked to Felix Morales, forty-three, who runs another chicken-egg-fish store. I asked if there was any rivalry with Rodríguez. Morales laughed. "How can there be rivalry if we both receive and hand out the same thing?" he said. "The only difference is he's black and I'm white!"

Morales told me everyone was aching for some improvement. He said he would like to work and see the fruit of his labors. He was wearing a T-shirt saying "Canada." Did he want to go there? Two women in the store burst out laughing. Of course Morales wanted to, of course they wanted to, who wouldn't?

Not Jorge Martínez, who runs the community health center near Morales's store, a place where doctors treat everything from alcoholism to depression. "Fidel is the man of the century," he told me.

I walked into a little restaurant called Asahi, one of the so-called *paladares*, independent, family-run enterprises, usually with three or four tables. José MartiCorena, its owner, told me he acquired his

state license a dozen years ago, but now it's difficult to obtain such a license. His father, Miguel, fought alongside Fidel and was rewarded after 1959 with this house. Later he worked in the merchant marine. A freezer he brought back from Japan had "Asahi" inscribed on it, after the Japanese beer; hence the name.

MartiCorena can charge what he wants for food, but his capacity is set at twelve people, and he pays various taxes. "We have a lot of dysfunctional things," he told me, "but nobody's dying of hunger or wanting for basic medical help. I was able to do something, and I feel fulfilled by it. My wife is a dentist, she loves to cook. We have two kids. We place a lot of hope in Obama, we believe he will free things up."

With that, he took out a little digital camera, set it to video, and started filming.

"What do you think of the food?" he asked.

"Very good," I said.

"And whom do you work for?"

"The *New York Times*."

Even on Lealtad, a half-century after the revolution, capitalist public-relations instincts are not far below the surface.

Toward the end of my stay, I traveled down to Santiago de Cuba in the southeast of the island. This is mythical territory: the land of the 1860s uprising against the Spanish; the site of the decisive U.S. intervention in 1898 that stole the fruits of that uprising; the city where Fidel and a band of followers attacked the Moncada Barracks on July 26, 1953 (sixty-one dead among more than one hundred insurgents); the home of the Sierra Maestra, where Fidel and Che waged guerrilla war between 1956 and 1958. It is here that the fiftieth anniversary will be formally celebrated on January 1, although the precise location in Santiago is still secret. Whether Fidel will appear is also unknown. Most people say no.

A historian, Octavio Ambruster, showed me around the Moncada museum. The mustard yellow barracks were converted into a school after the revolution. The museum occupies a few rooms. Gruesome photographs abound of the slain in the July 26 attack. Most were tortured before execution. A front-page headline the following day in the Batista-era paper, *Avance*, got it wrong: "Fidel Casro is dead."

In fact he slipped away, only to be captured a few days later in the mountains. He was brought to trial and imprisoned, but not before he made a now legendary declaration: "Condemn me, it has no importance. History will absolve me."

Will it? I don't think so, but it may be gentler on him than the ruinous state of Cuba would suggest. Fidel is a brilliant, romantic, and towering figure; as such, like his country, he tends to enchant even as the cost of that enchantment mounts. Ambruster told me that Fidel always called José Martí, the hero of the independence struggle against Spain, "the intellectual author of the *Moncada* assault." Framing his revolution as being about independence — *patría* more than *socialismo* — and casting that independence as being above all from the United States, has been one of Fidel's most ingenious ideas.

And how will history judge U.S. policy toward Fidel's Cuba? Badly, I think, especially since the end of the Cold War. If the embargo had come down then, back in 1989, I doubt the regime would have survived. But the grudges were too deep, and a mistake was made. Today the policy makes little sense. The United States dislikes Chávez but maintains diplomatic relations with Venezuela. I think Obama should add to the measures he has already announced by offering to open full diplomatic relations with Cuba immediately.

That would put pressure on Cuba and, if the offer were accepted, allow face-to-face negotiations to begin at a senior level. At these talks, Obama should not belabor democratic principles, at least not immediately, but should insist on the freeing of all political prisoners as a first step toward beginning to lift the embargo. The United States is not the European Union, which just normalized relations with Havana, although hundreds are still held in Cuban prisons for what they think.

Progress will not be easy. Representative Lincoln Diaz-Balart, one of the reelected Miami Republicans, told me, "We are very united, we will win the fights in Congress, and we will stop any moves to open commercial relations, trade financing, or tourism with Cuba." But Tony Lake, a senior foreign-policy adviser to Obama during the campaign, said, "With the new Democratic majority in Congress, and some clear Cuban gestures on human rights, you could get changes to Helms-Burton," the legislation

that has determined the shape of Cuban policy since 1996. Then the ball would be rolling with a momentum that the passing of generations should sustain.

Cuba is some way down Obama's priority list. But early in his presidency, another Democratic president, Jimmy Carter, did something that changed views of him in the hemisphere: he negotiated, against all the odds, the transfer of sovereignty over the Panama Canal to Panama. It seems clear enough that a breakthrough of similar proportions with Cuba would bring a major reconciliation with Latin America.

From Santiago, I drove out to the town of Guantánamo. There were no road signs and no road markings. Cubans say they are waiting for Obama to send pain. I passed tractor-trailers crammed with people: Chinese buses imported by Raúl have not yet met needs. At Guantánamo slogans abounded: "Our duty is to be victorious" and "This is the first trench in the anti-imperialist war." From a hill, I could see the control tower of the U.S. naval base glimmering in the distance.

The land before me, and this farther stretch of empty sea, had been carved from Cuba at its independence. And now Guantánamo had become synonymous with some of the most egregious acts of Bush's war on terror, acts that have tarnished America's name. There have been other moments of American dishonor over the years in Latin America, from Chile to Argentina, where the United States told generals it would look the other way.

Yes, Fidel's communist revolution, at fifty, has carried a terrible price for his people, dividing the Cuban nation, imprisoning part of it, and bringing economic catastrophe. But as I gazed from Cuban hills at Guantánamo, and considered Obama's incoming administration, I thought the wages of guilt might just have found a fine enough balance for good sense at last to prevail.