

## A BRIEF INTRODUCTION TO JOSÉ MARTÍ FOR THE BRIGADE VENCEREMOS,

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When I was asked to address you in English to introduce José Martí and his contextual scenario, I thought it best to put in writing, not just the well known facts of the life of our national hero, but at least part of our own research for the Critical Edition of his *Complete Works*, which I hope will interest you.. It is nevertheless useful that I convey to you a basic perspective of his life, which I hope will help you understand the complexities of his revolutionary tasks in the expiring days of the nineteenth century.

We all know he was born in Havana on January 28, 1853 in a modest Spanish family. His father was a Sargent in the artillery corps of the Spanish Army, reaching in later days the rank of lieutenant. His mother was a simple housewife born in the Canary Islands off the coast of Africa.

It has always been a mystery to many of us how early in his life Martí began showing his creative potential, his literary and political genius, his capacity for political analysis and strategic thought, and above all his ethical principles and sense of social justice. When he was just nine years old, he accompanied his father, designated district judge in Hanábana in what is today Las Villas province, a hotbed of infiltration of slaves from Africa. Already proficient in his written Spanish, Martí helped his father, who was not especially capable of putting his ideas in a readable Spanish, as a scribe for official paperwork. There he witnessed the horrors of slavery. Years later he wrote in his personal notebook: "What human being, who has seen a black man being flogged, does not consider himself forever in debt with him? I saw him when I was still a child, and the shame is still vivid in my memory [...]. I saw him, and from then on I swore to myself I would always defend him".

He was, in short, a true man, endowed with qualities we would like our sons and daughters to have. And that is why we are doing our best to preserve for future generations the enormous wealth of knowledge, the treasure of the many documents that he bequeathed us; his overwhelming literary and political achievements, his twenty-eight volumes of essays, articles, poetry, drama, letters and novels, forerunners of modernism, thought to be by the greatest writers and critics of his time and ours among the best written in the Spanish language.

He wrote more than four hundred articles and chronicles in newspapers from Buenos Aires, Montevideo, Mexico City, Caracas, and of course Madrid, New York and Havana, analyzing the social, economic and cultural reality of Latin America, and the rest of the world. More than three hundred described everything that took place in your country, and delved deep into its causes, not excluding day to day stories of human interest, in his well known

“North American Scenes”. But there are also many biographical essays and literary portraits of prominent thinkers, important politicians, artists and heroes of the two Americas, Europe, the Arab countries and even China, far away India and ancient Viet-Nam.

Martí’s other works depict his love for nature, and literary, artistic and scientific themes skilfully linked to his social and political ideas. It was an incredibly creative feat for a man who simultaneously organized a war of independence in a Spanish colony, divided in social classes and races, and created a new non-electoral party meant to help unify the Cuban people and provide the necessary resources for the war, including manpower for the Army of Liberation, that were to come, ironically, mainly from the territory of a rising world power, actively engaged in “controlling”, perhaps even annexing, the Island he meant to liberate from a despotic Spain.

Besides this demanding purpose in his life, he was also a prolific writer. His poetry was especially outstanding in three books of literary importance: his *Free Verses*, *The simple verses* and *Ismaelillo*, dedicated to his son, in whose residence we are now holding this meeting. He even published a magazine for the children of Latin America: *The Golden Age* (*La Edad de Oro*), to help educate future Latin American men and women to live in peace and harmony in the land they were born. It is difficult to measure the cultural heritage, indeed, the amount of useful information available to us about the history of his day and, above all, of one particular country, in the process of becoming then, before his eyes, an ambitious empire, and today a huge burden for the world and its inhabitants, bent on violence and the destruction of the good that both nature and humankind have created.

A hundred and thirteen years after Martí’s death in combat, his precious legacy lies in his example for the generations that followed and in his written works. Men and women who knew him have described how the intensity of his eloquence and deep convictions moved to action, sometimes to tears, those who were privileged to hear him. His words revealed his love for beauty and his vision of liberty, justice and solidarity. That is why he is also considered one of the most important thinkers and speakers of nineteenth century Latin America. His ideas of social justice, his anti-imperialist principles, and his dream of a united Latin America -- that Simón Bolívar had visualized before him --, capable of defending its independence and the right to attain it by those who had not yet won it, seem fitting even in our present days, and it is inextricably linked to his defense of the poor, of the exploited workers, of the slaves he saw, inhumanly oppressed and often tortured to death; his unbending faith in the destiny of man and, perhaps most important of all, his ultimate right to lay down his life for freedom and independence.

Very early in his life, his vocation for social justice led him to criticize the Spanish colonial regime in Cuba. The few words about the wrongs in colonized Cuba he had written to a friend

found their way into a colonial court that sentenced him to six years of hard labor in chains when he was scarcely sixteen years of age. The following year, his sentence commuted, young Martí was deported to the Isle of Pines and later to Spain, carrying the scars of prison for the rest of his life. In 1871, until 1874, he studied, first in the Faculty of Law of the Central University of Madrid, and later at the University of Saragossa, where he graduated in Law and Philosophy. While in Spain, Martí, overjoyed with hope, was in contact with the Republican revolutionaries who staged a frustrated uprising against the Spanish monarchy. He learned then with sorrow, because he was truly a man of peace, that there was no possible alternative for freedom-loving Cubans than another war for independence.

He then traveled to Mexico, where he lived from 1875 to 1876. What he experienced in that brief stay can hardly be described in the few lines that time allows. In Mexico he became an accomplished journalist, distinguished lecturer and high school professor. After the coup staged by General Porfirio Diaz, of whom he was highly critical, against President Lerdo de Tejada, a reformer who followed the steps of Benito Juarez, he could no longer stay in Mexico. From 1877 until 1878 he lived in Guatemala. There he worked as a high school teacher and university professor. Once more he clashed with the local government who found his vision dangerous, and again had to leave. This time he returned for several months to Havana, and again he was deported to Spain for his involvement in the plan of a new and frustrated phase of the ten year war for independence (1868-1878). He was losing time in Madrid, so he left for New York, lived there for a few months with his wife, a Cuban lady of a well to do family he had met and married in Mexico, mother of his only son, and finally settled in Venezuela. He was employed there as a journalist working for the Venezuelan newspaper *La Opinión Nacional* and as a university professor. He was the Editor of the Venezuelan review *La Revista Venezolana*. His revolutionary views and opinions were not shared by President General Antonio Guzman Blanco and so he was invited to leave the country. By this time he had a clear idea of the kind of governments he did *not* want for a future independent Cuba.

And so in 1881 he finally permanently resided in New York. In the fourteen years that followed he would live there and pursue his true political vocation as leader of the Cuban revolution. He found jobs in several commercial firms, but he was finally employed as a correspondent to the Argentine journal *La Nación* of Buenos Aires, and his friends in Mexico also managed to find a job for him as correspondent of the newspaper *El Partido Liberal*. With this increased income he was able to help his needy family in Cuba and survive in New York. His new jobs, and indeed his revolutionary plans required a thorough knowledge of English and a detailed study of American society. This became one of his prime objectives demanding almost total dedication. After his life in colonial Cuba, Spain, Mexico, Guatemala

and Venezuela, the United States seemed to him a haven with the liberty he longed for. But this joy did not last long. The assassination of President Garfield in 1881, the obvious evidence that went beyond his murderer and led to doubt those highly placed members of his own party who would benefit from his death; the exploitation of the workers, the myriads of destitute in the city, the misery of the German, Italian, Irish, Scandinavian and even Chinese immigrants, the high degree of corruption in the political system and government, the spread of cartels and monopolies that polluted all aspects of American society, and ever present greed as chief motivation in life, it all disappointed him and made him conclude that United States society, its government and institutions should also be ignored as a model for an independent Cuba. In this, too, he coincided with Simón Bolívar, who once wrote to a British friend in an ironical comment that he preferred the Koran to American social and government institutions.

He knew that the foreign policy of any country is based in its internal politics. Where there is violent class repression, racism, political assassinations; where a president can be murdered with almost total impunity; where there is a structural moral crisis and corruption in and out of government, there cannot be an external policy based on International Law and respect for peaceful coexistence and equal rights of nations, especially the weaker ones. He knew his unborn revolution was in mortal danger. For it to succeed, equilibrium in international relations had to be redesigned. Martí was familiar with the principle of equilibrium that he studied in Ethics, Art and above all in the subject of International Law in the University of Saragossa, Spain.

An afternoon in the warm month of July, 1887, while working in Lyon and Company, a French firm, he came across a news item in which a dubious event was mentioned. A reflection, meant to be an aid to his overloaded memory, was written on his own handwriting on a sheet of paper with the company's logo. It refers to the French Vice Consul in Guayaquil (Ecuador) who had found a "transcontinental passage" that would allow crossing the South American continent from the Pacific to the Atlantic with insignificant investments. Martí wrote:

¡That England (the Great Zaruma Gold Mining Co.), has already secured a concession for half the passage! Very well, what others see as a danger I see as a safeguard: while we are not yet sufficiently strong to defend ourselves, our salvation, and the guarantee of our independence may rest in the equilibrium of rival foreign powers.-- Further in the future, when we have been totally developed, we face the danger of seeing rival but closely related powers come together against us (England, United States): hence foreign policy in Central and South America should tend to promote foreign interests of various nations in our

countries, without allowing a definitive prevalence of any, although it is obvious that there should be and occasionally there must be a seemingly apparent and accidental predominance of a power that should perhaps always be European.<sup>1</sup>

It is clear Martí thought it possible to prevent the annexation of Cuba by establishing a balance of power between England and the United States, both with then contrasting interests in Latin America and the Caribbean. For this, unity in Latin America was then, as it is today, essential, although obviously difficult to achieve.

Huge Brazil, a nominal monarchy, fearing a Hispanic American alliance fostered by Argentina, had become since 1880 an undeclared ally of the United States. Latin America was divided and tied to the production and exports of minerals and tropical agricultural products, like coffee and sugar. Argentina, then considered a possible rival of the United States because of its outstanding economic growth, for example, exported wool, eventually wheat and in time refrigerated meat to the United Kingdom. Brazil the biggest producer of coffee to this day, exported an important part of its crop to the United States. Both were dependent countries and that is what their external policies reflected. And both were at odds with each other for leadership in the southern cone of South America.

Martí was of the opinion that for Cuba, Argentina, threatened by US expansionism, and the United Kingdom were the better potential allies, especially after 1889, when the United States declared openly its imperialist policy towards the Antilles particularly Cuba, Puerto Rico, the isthmus, the inter ocean canal and the Pacific, towards the gigantic Asian markets, where US industries dreamed of selling their expensive products.

In November of 1889, Martí for the first time publicly mentioned the principle of world equilibrium he knew so well from his university days, in an article for the journal *La Nación* of Buenos Aires. During the International American Conference in that year he wrote for *La Nación* that the event would show “those who defend Hispanic America’s independence where the equilibrium of the world stands”.<sup>2</sup> And from then on he reiterated this idea in letters and programmatic documents of the revolution. He worked relentlessly in consolidating unity among the exiles organized in revolutionary clubs in the main cities of the United States, Latin America and Europe. He appealed to the heroes of the *Ten Year War*, (1868-1878) who accepted his leadership. In November, 1887, he organized the Executive Committee, and in April he was elected its Chairman. In that same year he was designated Consul of Uruguay in New York, and in July 1890, in an exceptional political move by the governments of Argentina and Paraguay, he was also appointed consul of both countries in New York City.

In January 1892 he drafted the Bases and Statutes of the Cuban Revolutionary Party, the first political party in history, created for non-electoral purposes, whose delegate he was subsequently elected. Its Constitution was proclaimed on the 4<sup>th</sup> of April, 1892. That same month he founded the journal *Patria* that was to be of great importance for the political orientation of Cubans in foreign countries, especially in the United States. This institutional structure was meant to strengthen the unity of the Cuban people for the struggle ahead. He was at the peak of his political influence and international prestige.

The consular appointments could not have come at a better time. They were a subdued message to the United States that Cuba was not just an island to be bought and sold, but a nation, backed by an increasingly powerful South American country and other European potential allies. And as far as Martí himself was concerned, he would work for independence now under the protective cover of three consulates of South American nations. He would have more freedom and the certainty that no foul play would be attempted against him by either the governments of Spain or the United States.

It was precisely through Roque Saenz Peña, the Argentine head of delegation, appointed minister of foreign affairs during the prolonged Conference (October 1889-April 1890), that he confirmed that members of the US delegation had begun contacts with other Latin American representatives to organize a group of countries that would mediate between the US Government and that of Spain, in order to convince the latter to sell the Island of Cuba. It was the Argentine delegation the main obstacle to such a move in the Conference, as well as Spain itself, unwilling to part with her colony.

Above all, the attempted purchase of Cuba was a symptom of the growing power of the conservative members of the Republican Party in Government and Congress, under the leadership of James G. Blaine. The episode prompted Martí's deep skepticism. For the first time he had personally observed a clear example of Latin American oligarchic submissiveness to the United States with the aid of a few Cuban annexationists present at the Conference, as vulnerable then as today to United States recruiting approaches.

Yet another unforeseen event attracted Martí's attention that took place in November of that same year: the military coup in Brazil that expelled Pedro II from power and established General Deodoro de Fonseca in the presidency of a new Republic: the United States of Brazil, a truly significant name. This added to Martí's worries about the destiny of the revolution he led. As all Republican delegations in the Conference, Martí also extolled the change. He knew that monarchic Brazil had since 1880 developed a strategic policy of alignment with the United States, in order to balance Argentina's special relations with the United Kingdom and Germany. But the change from a monarchy to a Republic seemed to indicate a possible reform that could include foreign affairs, and maybe an improvement in

relations between Argentina and Brazil. Towards the end of the Conference, however, it became clear that no alteration of the former foreign policy was planned. Martí declared an eloquent silence in relation to Brazil, while he did all he could to attract Argentina to the cause of an independent Cuba.

The aforesaid was not the end of adversities for Martí. The United States armed forces joined the political fray. Captain Alfred Thayer Mahan, US Navy, an accomplished scholar and devoted social-darwinist, published in 1889 an important book on strategy and a series of articles eloquently defending his country's armed forces purpose, out of sheer "necessity", to "control" Cuba, Jamaica, Puerto Rico and Santo Domingo. There was "need", he said, to guarantee the security of the Isthmus where the future Panamá Canal would be built. Without control of its approaches there was no question of building an inter-ocean canal, because no one, or so he stated, could guarantee that it would not fall in the hands of European powers, meaning England or Germany. And the Canal was a "necessity" in order to guarantee the transportation of goods from the industrialized East, Northeast and central United States to the Pacific Ocean, since the West was underpopulated, underdeveloped and with little means of transportation for moving substantive amounts of merchandise to the West Coast for shipment to Asia. And the same expansionist policy applied to the Pacific side of the future Canal: the archipelagos of Samoa, Philippines, Marshall and Guam where its Pacific approaches had to be placed under US control.

Time was running dangerously short for Martí. The annexation of Cuba by the United States seemed inevitable. From the standpoint of the international situation of the period, Martí's prolonged silence was understandable, hoping perhaps that sooner than later Brazil would awaken to the crude reality of a United States implacable in its arrogance and indifferent to all demands of friendship from the Latin American Republics.

But this was not to be, for both Brazil and US governments unofficially agreed not to get in each other's way in their respective areas of influence.

Again, the most important danger was the imminent annexation of Cuba by the United States. In a letter addressed to his close friend, Gonzalo de Quesada, Martí commented near the end of the Conference: "in matters of the Conference, I see with pleasure that Argentina grows in authority", although "surrounded" and perhaps "defeated in advance", but "fighting tirelessly". On the other hand, [...] "¿can Brazil defy its only market, [the US], after Henderson's generous offers?"<sup>3</sup>

It is evident that Martí clearly understood the importance of economic dependence from the United States in any development of Brazil's foreign policy. It also seems obvious that Brazil felt no danger from the United States, as did the Spanish speaking countries, a point of which Martí constantly reminded them. At the end of the Conference he knew that unity

between both South American giants was not yet feasible – and in fact would not be until the beginning of the Twenty-first Century. Beyond April, 1890, when the brilliant speeches had been forgotten, the international situation forced Martí to silence any possible criticism to Brazil, strengthen his personal relations with Brazilian diplomats – a task he performed brilliantly -- and devote all his efforts to achieve unity among Hispanic-American nations that followed Argentina's international leadership and could become potential supporters of Cuba's war of independence. But he kept a close watch over the Brazilian government that could perhaps actively oppose the aspirations of the Cuban people.

Four years of frantic efforts went by before Martí was able to leave New York to begin military operations in Cuba. Betrayal on the Cuban side prevented Martí from achieving complete surprise and a quick victory over Spain. But he decided to go ahead with his plans, rather than surrender to the United States new-born oligarchy.

And after having landed in Cuba, in April of that year, while near the town of Guantánamo, less than two weeks before his death, Martí was informed about the accidental demise of a British sailor of the schooner *Honor* that landed a Cuban military expedition on the Island. Martí quickly wrote a letter in English to HM Vice consul in Guantánamo, officially informing him of the incident. In it he transcends its original motivation. After clarifying that he had ordered an investigation, Martí added:

The high ideals that sustain the Cuban revolution, the object of which is no less than the foundation of a strong and prosperous republic, open to the industry of the world and deserving its respect and sympathy, cannot tolerate the slightest transgression of moral principles and the international respect of those who defend them. <sup>4</sup>

This vision of a new republic open to the world, in that particular case England, was based on Martí's first-hand knowledge of British interests in Latin America and Cuba, in which it had made important investments. On that same day Martí wrote another letter in English to the German Vice Consul, that prompted the German Government to comment in its internal documents that should the rebels succeed in overthrowing Spanish rule in the Island, a commercial treaty would be signed before establishing relations with the new government. It stands to reason that had Martí been able to carry out his plan successfully, that is, achieving the independence of Cuba, Puerto Rico and reaffirming that of the Dominican Republic, history would perhaps have been different, 1) because the approaches to the Isthmus would have been in the hands of three independent countries, and 2), because European interests would have made themselves felt in future negotiations preventing annexations and other unpleasant surprises. That in the very least would have delayed US strategic plans. As we



have seen, Martí had more than enough reasons to invite Europe to share the Cuban market after independence in the face of the growing danger of control and eventual annexation by the United States.

Finally, Martí's international legacy could be summarized as follows:

1. The true need of strategic unity of Hispanic American countries, both in South America and the Antilles, as Bolívar had foreseen. To this end Martí said it was imperative "to bring together what in the end will come together". This was a well learned lesson that the present Cuban political leadership owes to José Martí, that became a basis for a continental strategy intended to balance US expansion and military power.
2. Closely linked to the previous point was the need to carefully limit the economic penetration and subsequent control by the United States of a united Hispanic America. This objective required an active policy of industrial development that would eliminate all traces of a backward colonial economy, responsible for destitution, social unrest and neocolonial dependency.
3. Such a process would have to emerge from the country's own means and social, economic and political national realities, without abject imitation of foreign, mainly United States solutions and formulas. This meant that the three new republics would have to battle intensively to maintain their hard won independence, perhaps assisted by Europe interested in the natural wealth of the Islands and their trade potential, apart from obvious geo-strategic values. This would have forced the United States to a long pause to rethink its planned expansion to the South and, the result would perhaps have been a new world balance of power.

But this did not occur. It is always painful to remember that Martí never achieved his goal. His death in combat in 1895 and that of General Antonio Maceo a year later, at the very beginning of the war; US intervention in the war and its subsequent victory over Spain, not to mention the complicity of annexationists infiltrated in the new government of Cuba, all the hope for a truly independent nation vanished, and so did Martí's dream of a new world equilibrium. But the seed of liberty, justice and solidarity had been sown. Martí said, "I will die, but my ideas will survive". And so they did, and a new generation, led by Fidel Castro, took the flag from Martí's hands, liberated the country and recovered its dignity, and has kept the national ensign flying over Cuba in the last fifty years, ninety miles away from the most powerful empire the world has known.

As for the United States, the immediate consequences were far reaching. The expansionist Republican group in the US government and Congress, with the incorporation of Cuba and Puerto Rico to the US imperialist system and the possession of the Isthmus, future location of the Canal, the Hawaiian Islands, Guam and the Philippines, consolidated United

States control in the Caribbean and the Pacific and strengthened the conservative group in the Republican Party and Congress throughout the Twentieth Century, today at the zenith of its power, where it cannot forever remain, unless policy changes are made that would force it to take a more modest place among the world's powers.

I should like to end my brief comments on José Martí's context with a note of optimism, hoping that today's and future meetings will further strengthen friendship between our two worthy peoples who share the universal language of culture, science, and a common hope for peace, equality and dignity, not just for the rich and privileged, but as Martí hoped, for all peoples of the earth.

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