

THE EMPIRE AND THE INDEPENDENT ISLAND. Part I

The history of Cuba during the last 140 years is one of struggle to preserve national identity and independence, and the history of the evolution of the American empire, its constant craving to appropriate Cuba and of the horrendous methods that it uses today to hold on to world domination.

Prominent Cuban historians have dealt in depth with these subjects in different periods and in various excellent books which deserve to be readily available to our compatriots. These reflections are addressed especially to the new generations with the aim of helping them learn about very important and decisive events in the destiny of our homeland.

Part I: The Imposition of the Platt Amendment as an appendix to the Neocolonial Cuban Constitution of 1901.

The “ripe fruit doctrine” was formulated in 1823 by Secretary of State and later President John Quincy Adams. The United States would inevitably achieve taking over our country, by the law of political influence, once colonial subordination to Spain had ended.

Under the pretext of blowing up the “Maine” –a still unraveled event of which it took advantage to wage war against Spain, like the Gulf of Tonkin incident, an event which was demonstrably prefabricated in order to attack North Vietnam –President William McKinley signed the Joint Resolution of April 20, 1898, stating “...that the people on the island of Cuba are and by right ought to be free and independent”, “... that the United States herewith declare that they have no desire or intention to exercise sovereignty, jurisdiction or control over said island, except for pacification thereof, and they affirm their determination, after this has been accomplished, to leave the government and control of the island to its people.” The Joint Resolution entitled the President to use force to remove the Spanish government from Cuba.

Colonel Leonard Wood, chief commander of the Rough Riders, and Theodore Roosevelt, second in command of the expansionist volunteers who landed in our country on the beaches close to Santiago de Cuba, after the brave but poorly utilized Spanish squadron and their Marine infantry on board had been destroyed by the American battleships, requested the support of Cuban insurrectionists who had weakened and defeated the Spanish Colonial Army after enormous sacrifices. The Rough Riders had landed without horses.

Following the defeat of Spain, representatives of the Queen Regent of Spain and of the President of the United States signed the Treaty of Paris on December 10, 1898 and, without consulting of the Cuban people, agreed that Spain should relinquish all claim of sovereignty over and title to the island and would evacuate it. Cuba would then be occupied by the United States on a temporary basis.

Already appointed U.S. military governor, Army Major General Leonard Wood, issued Military Order 301 of July 25, 1900, which called for a general election to choose delegates to a Constitutional Assembly that would be held in the city of Havana at twelve noon on the first Monday of November in 1900, with the purpose of drafting and adopting a Constitution for the people of Cuba.

On September 15, 1900, elections took place and 31 delegates from the National, Republican and Democratic Union parties were elected. On November 5, 1900, the Constitutional Convention held its opening session at the Irijoa Theatre of Havana which on that occasion received the name of Martí Theatre.

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General Wood, representing the President of the United States, declared the Assembly officially installed. Wood advanced the intention of the United States government: "After you have drawn up the relations which, in your opinion, ought to exist between Cuba and the United States, the government of the United States will undoubtedly adopt the measures conducive to a final and authorized treaty between the peoples of both nations, aimed at promoting the growth of their common interests."

The 1901 Constitution provided in its Article 2 that "the territory of the Republic is composed of the Island of Cuba, as well as the islands and neighboring keys which together were under Spanish sovereignty until the ratification of the Treaty of Paris on December 10, 1898".

Once the Constitution was drafted, the time had come to define political relations between Cuba and the United States. To that end, on February 12, 1901, a committee of five members was appointed and charged with studying and proposing a procedure that would lead to the stated goal.

On February 15, Governor Wood invited the members of the committee to go fishing and hosted a banquet in Batabanó, the main access route to the Isle of Pines, as it was known then, also occupied at that time by the U.S. troops which had intervened in the Cuban War of Independence. It was there in Batabanó that he revealed to them a letter from the Secretary of War, Elihu Root, containing the basic aspects of the future Platt Amendment. According to instructions from Washington, relations between Cuba and the United States were to abide by several aspects. The fifth of these was that, in order to make it easier for the United States to fulfill such tasks as were placed under its responsibility by the above mentioned provisions, and for its own defense, the United States could acquire title, and preserve it, for lands to be used for naval bases and maintain these in certain specific points.

Upon learning of the conditions demanded by the U.S. government, the Cuban Constitutional Assembly, on February 27, 1901, passed a position that was opposed to that of the U.S. Executive, eliminating therein the establishment of naval bases.

The U.S. government made an agreement with Orville H. Platt, Republican Senator from Connecticut, to present an amendment to the proposed Army Appropriations Bill which would make the establishment of American naval bases on Cuban soil a fait accompli.

In the Amendment, passed by the U.S. Senate on February 27, 1901 and by the House of Representatives on March 1, and sanctioned by President McKinley the following day, as a rider attached to the "Bill granting credit to the Army for the fiscal year ending on June 30, 1902," the article mentioning the naval bases was drafted as follows:

"Art. VII.- That to enable the United States to maintain the independence of Cuba, and to protect the people thereof, as well as for its own defense, the government of Cuba will sell or lease to the United States lands necessary for coaling or naval stations at certain specified points to be agreed upon with the President of the United States."

Article VIII adds: "...the government of Cuba will embody the foregoing provisions in a permanent treaty with the United States."

The speedy passage of the Amendment by the U.S. Congress was due to the circumstance of it coming close to the conclusion of the legislative term and to the fact that President McKinley had a clear majority in both Houses so that the Amendment could be passed without any problem. It became a United States Law when, on March 4, McKinley was sworn in for his second presidential term in office.

Some members of the Constitutional Convention maintained the view that they were not empowered to adopt the Amendment requested by the United States since this implied limitations on the independence and sovereignty of the Republic of Cuba. Thus, the military governor Leonard Wood hastened to issue a new Military Order on March 12, 1901 where it was declared that the Convention was empowered to adopt the measures whose constitutionality was in question.

Other Convention members, such as Manuel Sanguily, held the opinion that the Assembly should be dissolved rather than adopt measures that so drastically offended the dignity and sovereignty of the people of Cuba. But during the session of March 7, 1901, a committee was appointed yet again in order to draft an answer to Governor Wood; the presentation of this was entrusted to Juan Gualberto Gómez who recommended, among other things, rejecting the clause concerning the leasing of coaling or naval stations.

Juan Gualberto Gómez maintained the most severe criticism of the Platt Amendment. On April 1, he tabled a debate of the presentation where he challenged the document on the grounds that it contravened the principles of the Treaty of Paris and of the Joint Resolution. But the Convention suspended the debate on Juan Gualberto Gómez's presentation and decided to send another committee "to ascertain the motives and intentions of the government of the United States about any and all details referring to the establishment of a definitive order to relations, both political and economic, between Cuba and the United States, and to negotiate with the government itself, the bases for agreement on those extremes that would be proposed to the Convention for a final solution."

Subsequently, a committee was elected that would travel to Washington, made up of Domingo Méndez Capote, Diego Tamayo, Pedro González Llorente, Rafael Portuondo Tamayo and Pedro Betancourt; they arrived in the United States on April 24, 1901. The next day, they met with Root and Wood who had earlier traveled back to his country for this purpose.

The American government hastened to publicly declare that the committee would be visiting Washington on their own initiative, with no invitation or official status.

Root, Secretary of War, met with the committee on April 25 and 26, 1901 and categorically informed them that "the United States' right to impose the much debated clauses had been proclaimed for three-quarters of a century in the face of the American and European world and they were not willing to give it up to the point of putting their own safety in jeopardy."

United States officials reiterated that none of the Platt Amendment clauses undermined the sovereignty and independence of Cuba; on the contrary, they would preserve them, and it was clarified that intervention would only occur in the case of severe disturbances, and only with the objective of maintaining order and internal peace.

The committee presented its report in a secret session on May 7, 1901. Within the committee there were severe discrepancies about the Platt Amendment.

On May 28, a paper drafted by Villuendas, Tamayo and Quesada was tabled for debate; it accepted the Amendment with some clarifications and recommended the signing of a treaty on trade reciprocity.

This paper was approved by a vote of 15 to 14, but the United States government didn't accept that solution. It informed through Governor Wood that it would only accept the Amendment without qualifiers, and warned the Convention with an ultimatum that, since the Platt Amendment was "a statute passed by the Legislature of the United States, the President is obliged to carry it out as it is. He cannot change or alter it, add or take anything out. The executive action demanded by the statute is the withdrawal of the American Army from Cuba, and the statute authorizes this action when, and only when, a Constitutional government has been established which contains, either in its body or in appendices, certain categorical provisions, specified in the statute (...) Then if these provisions are found in the Constitution, the President will be authorized to withdraw the Army; if he does not find them there, then he will not be authorized to withdraw the Army..."

The United States Secretary of War sent a letter to the Cuban Constitutional Assembly where he stated that the Platt Amendment should be passed in its entirety with no clarifications, because in that way it would appear as a rider to the Army Appropriations Bill; he indicated that, otherwise, his country's

military forces would not be pulled out of Cuba.

On June 12, 1901, during another secret session of the Constitutional Assembly, the incorporation of the Platt Amendment as an appendix to the Constitution of the Republic passed on February 21 was put to the vote: 16 delegates voted aye and 11 voted nay. Bravo Correo, Robau, Gener and Rius Rivera were absent from the session, abstaining from voting in favor of such a monstrosity.

The worst thing about the Amendment was the hypocrisy, the deceit, the Machiavellianism and the cynicism with which they concocted the plan to take over Cuba, to the lengths of publicly proclaiming the same arguments made by John Quincy Adams in 1823, about the apple which would fall because of gravity. This apple finally did fall, but it was rotten, just as many Cuban intellectuals had foreseen for almost half a century, from José Martí in the 1880's right up to Julio Antonio Mella, assassinated in January of 1929.

Nobody better than Leonard Wood himself to describe what the Platt Amendment would mean for Cuba in two sections of a confidential letter to his fellow in the adventure, Theodore Roosevelt, dated on October 28, 1901:

"There is, of course, little or no independence left Cuba under the Platt Amendment. (...) the only consistent thing to do now is to seek annexation. This, however, will take some time, and during the period which Cuba maintains her own government, it is most desirable that she should be able to maintain such a one as will tend to her advancement and betterment. She cannot make certain treaties without our consent (...) and must maintain certain sanitary conditions (...), from all of which it is quite apparent that she is absolutely in our hands, and I believe that no European government for a moment considers that she is otherwise than a practical dependency of the United States, and as such is certainly entitled to our consideration. (...) With the control which we have over Cuba, a control which will soon undoubtedly become possession, (...) we shall soon practically control the sugar trade of the world. (...) the island will (...) gradually become Americanized and we shall have in time one of the richest and most desirable possessions in the world."

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