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*History will Absolve Fidel
by John Maxwell*

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On my way to Panama recently, I had the theoretical options of going by way of Miami or through Cuba. Obeying my instincts and listening to my intelligence, I decided more than a year ago that my life could do without my tempting fate and the PATRIOT Act. I would no longer apply for a visa to visit the US. "Coward man keep soun' bone" as the Jamaican aphorism says.

Since the Cubans prefer Canadian dollars to US currency, I decided to change some US dollars at the airport cambio. The lady in charge asked me for my passport, I supposed to ascertain that I was who I said I was. But there was more. She scanned my passport into a machine and then phoned someone. I presumed that my name had come up on some list connected with my passport. I asked her if she scanned every passport to change \$100. She didn't answer, nor did she answer when I asked her whether the joint was run by the CIA.

When I was leaving Panama to return to Jamaica my passport again occasioned surprise at the COPA airline check in. The matter was, however, resolved without my ever knowing what was at issue.

I may be paranoid, but as Henry Kissinger once quoted, "even paranoiacs have enemies".

I say this because I would be a fool not to know that I am, in some circles, considered if not an enemy of the United States, at least unqualified to be embedded with the Marines.

I have known this for years, in fact, for nearly forty years. American paranoia is not a product of the Bush administration. It has almost always been there.

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I mention all this because of the relative ease with which it is possible to defame people, particularly in Third World politics, with the enthusiastic participation of the United States press. While they demonize Aristide, Castro and Chavez, for instance, they say very little about terrorists like Posada Carriles and his protector and co-conspirator Santiago Alvarez (not the filmmaker). The Master Narrative, as Tom Blivens calls it, omits the context.

There was precious little coverage in the US last week of the arrest of the wealthy developer, Santiago Alvarez, in Miami. Apart from the Miami Herald and a few small town newspapers, nobody else seemed interested, although the Herald reported. "The case against Posada's close associates has the potential to create a political firestorm for the White House, with hardline exile activists vowing to protest and defend Alvarez against what they see as an attack by Castro".

This is because Alvarez is a prominent supporter of Jeb Bush and is also accused of illegally ferrying the airplane bomber, Posada, into the United States and giving him shelter, once there.

According to the Herald, the Cuban community in Miami is incensed, saying that President Bush is catering to Castro by arresting a man whom they regard as a freedom fighter, but who is a terrorist by any other definition.

The Cuban government has on tape, a conversation between Santiago Alvarez and one of his agents who had been sent to conduct sabotage in Cuba. The agent asked Santiago whether he should bomb the world famous Tropicana nightclub and Santiago replied, "It's OK with me".

Mr. Alvarez also has been accused by Cuba of organizing a 2001 "mission" in which three Miami-Dade men were captured trying to land in Cuba with assault rifles.

He is also suspected of being Posada's backer in the expedition to Panama in 2001, in which Posada intended to bomb an auditorium with hundreds of people who had come to listen to Fidel Castro.

"We are seeing signals that indicate that the administration of President Bush is forgetting the promises they made to the exile community in order to cater to Castro," said Cuban American National Foundation President Francisco "Pepe" Hernandez, according to the Miami herald.

Next day the Herald, valiantly straddling the fence, boldly declared that while storing assassination weaponry was against the law, "good intentions do not excuse criminal actions".

"We, too, would like to see Cubans on the island freed from a tyrant. But good intentions do not excuse criminal actions," said Miami's most influential paper.

As it happened, on Thursday, in Jose Marti airport, I decided to reread Fidel Castro's speech in defense of the Moncada uprising in 1953. The last defiant line of the speech: "Condemn me; it does not matter. History will absolve me".

I first read the speech in 1960, on my first visit to Cuba. The air was electric. The ammunition ship, La Coubre had just been blown up by saboteurs in Havana harbor, killing hundreds, the crew, dockworkers and innocent people in their houses or at work.

The revolution was hard at work, building prefabricated houses to replace the bohios (thatched huts) in which the farm workers and peasants lived, building new housing all over the island, providing free medical care for pregnant women of any class, and above all, wiping out illiteracy. On the day I arrived, President Eisenhower approved the end of the Cuban sugar quota. War had been declared.

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I was impressed then, and am now, with the revolutionary determination to bring equality of treatment to all. Illiteracy and AIDS are almost non-existent in Cuba, there is a doctor for every 100 Cubans, the infant mortality rate is the lowest in the world and three quarters of the population are in some form of educational pursuit.

As Castro promised in his speech in 1953, every schoolteacher at every level in Cuba gets a sabbatical year in which to pursue any academic interest.

"History Will Absolve Me" is, first of all, an attempt to lay the legal basis for the revolution, to rescue the Cuban people from Fulgencio Batista, a usurper, a tyrant, a man who tortured and murdered his opponents and sold Cuba's self-respect to the highest bidder, which usually, was the Mafia or other American interests.

Castro contended that contrary to the charges against him, he was being tried for doing his duty to overthrow oppression. He then denounced the regime's response to the July 26 uprising, in which officers of the Cuban army tortured and murdered some of the men they had captured. Castro was especially bitter because he had defended the army on an earlier occasion, accusing the state of using soldiers as slaves on private estates.

He reported on the fate of his closest comrade, Abel Santamaria, who had been captured alive. I have never been able to forget his description:

"Frustrated by the men's courage, they tried to break the women's spirit. A sergeant with several other men, came with a bleeding human eye in his hand into the cell where our comrades Melba Hernandez and Haydee Santamaria were held. Addressing the latter and showing her the eye he said, 'This eye belonged to your brother. If you will not tell us what he refused to say, we will tear out the other.'

"She, who loved her brave brother above all other things replied with dignity: 'If you tore out his eye and he did not speak, neither will I.'"

"Later they came back and burned their arms with cigarette stubs until at last, filled with hate, they told young Haydee Santamaria, 'You no longer have a boyfriend, because we killed him too.'"

Earlier in the speech, Fidel Castro outlined his plans for Cuba in relation to the existing situation, where more than half the land was in the hands of foreigners while 200,000 peasant farmers did not have "a single vara of land to plant food crops for their starving children". Except for a few food, lumber and textile factories, Cuba was still a producer of raw materials. There were 200,000 bohios (dirt floored thatched huts) and hovels in Cuba, 400,000 families lived in slums that lacked even the most basic sanitary conveniences. 2.2 million paid extortionate rents and 2.8 million people (more than half the population) in rural and suburban Cuba lacked electricity.

He spoke about a society moved to compassion by the kidnapping of a single child but criminally indifferent to the "mass murder" of the many thousands of children who died every year because of poverty, of fathers working only four months of the year, of a million people unemployed. In a country with five and a half million people, more people were jobless than in France or Italy, with populations nearly ten times as large.

Castro proposed revolutionary laws, first to give sovereignty back to the people, a government vested with the power to enforce the people's will and true justice, another to give non-transferrable ownership of land to tenants and subtenants, to introduce profit sharing in business and in the sugar industry, to recover stolen national property which would then be used to subsidize workers pensions and for hospitals and other charitable work and finally a policy of revolutionary solidarity with the oppressed peoples of the continent.

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Looking back at the speech today, more than fifty years later, I am struck by two things: the idealism of the aims and the fact that most of those aims have, in fact, been achieved. There have been mistakes made, many of them serious, but overall, if one compares Cuba to its nearest neighbors, Haiti, the Dominican Republic, Puerto Rico and Jamaica, it is clear that Cubans enjoy a far better quality of life than citizens of the others. And in World Bank terms it is poorer than all except Haiti.

For one thing, crime is almost non-existent and violent crime is statistically insignificant. People still steal and profiteer but civil society seems alive and well in Cuba.

The care given to the weakest and most vulnerable is extraordinary and Cuban health care is recognized as among the very best in the world. The same is true of education, and just as Cubans now have a doctor in every neighborhood (1 doctor to every 100 Cubans) they are getting university-level centers set up in every borough. And education is almost completely free.

The proportion of people completing the primary education cycle was lowest in the province of Guantanamo in 2004. It was 94%

The highest unemployment rate in the country is in the province of Havana, where it is 2.3%. Daily food intake is over 3 kilo calories and less than 2% of the population is at risk of malnutrition.

In almost every single index of human development, Cuba is far ahead of the rest of Latin America and in many cases, Cuba outperforms many developed countries, including the United States. Cuba carried out its first heart transplant nearly thirty years ago. The level of technology is world class.

But, I am always asked, what about democracy? What about freedom of Speech? Human Rights?

Perhaps, since I am not a Cuban, it would be pretentious even to attempt to answer these questions.

I wish, however, to remind people that the United States has been engaged in what it regards as a war against Cuba for the last 46 years. The overt terrorist war is clearly not over, with people like Santiago Alvarez stockpiling assassin's weapons.

When one is under attack, as the United States considers itself to be, there are restrictions on some freedoms, as in the case of the PATRIOT act. But I do not believe that there are prisoners of the Cuban state who are tortured, mistreated and otherwise abused and denied fundamental human rights as are the prisoners of the American state at Guantanamo Bay, ironically, on Cuba soil where the US is illegally squatting. And Cuba continues to be the victim of a wide range of illegal actions designed to bring down the government.

We do have some answers, however, including 'refugees' from Cuba who have chosen to return to their home country. Of course, you don't hear about them.

But we have all heard about Elian Gonzalez and his father, a security guard in Cuba.

If you remember, Juan Miguel Gonzalez was offered a free mansion, millions of dollars and a life of ease if he would only renounce Cuba and relocate to the United States.

All that Cuba could have promised was more of what he was accustomed to; a life as a security guard in a country secure in its integrity and in its people.

I suspect that most Cubans would have made the same choice. I don't know too many Jamaicans who would have. And that is precisely why Castro, Chavez and Aristide are being demonized, traduced and libeled.

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Humanity is subversive and leaders who listen to people are extremely dangerous to the established order.

John Maxwell of the University of the West Indies (UWI) is the veteran Jamaican journalist who in 1999 single-handedly thwarted the Jamaican government's efforts to build houses at Hope, the nation's oldest and best known botanical gardens. His campaigning earned him first prize in the 2000 Sandals Resort's annual Environmental Journalism Competition, the region's richest journalism prize. He is also the author of *How to Make Our Own News: A Primer for Environmentalists and Journalists* (Jamaica, 2000). *Mr. Maxwell can be reached at jonmax@mac.com.*

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