

Obama in Havana - A Long Time Coming...

Escrito por Margarita Alarcón
Jueves, 17 de Marzo de 2016 09:00



When President Barack Obama visits Havana next week, his will be the first and only visit to the island by a sitting U.S. president since Calvin Coolidge came here during the roaring twenties, just a year before the stock market crash in 1929.

At that time, Cuba was a country right out of a Fitzgerald novel — the days of Gatsby; beauty, glamour, lots of money, lots of wealth, Lalique, Paris, la belle époque, feathers, pearls, palazzos, the Ritz, oysters and wine.

The aristocracy in Havana, the capitol, and in Santiago de Cuba, the island's second largest city, was flourishing in the newly formed nation. After all, Cuba was barely in her twenties herself, only just having achieved independence from Spain at the turn of the century.

But, for all its outward charm, there was another, darker side to the island located just 90 miles from the U.S.

A tyrant and a crook by most accounts, Gerardo Machado was president of Cuba then. Thought to be one of the worst heads-of-state Cuba ever had, Machado was ousted by the people he ruled with an iron fist and who hated him with a passion.

Under his draconian control, the country had become divided with the haves and have-nots — those with extreme wealth living side by side with those suffering from extreme poverty.

Sugar barons formed a huge aristocracy and flourished as a bourgeoisie that had no comparison in the Americas of the day. Cuba was quite possibly the first in the region to truly be representative of the disparity we now see occurring in the U.S. where much of the nation's wealth is in the hands of the infamous 1%.

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When President Obama arrives here, the Cuba he will see is no longer in its twenties and no longer does it roar. You see, those years of extreme wealth bordering on decadence lasted well into the first half of the twentieth century and brought the island to its knees with bloodshed, tyranny, social injustice and extreme poverty. Cuba had to undergo a civil war in order to find its way in the proverbial sea that surrounds her. Young men and woman from all over the country and from every walk of life were part of this struggle.

There is a misconstrued idea that the Cuban Revolution was conducted and brought about by uncultured barbarians. I am sorry to burst that odious bubble but that was not the case at all. Many young people who gave their lives and put themselves in extreme peril were actually economically and socially well off. They just couldn't tolerate the idea of their homeland being subjected to total devastation any longer.

And so it was in early January of 1959, a few years before President Obama was born, that change came about, a change that has yet to be fully understood by many living outside and within the island.

Was this change for the better? Was it a necessary evil in order to set the sails for the desperately needed winds of change? Did Cuba win or lose? More so, will Mr. Obama be able to find answers to what I am sure are these and many other questions?

In spite of a vicious economic blockade imposed by the U.S., Michelle Obama, who will accompany her husband, will not see girls going without schools and a fine education, or young women not being permitted to go to college — all paid for by the state.

Here, Mr. Obama will find out how his so-called Obamacare compares to our exemplary universal health care system. He will learn how we have been able to make certain dreams come true.

Mr. Obama may be surprised to find our Ministry of Culture with millions in government support more than equals the work of America's National Endowment of the Arts. Much of the cultural heritage of the nation will be visible, albeit not as splendorous as in the past, but visible none the less. For you see, the Cuban Revolution never really intended to destroy the glories of yesteryear; it just wanted to spread the wealth as far and wide along the island as possible.

It's true that much was, in the end, spread too thin and some of it got lost along the way, and some of that richness of spirit was misunderstood, but the noble intent was there.

Michelle and Barack will be able to see a society where solidarity is spoken in many languages, where somehow many wrongs have managed to create a whole lot of right (left).

We can only hope the president, this president, will be able to see past the dilapidation of some of the older buildings, the lack of decent paint jobs and crumbling facades; the absence of adequate vegetation in town and the potholes — see past all of that, and understand (which I think he does), that we've done way more than most could have under the same strenuous conditions of isolation and punishment.

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This sitting president and his entourage will visit a country full of problems, so many that it would take more than a mere 48 hours to actually see. What he won't see are guns in the hands of children, hunger in the face of multitudes, fear, loathing, dismay or a lack of sovereignty.

Cuba needs change, change that should happen with the help of the United States, specifically by lifting the constraints against the island and becoming a partner walking side by side. The rest hopefully will happen naturally, always keeping in mind that the island once ran away from the highway of pseudo-independence and will never go down that road again.

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