

# Star Spangled Cuba

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For at least two centuries the United States (U.S.) and Cuba have had an intimate and complex relationship marked with inequality and exploitation at many turns, yet they have maintained an undeniable mutual attraction. For instance, Jose Marti, Cuba's national hero, lived in the U.S for many years, where he theorized Cuba's independence from Spain. "America" extracted sugar from the Pearl of the Caribbean and left, in exchange, poverty and illiteracy due to poorly distributed wealth. Baseball, however, has been a better gift and is cherished as the national sport in Cuba. Some baseball players even escape from the island for a chance to compete and earn more money playing in major U.S. baseball leagues. In addition, Ernest Hemingway is an adopted son of Cuba.

The U.S. government has been perpetually at odds with Fidel Castro and the Cuban Revolution, a battle which has entailed armed invasions, terrorism, counterintelligence, propaganda, trade embargoes, travel restrictions, and dare-devil emigration. Simultaneously, the two neighbors are locked in an embrace of shared historical experience that includes music, dance, and images; representations of the self and



the other. To see the U.S. flag in Cuba is ironic and surprising, yet it makes perfect sense. We are invited to wonder why and (re)consider the long embrace between the two countries.

Historian Louis Pérez examines in his book, *On Becoming Cuban*, the process by which contact with the U.S. shaped Cuban culture and national identity. According to Pérez, Cubans were very familiar with what was becoming known as the “American way of life” by the late 19th century. During this time, it was normal for Cubans to have traveled or lived in the U.S., used American goods and technology, and envisioned their own future linked to the U.S., a kind of big brother to the north and a modern alternative to their Spanish colonial past.

In 1898, at the start of the American Century, the U.S. military intervened in the Cuban independence war against Spain. Just as the Cubans were about to claim victory and sovereignty, the U.S. began increasing its economic and political control, as well as cultural influence on the island. During Cuba’s Republican era (1902 – 1958), “so thoroughly had North American forms penetrated the structural order of daily life that it was often impossible to make a sharp distinction between what was properly ‘Cuban’ and what was ‘North American’ ”. (Perez 1999, 12) However, as the U.S. culture revealed itself to be unable to meet Cuban aspirations, the affinity for Americans and their ways was increasingly matched by the uneasy feeling and, according to Perez, “that the potential and the promise of nationality--of being Cuban--was within reach if only the ‘weight’ of North American hegemony could be lifted”. A passionate love/hate relationship was developing, which would

express itself in all its irony starting with the Cuban Revolution of 1959.

Considering the harsh policies of the U.S. toward Cuba, it is no big surprise that at different times the U.S. flag has been officially banned and/or strongly discouraged in Cuba. Specifically, it could not be worn on clothing at work and government officials and their families could not have it in their homes. In Havana, there is a billboard along the Malecón, a poetic boulevard along the sea, which depicts Cuban soldiers clad in green army gear jeering across the ocean at a monstrous replica of Uncle Sam complete with a red, white, and blue top hat and fangs. The billboard reads “Capitalists, we are not afraid of you!” This is the kind of representation one would expect of the old stars and stripes because, from a Cuban viewpoint, the U.S. flag represents not only the long standing connection between the two countries but, also, America’s desire to control Cuba as expressed in the Platt Amendment, Bay of Pigs invasion, U.S. trade embargo and travel restrictions, and the Helms-Burton Law.

Among Cubans in the streets these days, our star-spangled colors are being represented on hats, handkerchiefs, T-shirts, underwear, dresses, tattoos, etc. and are worn in a different spirit. Instead of confrontation, people seem to express identification with aspects of U.S. culture, such as sports or music, and sometimes even infatuation with the capitalist way of life or the concept of “freedom” which is represented by the flag or images of the U.S. greenback. For some, the U.S. flag represents their connections to people who have come from the U.S. as visitors to Cuba and brought these items as gifts. These are connections forged in peace, not aggression; hope and humanity, not imperialism or treason.



Cuba's recent action of phasing out the U.S. dollar from its economy--after allowing it as legal tender along side the Cuban peso for ten years-- heightens the drama of all representations of U.S. influence on the island. As the U.S. continues to occupy Iraq and, seemingly, sets the stage for another

American Century, the creative and fiercely independent Cubans linked historically and culturally as they are to the U.S. are in a unique position to comment on the American way through symbolic representations like the U.S. flag.

