PREFACE

Fulgencio Batista, and for that matter most of Cuban history prior to the Revolution of 1959, is lost in the historical mists. There was a Cuba prior to Fidel Castro and the Marxist Revolution, and this study seeks to rediscover it. Batista dominated Cuban politics from the period between 1933 and 1959 in the same way Fidel Castro dominates Cuba today, and has done for more than the past four decades. This work attempts to accurately represent Batista.

These are my scholarly aims, but my motivations are more than historical. A large part of the motivation to write this book comes from a desire to know my family and the Cuba they lived in prior to the revolution. My father emigrated to the United States in 1955, during the period that Batista ruled Cuba, when one of his close friends in the railroad labor movement died under mysterious circumstances. The island was awash in revolution and revolutionaries, and he chose to emigrate to avoid becoming the next mysterious victim. In the aftermath of the revolution's triumph, many of my relatives, some Castro supporters and others opponents, fled into exile. Some family members remained loyal to the revolution and decided to stay. Family conversations often centered on the Cuba prior to the revolution, so in many ways this book is one of self-discovery. In the process of uncovering the historical Batista, I have sought to uncover something about the world of my father and his brothers and sisters. It is a journey that I hope will interest readers.

I chose Batista as my subject because his failures and achievements played out on a grand scale in the Cuba of the 1930s, 1940s, and 1950s, and even

at this late date there is no scholarly biography of the second-most controversial and important figure in modern Cuban history. In spite of his importance, he remains a stick-figure caricature defined by his enemies, a poster boy for a failed dictatorship, fleeing in disgrace in the middle of the night on January 1, 1959. The stereotypes are well known: pawn of the U.S. government, right-hand man to the Mob, iron-fisted dictator. There is some truth to these clichés, but they are superficial truths that barely scratch the surface of his multifaceted political career. This book, the first installment of a two-volume biography of Batista, aims to look at his life with all its complexities. It attempts to use Batista as an interpretive prism to review an entire era—the republican period (1933–1959) of Cuban history—relatively ignored by scholars until recently.

Many Batistas

The Batista most often written about is the dictator of the 1950s. His dramatic coup of March 10, 1952, the subsequent revolutionary struggle against him, and the transformative events of 1959 receive the bulk of scholarly attention. But the Batista of the 1930s and 1940s is not the Batista of the 1950s, no more than the Fidel Castro of the 1960s is the same as the political figure of the early twenty-first century. To treat the many Batistas as a single character is to distort and impoverish the historical record. The tendency among scholars has been to transplant the dictator of the 1950s back into the 1930s and 1940s. Put another way, the trend is to view his earlier actions as motivated by the same pressures, principles, and factors. Batista has been reduced to a cardboard cutout in a historical play in which the only outcome can be revolution. But, there was little of the predictable in the period covered by this work, which includes a worldwide economic depression, the beginnings of World War II, and in Cuba, the Revolution of 1933, the expansion of the middle class, and the gradual development of democratic institutions. It was a Cuba emerging from a period of pervasive and overt domination by the United States (1902–1933), best symbolized by the hated Platt Amendment, a codicil to the Cuban Constitution of 1901 that permitted the United States to intervene in Cuban affairs when its interests were imperiled. It was a Cuba with a growing sense of nationalism—a Cuba forged, at least in part, by a new relationship of both conflict and cooperation with the United States. The historical Batista, who played a key role in the abrogation of the Platt Amendment, was an embodiment of that new relationship and the period that followed. Cuba was not the same in the

1930s as it was in the 1950s, so why should we believe that the political actors and forces were the same?

This volume will focus on two of the many Batistas, the revolutionary leader in the period 1933–1934 and the strongman of 1934–1939. Throughout the 1930s, Batista saw himself, as did many others, as the leader of one faction of a revolutionary movement. He saw himself as inside the Revolution of 1933, not outside of it. Even after toppling President Ramón Grau San Martín and effectively ending the revolution, Batista laid claim to and defended the most far-reaching reforms enacted by the "Government of the One Hundred Days" (actually 134 days), from September 4, 1933, until January 15, 1934. The mantle of revolutionary leadership would be contested ground between Batista and Grau, and remains so to this day for their aging and dying followers in Miami. For the Batista of the period between 1934 and 1939, I have chosen the word "strongman" rather than "dictator," to describe him, because it was a term frequently applied at the time, and it better reflects the historical reality of the period. Batista was the "strong man" if you will, but his commands were by no means the only ones that carried weight in Cuba. In fact, during this period he was as much a political boss as he was a military leader. In order to remain in power, Batista carefully, and repeatedly, crafted political compromises between his military commanders and then argued the position to a volatile and ever-changing coalition of civilian and political leaders. He was a military strongman who was required to operate within a civilian institutional framework.

The rocky relationship between Cuba and the United States is another important theme of this study. Rather than toadying to the United States, the Batista of the 1930s was an irritant to his northern neighbor. The historical evidence points to a leader seeking greater economic and political independence for Cuba but grappling with the fact that the island's export-based economy, revolving around sugar, relied heavily on trade and investment with the United States. Nevertheless, Batista repeatedly challenged his powerful trading partner, displaying a strong reformist streak in his political agenda. Beginning in 1936, he launched the first nationwide effort to eradicate illiteracy. A few years later, he made an alliance with the Cuban Communists in an effort to secure his election to the presidency. This is the same Batista who strictly enforced employment laws reducing the number of U.S. nationals allowed to work in Cuba. The worldwide contest between fascism and communism and the shadow cast by World War II gave Batista more political space to confront the U.S. government and extract more concessions than might have been the case otherwise. All of this is to say that

the relationship between Batista and Washington cannot be simplified by the stereotypes so often foisted on us.

These observations are not intended to minimize the enormous influence the United States had over Batista and Cuban affairs. The United States maintained a neocolonial relationship with Cuba throughout the period, and its influence was corrosive to Cuban institutions. Even under Franklin Roosevelt's Good Neighbor policy, of which nonintervention was a keystone, the United States attempted to interfere in every conceivable way, small and large. U.S. officials connived with Batista and his allies to rig the presidential elections of 1936, they threatened economic embargoes on a regular basis when displeased with the Cuban government, and the unspoken threat of military intervention was always present. But the Cubans pushed back. There has been a tendency, again in the aftermath of 1959, to suggest that the United States always got its way. Nothing could be further from the truth.

History should be a living thing, not some dusty tome lying dead and dormant on a bookshelf. It must be reinterpreted by new generations in light of new information and perspectives. Today, more than forty-seven years have passed since Fidel Castro and the revolutionary government took power. Yet, several generations have failed, in large part, to reinterpret Batista and the republican era. For many, the stakes are too important to permit a dialogue. The intent of this book is to contribute to that long-delayed reinterpretation of Batista and the period. It is time to search for the historical Batista rather than continue to live with the cartoon figure that we have inherited.

Current Biographical Literature

The existing literature on Batista does little to clear up the confusion over his legacy. Most of the biographies were written by friends and associates and border on hero worship. No revolutionary scholar has deigned to write a biography of Batista. The best-known work remains *A Sergeant Named Batista,* an obsequious book written by Associated Press journalist Edmund Chester. A friend of Batista, Chester wrote his book in the aftermath of the coup of March 10, 1952 (it was published in 1954). It paints a Lincolnesque portrait of a man destined to rule Cuba. At times it is difficult to know whether in fact the book was written by Chester or by Batista. Years later in exile, Batista quotes page after page of Chester's book verbatim in his own writings and acknowledges that Chester's account is based on information he provided the author.

The origin of Chester's book merits additional attention, because much of it appears to be a translation of an earlier study by Raúl Acosta Rubio

entitled *Ensayo biográfico Batista: Reportaje histórico*, published in 1943. A number of sentences are reproduced almost word-for-word and concept-for-concept in Chester's work. The laudatory tone is consistent in both. Here again, a personal link exists between author and subject. Acosta Rubio was a political aide to Batista, and the stories related in his book seem to be first-hand accounts of events. Neither the work of Chester nor that of Acosta Rubio contains any footnotes. Both appear to be clumsy attempts by Batista and his associates to portray him as a great man in the tradition of Latin American biographical writing. Also published in 1943 was the first of two Batista biographies written by Ulpiano Vega Cobiellas entitled *La personalidad y la obra del General Fulgencio Batista Zaldívar*. Twelve years later, he updated it and released it as *Batista y Cuba: Crónica política y realizaciones*. Vega Cobiellas distances himself a bit more from his subject than does Chester or Acosta Rubio, but still there is little effort at critical analysis. Both versions are spirited defenses of the Batista record, and neither has footnotes. These four works, coupled with the writings and speeches of Batista and Arístides Sosa de Quesada, the intellectual voice of the Cuban military, best represent the pro-Batista literature dealing with his early career.

In opposition to this is an avalanche of books and articles written by the student leaders of the Revolution of 1933, which attribute every possible crime to Batista. Although Batista controlled most of the weapons in the 1930s, the students and senior officers he ousted from power controlled the pens, and they used them to great effect. Their politically motivated attacks, sometimes exaggerated, led in turn to an exaggerated defense of Batista by his allies. There can be no doubt who won the image war. Batista's depiction as a dictator and opportunist was carefully drawn by his early critics and then adopted wholesale by the revolutionary government of the 1960s.

In the immediate aftermath of the Cuban Revolution of 1959, Batista and a few die-hard supporters attempted to defend his second regime and explain its downfall. Batista went on a book-writing spree, publishing six books in the five years between 1959 and 1964. The works utilize a broad range of statistics and measurements to illustrate the achievements of the 1950s Batista regime. But Batista makes no effort in these books to view his life in its totality. Family members say he was writing an autobiography at the time of his death in 1973, but it was never published, and they have declined to release excerpts. A few loyal supporters tried to defend the Batista record, but these works were polemical rather than scholarly. Every few years, a work or two from an aging Batista follower is published in Miami, but apart from some in the Cuban exile community, few read them.

After the 1959 revolution, even more than in the earlier period, Batista's defense was drowned out by his opponents' incessant attacks. In addition to depicting him as a murderer and assassin, supporters of the revolution sought to humiliate him in every possible way, from parading his sick brother, Hermelindo, through the streets and having him declare himself in favor of the revolution to revealing, in newspaper reports about Batista's country home, Kuquine, how many shoes and sports coats he owned. Batista's own discredited rise to power via a military coup on March 10, 1952, invalidating a democratic constitution he helped draft, further weakened any defense of his government and delayed a rational assessment of his career. Events quickly eclipsed Batista's relevancy, as Cuba turned to socialism and the Bay of Pigs invasion was followed by the Cuban Missile Crisis. The importance of placing Batista and his era in historical context was overshadowed. It remains unfinished business to this day.

Dueling Interpretations

For many years interpretations of the period have been held hostage by polarized political views. Scholars within Cuba denigrate and minimize earlier political figures as lackeys of the United States and big-business monopolies, and with the triumph of the revolution, irrelevant. This interpretation serves Fidel Castro and the revolutionary government very well, because it debases prerevolutionary leaders, with a few choice exceptions, and sets Castro apart as the spiritual heir to independence leader José Martí. Batista and his representation as a historical figure is central to the revolution's depiction of its victory. The more sinister and nefarious the portrayal of Batista, the more glorious the triumph of the revolution. The more devalued the republican era, the more enhanced the revolution. When I visited Cuba in 1999, the official interpretation of the period was on display at the Museo de la Revolución (the former Presidential Palace) in which Batista was given a special place of shame—*el rincón de los cretinos* (the cretins' corner)—along with former U.S. Presidents Ronald Reagan and George Bush Sr. In the exhibit, the ills of the republican period were elaborately detailed, leaving the impression that everything was made right by the revolution. This is the sort of ideological straitjacket that scholars residing in Cuba must wear. To even mildly challenge this interpretation is to go against one of the central tenets of the revolution, and as a result few revolutionary scholars write of the period, and if they do, they dare not stray from the official interpretation.

A major reassessment of the era is likely once the treasure trove of Cuban government documents becomes available to scholars. But the climate of

political correctness in Havana creates practical problems for scholars seeking to gain access to these records. In order to see some collections, I was asked to provide sample chapters, a political litmus test to which I was unwilling to submit. Fortunately, I was able to supplement my limited access to official government documents with an extensive review of several Cuban newspaper collections in the United States. There is also page upon page of Cuban government records, interview materials, memos of conversations, and personal interviews with Batista in archival collections in the United States. Many Batista supporters and opponents eventually fled to the United States, and so for the past five years I have conducted a series of oral history interviews and corresponded with family members, surviving officials of the Batista government, and political adversaries.

The eldest son of the former ruler, Fulgencio Rubén Batista Godínez, was gracious enough to provide me with access to some of his personal documents, even though he realized this work would be unfavorable to his father in countless ways. He asked me to specifically note that neither he, nor his family, is endorsing the content and conclusions contained herein. Some will view with a critical eye my extensive use of records and oral history interviews provided by the Batista family. With this thought in mind, I viewed such information with a historian's natural skepticism, as I did my other sources. Whenever possible in this biography, differing interpretations and contradictory evidence are provided in order to give readers the opportunity to decide which version of events seems most plausible. In the end, shining a light on the information provided by the Batista family is one of this work's most important contributions to the historical record. In addition to the oral history interviews, the Batista family gave me access to some of Fulgencio Batista's letters, excerpts from his diary, and to rare photos and memorabilia. They withheld access to some documents, specifically his diary, because of privacy issues, and one can only hope that with time they will see the wisdom of releasing that information as well. There are encouraging signs. A few months before the publication of this book, the Batista family donated a collection of documents to the University of Miami.

Another invaluable source was the Sumner Welles collection at the Franklin D. Roosevelt Library in Hyde Park, New York. This is an archive rich with historical value, which was made available to the public just over a decade ago. The letters between Assistant Secretary of State Welles and the U.S. Ambassadors to Cuba Jefferson Caffery, J. Butler Wright, and George Messersmith reveal many of the behind-the-scenes machinations of Batista and the respective ambassadors. The importance of this collection cannot be overstated. Although Caffery, ambassador from 1933 to 1937, burned all of his

important correspondence, Welles never threw any letters away. This voluminous correspondence opens a revealing door onto the period. Many of the letters I have used here have never before appeared in a scholarly work.

The Cuban community in exile likewise presents a historian of the period with a set of formidable challenges. Many of the voices from Miami and Union City, New Jersey, idealize the republican period. They speak and write of it as a time of lightness before the darkness fell on Cuba. Any critique of the era that in any way justifies or explains the emergence of Fidel Castro and the revolutionary government is dismissed as procommunist.

As a result of these hardened political positions, there is no substantive, ongoing, scholarly dialogue between the two sides. This becomes apparent in glancing at many of the bibliographies of scholarly works produced on the island and in the United States. Each side ignores the scholarship and firsthand accounts of the other. This book attempts to incorporate the findings of all sides, regardless of their political perspective. It seeks a fair and critical assessment of the man and the period. Some will disagree with the balance struck by this work. Let the debate rage.