

Viva Cuba libre! Rebellion and resistance

As Cuban agriculture thrived under Spanish colonisation, movements towards independence grew. These movements were fuelled by the fact that although the fruit, sugar and tobacco industries were creating great wealth, all profits went out of Cuba and into the treasury of the Spanish kings. The first rebellion took place in 1819 and was brutally crushed. By 1855, there had been at least six more insurrections resulting in the Spanish government passing repressive laws banning Cubans from setting up businesses, taking public posts, taking legal action against a Spaniard and travelling without permission. Marriages between Cubans and Spaniards were annulled, that is dissolved as though they had never taken place.

The Monroe Doctrine

The United States had been interested in Cuba from 1783 when President John Adams described Cuba as 'a natural extension of the North American continent'. In 1823, President James Monroe made a speech to Congress in which he affirmed that the United States would not become involved in European affairs and that Europeans should no longer interfere with any part of the Americas. Monroe stated that any attempt by a European power to influence or colonise any independent nation in the Americas would be seen as an attack on the peace and safety of the United States. The United States therefore had the right to act in order to 'protect' the region.

This statement became known as the **Monroe Doctrine**. Its aim was to limit European influence in any part of the American continent as well as the Caribbean. (This entire region is sometimes referred to as the Western Hemisphere.) It placed the United States in the role of 'protector' of independent countries of the Americas and the American continent was effectively closed to further European colonisation.

The Monroe Doctrine became the philosophy behind American actions in Cuba. Another concept was also used to justify American ambitions in the continent – 'Manifest Destiny'. The United States believed that its system of democracy and free enter-

prise should be spread not only across North America but also throughout the rest of the Americas.

By 1850, insurrections were encouraged by the United States, who wanted to end Spanish colonisation in order to gain control of Cuba. By the 1880s American interests were heavily involved in the Cuban economy, especially in the sugar industry. The United States even offered to buy Cuba at one stage but Spain refused.

In a bitter war for independence, the Ten Years War, Spain was able to maintain its hold over Cuba. Although the Spanish introduced some reforms, war again broke out in 1895, led by Jose Marti. This war finally broke Cuba's ties with Spain but did not achieve independence. In 1895, the Committee of Cuban Exiles in the United States was established to encourage Americans to support the insurrection, mainly supplying American newspapers with stories of the war, with a view to winning support for their cause. By 1897 lurid and sensational stories of Spanish atrocities were published in major newspapers. Many of these stories were exaggerated or false, but this effective form of propaganda meant that most ordinary Americans became sympathetic to Cuba.

The Spanish-American War

In 1898, the battleship USS *Maine* arrived at Cuba on a 'courtesy visit'. On 15 February the *Maine* exploded and 260 crew members were killed. (One newspaper immediately coined the slogan 'Remember the *Maine*, to hell with Spain'.) In April 1898, the United States declared war on Spain and Spanish rule over Cuba ended with their defeat in 1899. The United States set up a military government until the Cuban Republic was proclaimed in 1902.

The Platt Amendment

The new Cuban constitution, drawn up in 1902, contained the **Platt Amendment**, which gave the United States the legal right to intervene in Cuba in order to protect 'life, property and individual liberties'. The makers of the Cuban constitution were presented with the Amendment by the United States

in 1901 and were warned that American troops would not leave Cuba until its terms had been adopted. The terms of the Platt Amendment:

- restricted Cuba's ability to make treaties with other countries
- gave the United States the power to intervene in Cuban affairs
- gave the United States the right to buy or lease land for military bases
- guaranteed a 'perpetual lease' (the right to use land indefinitely) on Guantanamo Bay so that a Naval base could be built.

Originally presented as a way in which the United States would help to protect Cuba's independence, to many critics the Platt Amendment effectively placed Cuba under American control. The term 'sphere of influence' was used to describe the relationship between Cuba and the United States.

In 1906, 1909 and 1912 American forces occupied Cuba again after rebellions took place against the Cuban government. Between 1917 and 1923, American marines occupied Cuba to put down strikes in the sugar mills and protect American property. Representatives of American sugar interests were leading political figures and they enforced policies that suited American economic interests at the expense of Cuban national development. The United States encouraged the development of the sugar industry by guaranteeing to import Cuban-grown sugar. (American investment in Cuba grew from \$400 million in 1909 to \$1200 million in 1921.) By 1925, American interests dominated Cuba's banks, mines and rail transport as well as the tobacco, cattle and sugar industries.

Between 1902 and 1928 a number of governments rose and fell in Cuba, culminating in the establishment of a dictatorship by Gerardo Machado in 1928. Machado had a personal police force of over 15 000 men and simply assassinated any opponents.

When Machado fell in 1933, Sergeant Fulgencio Batista controlled the Cuban army and, after the so-called Sergeants' Revolt, controlled the presidency. The Sergeants' Revolt took place in September 1933 when Batista and other military leaders staged a coup and controlled the country for six days. Although others then held the post of president, Batista's influence over the presidency was absolute. Batista was president from 1940 to 1944, and again in 1952. During his first term he allowed a democratic constitution to be drawn up. However, after he stepped down he was followed by two repressive and increasingly corrupt regimes.

A number of Cubans, disgusted by these governments, founded the Orthodox Party, which soon won thousands of supporters. Eduardo Chibas, leader of the Orthodox Party, called for economic and political independence and social justice. By 1951, it had gained enough support (including that of the Cuban Communist Party) to become the party favoured to win the upcoming election in 1952.

In March 1952, Batista overthrew the government in a military coup weeks before presidential elections were to be held. Although Batista had been a popular figure since the 1930s, his coup and the repressive nature of his new government was opposed by many Cubans. As president, Batista abolished Cuba's constitution, dissolved Cuba's congress (parliament) and outlawed the Cuban Communist Party.

Source 9.1

The Platt Amendment

Article III. The Government of Cuba consents that the United States may exercise the right to intervene for the preservation of Cuban independence, the maintenance of a government adequate for the protection of life, property and individual liberty, and for discharging the obligations with respect to Cuba imposed by the Treaty of Paris on the United States, now to be assumed and undertaken by the Government of Cuba ...

Article V. The Government of Cuba will execute and, as far as necessary, extend the plans already devised, or other plans to be mutually agreed upon, for the sanitation of the cities of the island, to the end that a recurrence of epidemic and infectious diseases may be prevented, thereby assuring protection to the people and commerce of Cuba, as well as to the commerce of the southern ports of the United States and the people residing therein ...

Article VII. To enable the United States to maintain the independence of Cuba, and to protect the people thereof, as well as for its own defence, 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.

From J A Sierra, *The History of Cuba*, viewed 24 May 2002,
<<http://www.historyofcuba.com/history/platt.htm>>.

Questions

Study Source 9.1.

- a According to Article III, why should the United States have the right to 'intervene' in Cuba?
- b According to Article V, what are the two reasons why infectious diseases should be prevented?
- c According to Article VII why should there be American naval bases on Cuba?
- d Using the information in this chapter, explain any other reasons why Article VII of the Platt Amendment was included.
- e Using Source 9.1 and the information included in this chapter, describe the reasons why the United States became involved in Cuba.