

EDUARDO CHIBÁS: A POLITICAL BIOGRAPHY

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Introduction:

This study will examine, in the form of a political biography, the impact of the career of Eduardo Chibás on the Cuban political system between 1940 and 1952. Specifically, it will analyze whether Chibás' proposals for government reform constituted a program that generated broad-based public support and, if so, which sectors constituted that support. In addition, this study will identify the programmatic elements sponsored by him that most appealed to specific voters. This will then be weighed against the degree to which Chibás' popularity as a politician was based on his personal charisma and the extent to which it was a function of his actual proposals for government and societal reform. This will be done in an effort to better understand the degree to which personalism, rather than concrete political platforms, generated broad-based public support in Cuba in the mid-20th century in order to better understand the nature and evolution of politics during the first fifty years of the Cuban Republic. In order to answer these questions, Chibás' political and ideological formation will be analyzed to establish the nature of his political proposals and platforms and why they changed over time. This will involve analyzing his early career as a student activist, as well as his involvement in the Auténtico party and eventual rejection of it and founding of the Ortodoxo party in 1947. Chibás' participation in formulating the basic party documents and proposals of both will be examined to establish the degree to which they represented general trends. This will help establish the political context in which Chibás operated and the degree to which his statements and actions were pro-active determinants of the polity and the extent to which they were reactions shared by other activists. In short, this study will attempt to establish how and in what manner Chibás influenced Cuban politics between 1940 to 1952 and the degree to which he was merely a personalistic reflection of general trends. The result should be greater comprehension of the nature of Cuban politics past and present.

Statement of the Problem:

The Centrality of Eduardo Chibás in Cuban Politics, 1940-1952

There is ample evidence to suggest that Eduardo Chibás, despite never having been president, was of primary importance to Cuba's political system in the years 1940-1952. Aside from being a congressman and later a senator, he was also the island's most popular radio commentator – which afforded him an excellent opportunity to shape public opinion. Chibás used this forum for self-promotion but also to denounce what he saw as the vices and inadequacies of Cuban politics, especially corruption in public office. By all accounts, Chibás was a man of unquestioned probity. Even his enemies admitted as much.¹ Moreover, Chibás' public stature and credibility were enhanced by his participation in Cuba's 1933 revolution, which overthrew the dictatorial administration of Gerardo Machado (1925-1933), and in the mass strikes of 1935, which opposed Fulgencio Batista's first military regime (1934-1940). Through personal charisma and media savvy he raised expectations among many Cubans that economic prosperity, national sovereignty, personal security and efficient and transparent governance were possible through a renewal of the nation's institutions led by his Ortodoxo party. Founded in 1947, the Ortodoxo platform called for economic independence, political liberty, social justice, constitutionalism and an insistence that the government remain free of political pacts or coalitions. The party was also closely associated with Chibás' crusade against malfeasance. This program attracted a diverse following, including middle class sectors, rural laborers, urban workers and Afro-Cubans. The first three groups were disappointed by the successive Auténtico administrations of Ramón Grau San Martín (1944-1948) and Carlos Prío Socorrás (1948-1952). Among other things, the middle class was disgusted with *pistolerismo* by so-called "action groups" with ties to the Auténticos. Rural laborers felt betrayed by the Auténticos' abandonment of its rehabilitation program, which had promised new schools, cement floors in each *bohío*,

¹ "En Cuba," *Bohemia*, May 30, 1948, 56. Specifically, ex-president Fulgencio Batista, who was hardly a Chibás ally, admitted that while other Auténticos had asked him for money or favors while he was in office, Chibás had never done so.

sanitary latrines and good wells.² Many urban workers were disappointed by the Auténticos' failure to substantially improve the nation's hospitals. Afro-Cubans maintained a large presence in the Partido Socialista Popular (PSP), or Communist party, but were otherwise largely unaffiliated with any of Cuba's larger parties.³ Chibás actively recruited them, emphasizing his personal friendships with two popular Afro-Cuban boxing champions, Kid Chocolate and Kid Gavilan. Of course, all the above constituencies also responded to Chibás' denunciations of government corruption – which he described on the radio every Sunday evening.

To date, analysts of Cuban political developments in the 1940s and early 1950s have not reached a consensus concerning Chibás. For instance, the Cuban American sociologist Marifeli Pérez-Stable has minimized his importance, asserting that Chibás focused more on catchy slogans than pressing issues such as economic diversification, industrialization and defense of national sovereignty.⁴ This criticism is not entirely accurate. As a presidential candidate in 1948, Chibás necessarily devised a host of campaign mottoes – the most famous of these being *vergüenza contra dinero* (shame versus money). These were part and parcel of his attempt to generate opprobrium against corrupt politicians. Moreover, Chibás had repeatedly emphasized the need for national sovereignty since his days as a student revolutionary. In a 1933 public speech, for example, he condemned “great foreign monopolies” along with their “indigenous servants” and concluded that the revolt currently underway sought not merely to depose Gerardo Machado but also to “change...the economic structure of the regime.”⁵ In 1949, while a senator, Chibás was briefly jailed for accusing the administration of Carlos Prío of giving preferential treatment to the U.S. owned Cuban Electric Company. On the other hand, Chibás did not extensively address the longstanding problems of sugar monoculture and the island's lack of industrialization. However, this was no guarantee he would have ignored these issues had he been elected president. For example, the U.S. political scientist William Stokes notes that in 1948 Chibás presented the “longest and most detailed” party program of any candidate. This indicated a

² William S. Stokes. “The ‘Cuban Revolution’ and the Presidential Elections of 1948.” *Hispanic American Historical Review*. Vol. 31, No. 1 (Feb. 1951): 43.

³ Charles D. Ameringer. *The Cuban Democratic Experience: The Auténtico Years, 1944-1952*. (Gainesville: University of Florida Press, 2000), 44.

⁴ Marifeli Pérez-Stable. *The Cuban Revolution: Origins, Course, and Legacy*. (New York: Oxford University Press, 1993), 50.

⁵ Luis Conte Agüero. *Eduardo Chibás, el Adalid de Cuba*. (México: Editorial Jus, 1955), 193.

willingness to confront the nation's ills. At the same time, the Ortodoxo platform was remarkably similar to that of the Auténticos.⁶ This reflected the fact that many Ortodoxo leaders, including Chibás, were ex-Auténticos who felt their former party had abandoned its platform in favor of personal enrichment and opportunistic political alliances. Thus, Ortodoxo promises to reform the electricity sector,⁷ to improve the nation's hospitals, to subsidize native entrepreneurs, to build more schools and to better the lot of the island's *guajiros* implicitly depended on the honesty of its leadership.

The Cuban American political scientist Jorge Domínguez dismisses the impact of Ortodoxo "reformist moralizing" as a "peculiarly middle-class concern."⁸ He argues that this was because the bourgeoisie formed part of the political elite and had media access, where the topic was often discussed, but there was no substantial commitment to structural reforms. However, a May 1951 poll in *Bohemia*, Cuba's most popular magazine, indicated that Chibás, apparently with multi-class support, was the leading candidate for president in all six of Cuba's provinces.⁹ In addition, the heretofore dominant Auténtico party was sufficiently worried about the potency of corruption as a political issue to nominate Carlos Hevia, an honest but reportedly non-charismatic man, as its candidate in the 1952 presidential election. Domínguez also repeats the charge (which has come from various quarters)¹⁰ that Chibás' unrelenting criticism had the effect of "weakening the entire system" of Cuban democracy.¹¹ This claim is rather unconvincing. After all, Auténtico malfeasance was the primary reason why Cubans questioned the legitimacy of their government. For instance, Cuban peasants who were promised cement floors in their *bohios* (according to the Auténtico platform) knew quite well, independently of Chibás, that their situation remained unchanged. The same could be said of urban middle class Cubans, who were shocked by

⁶ Stokes, 72.

⁷ "Los Candidatos Presidenciales Opinan Sobre El Grave Problema de la Electricidad." *Bohemia*. May 23, 1948: 67,74. Among the proposals were nationalization of the island's electricity sector, a 50 percent reduction in tariffs and extension of service into rural areas – which he believed was essential to agrarian reform.

⁸ Jorge Domínguez. *Cuba: Order and Revolution* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1978), 113-114. Specifically, Domínguez cites figures for the party's appeal under the leadership of Roberto Agramonte, who succeeded Chibás after the latter's suicide and was far less charismatic.

⁹ *Bohemia*. May 20, 1951: supplement, 8-9.

¹⁰ See Jaime Suchlicki. *University Students and Revolution in Cuba, 1920-1968*. (Coral Gables, FL: University of Miami Press, 1969) and Eduardo Suárez Rivas. *Los Días Iguales* (Miami: n.p., 1974) among others.

¹¹ Domínguez, 114.

pistolero violence in broad daylight by action groups associated with the Auténticos.¹² Perhaps the most forceful challenge to this view is provided by University of Havana students, who were arguably Chibás' most devoted followers and who were among the few who offered to defend the government from the March 1952 coup headed by Fulgencio Batista and the military.

On the other side of the spectrum, the U.S. historian Charles Ameringer asserts that Chibás was a "people's champion" who represented the "outraged conscience of the nation" and almost certainly would have been elected president had he lived. Of course, Cubans were receptive to such a figure because the Auténtico party had squandered nearly all its credibility during the Auténtico administrations of Ramón Grau San Martín and Carlos Prío. In addition, while allowing that Chibás exposed Auténtico corruption, Ameringer also notes that the Ortodoxo chief had a tendency to exaggerate or even fabricate charges. Despite this shortcoming, he concludes that Chibás' death left "a great void" that was exploited by Batista and the military when they overthrew Cuba's elected government in March of 1952.¹³ In a similar vein, the Cuban American historian Luis Aguilar describes a "clamor" among the Cuban public for honest politicians during this era. He suggests Chibás was the embodiment of their ideal, dubbing him the "champion of many popular aspirations." He also portrays Chibás' suicide as a "staggering blow" which was a factor that enabled Batista and the military to seize power.¹⁴ The recently deceased Cuban exile novelist, Guillermo Cabrera Infante, also shared this opinion. He concluded that Chibás' death "deprived the opposition of their natural leader" and plunged his party and the country into "chaos," greatly facilitating the takeover by Batista and the military in 1952.¹⁵ This view, which casts

¹² Perhaps the most notorious case was the Orfila incident in the city of Marianao on September 15, 1947. In this instance, Emilio Tró who headed the National Police Academy but was also chief of the Union Insurreccional Revolucionaria (UIR) and Mario Salabarría who was in charge of the Police Bureau of Investigations but also a member of the Movimiento Socialista Revolucionaria (MSR), used the forces under their command to conduct a battle over the course of several hours which resulted in the death of Tró and four others. Both men were Grau appointees. Moreover, the battle was broadcast live over the radio, embarrassing the Auténticos and giving rise to shock and revulsion among the island's citizens. Hugh Thomas notes that, "This pointless bloodshed caused a scandal even in the blasé Cuban society, hardly reassured by the thirty-year gaol (sic) sentence imposed on Salabarría, or by the realization that one of the most important gangster leaders was not removed from the scene. Hugh Thomas. *Cuba, the Pursuit of Freedom*. (New York: Harper & Row, 1971), 755.

¹³ Ameringer, 145,165.

¹⁴ Luis Aguilar. *Cuba 1933, Prologue to Revolution*. (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1972), 244.

¹⁵ Guillermo Cabrera Infante. *Mea Cuba*. (New York: Farrar, Strauss and Giroux, 1994), p. 143. Specifically, Cabrera Infante writes that, "With his death Chibás had deprived the political

Chibás as almost a *sine qua non* of Cuban democracy does not fully take into account the political and economic ills that plagued the island. Perhaps closest to the truth is an opinion expressed by Stokes, who, referring to the 1948 election writes:

There is the strongest evidence that Cuban political opinion desperately desired the “Revolution” (of 1933) to mean, at least, fundamental departure from the venality, corruption, and fraud so characteristic of Cuban colonial and republican politics. The evidence is seen in the great support given to Chibás, whose almost sole campaign asset was rectitude and integrity and passionate insistence on honesty in government. His cries for genuine revolution, to begin in this area, released emotional enthusiasm in all classes, and he rallied many of Cuba’s great men to this cause.¹⁶

This statement presents Chibás not as an empty sloganeer or apostle of democracy but as a genuine reformer who desired to renew Cuba’s faltering political system. Clearly, the evaluations of Chibás’ role in Cuban politics are highly debatable and hence ripe for in-depth study.

As a political biography this study will also be concerned with Chibás’ ideological evolution. Currently, this aspect is not entirely clear – especially in the years before he entered the university and what influence his family and socioeconomic background had on his way of thinking. His father, Eduardo Chibás y Guerra, was a wealthy engineer and *hombre de negocios* who had produced the maps of San Juan Hill used by Theodore Roosevelt’s Rough Riders during the Spanish-American War. He had also been Secretary of Public Works in the short-lived administration of Carlos Manuel de Céspedes in 1933. His mother, Gloria Ribas y Agramonte, was a niece of Eduardo Agramonte, Secretary of Foreign Relations during Cuba’s first war of independence (1868-1878). In keeping with his family’s status, Chibás attended the elite Colegio de Dolores in Santiago and later on, when his parents moved to the capital, finished his secondary education at Belén, a prestigious Jesuit institution. Chibás also traveled in Europe and the United States and belonged to the Havana Yacht Club, the social center for the capital’s elite. Chibás, like many members of his generation, was profoundly impacted by the dictatorship of Gerardo Machado. While a University of Havana student, he became involved with the radical, anti-Machado

opposition of their natural leader and had left his party in a chaos greater than the one the Republic was in then. So, some months later, Batista carried out his infamous, fateful *coup d’état* that was both bloodless and easy because President Prío chose not to resist, his bags always at hand.”

¹⁶ Stokes, 77.

Directorio Estudiantil Universitario (DEU). His anti-government activities led to significant periods in jail and exile between 1927 and 1933. After the fall of Céspedes, Chibás personally nominated Grau for president on behalf of the students. During Grau's brief first term as president, Chibás outlined his thinking in a slew of public speeches. The revolution of 1933, he claimed (as have a good number of contemporary Cuban scholars and politicians), had not been a mere revolt of the type that had occurred with regularity during the republic's first three decades. Rather, this was a new development and part of an ongoing process that sought to fundamentally change Cuba's political system. Specifically, Chibás railed against foreign monopolies, which, in his view, enriched themselves and a few corrupt politicians at the nation's expense. Chibás would revisit this theme repeatedly throughout his political career, perhaps most famously in his criticism of the U.S. owned Cuban Electric Company in 1949. To be sure, the foreign domination of Cuba's economy between 1902 and 1933 was high on the list of grievances for Cuba's student revolutionaries – Chibás included, although his rhetorical fluency helped make him more visible than many others. Chibás was also an avowed anti-communist, at least in part because that party had collaborated with Batista in the late 1930s and also because he viewed international communism with the same foreboding reserved for U.S.-style imperialism.

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Chibás initially emerged as a leading politician and Auténtico party spokesman after his election to Congress in 1940. Founded in 1934, the Auténticos were a multi-class, reform party that rejected both Soviet-style communism and imperialist capitalism much like the Peruvian Alianza Popular Revolucionaria Americana (APRA) led by Víctor Raúl Haya de la Torre.¹⁷ The Auténtico platform emphasized nationalism, socialism and anti-imperialism. In its early years, the party opposed Batista's first military regime through both political and violent means but by 1939 had resolved to pursue a peaceful course. Above all, *autenticismo* derived legitimacy from two factors. First, its core leadership had participated in the struggle to oust Gerardo Machado in 1933. Second, its *jefe máximo*, Ramón Grau San Martín, had briefly served as president that same year (before being overthrown by Batista) and issued a

¹⁷ Ameringer, 12. Also relevant here is the famous quotation by Haya de la Torre, “¡Ni con Washington ni con Moscú!” indicating his desire to find a path for Latin America independent of these two ideologies.

series of popular decrees which, among other things, legalized labor organizations, set price caps on electricity prices and required that all businesses maintain a labor force that was at least 50 percent Cuban. By 1947, however, a group of disaffected Auténticos led by Chibás believed the party had abandoned its ideals and decided to form a new organization. Specifically, they were disillusioned by the administration of Ramón Grau San Martín, which had been accused of corruption and mismanagement.¹⁸ From a personal standpoint, Chibás was also disappointed that Grau had bypassed him as the party's presidential candidate in the 1948 election. Chibás ultimately competed in that contest as head of the Ortodoxo party, winning 16 percent of the vote despite having only a year to prepare and a rudimentary organization to support him. The Ortodoxo symbol was a broom, reminding voters of its intention to sweep away graft and inefficiency. In order to give himself and his fledgling organization a feisty popular image, he set up the Ortodoxo headquarters in the old gymnasium of Eligio Sardiñas – the popular Afro-Cuban boxing champion better known as Kid Chocolate. He apparently also hoped to win support from the substantial Afro-Cuban community in this manner.

Another constituency targeted by the Ortodoxos was the rural poor, who had initially benefited from new schools along with expanded school lunch and health programs under Grau's first education minister, Luis Pérez Espinós, (1944-1946) an honest man and Auténtico militant.¹⁹ A lavishly funded Ministry of Education²⁰ made such things possible

¹⁸ The charges of corruption came from all quarters of Cuba's society and political spectrum. Francisco Ichaso, one of the founders of the ABC, described Grau's last year in office as "one of the most corrupt periods in the history of the Republic." Francisco Ichaso, "El Proceso Auténtico," *Bohemia*, June 26, 1949: 87. In November of 1947, University of Havana students, among them Fidel Castro, announced a "war against government graft." Rolando E. Bonchea and Nelson P. Valdés, eds. *Revolutionary Struggle, 1947-1958*. Vol. 1 of *Selected Works of Fidel Castro*. (Cambridge, MA: MIT University Press, 1972), 132. Moreover, government malfeasance was hardly limited to 1947. Chibás himself had written a letter to Grau in January of that year listing a litany of complaints, chief among them the corruption of government ministers and advisors – notably Inocente Alvarez the ex-minister of commerce who had reaped tremendous profits in Cuba's barter deals with other Latin American countries in 1945, César Casas, the present minister of commerce who Chibás accused of dealing on the black market and José Manuel Alemán, the notoriously sleazy minister of education, whom, Chibás claimed, was embezzling funds while schoolchildren were deprived of their lunches. Luis Conte Agüero. *Eduardo Chibás, el Adalid de Cuba*. (México: Editorial Jus, 1955), 476-477. In January of 1949, shortly after Grau had vacated the presidency, "Case 82" was submitted to the Criminal Panel of the Supreme Court, alleging that Grau and his ministers had embezzled 174,241,840.14 pesos. Not surprisingly, the brief was filed by Pelayo Cuervo Navarro, an Ortodoxo.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, 32.

but also tempted dishonest ministers to use the money for their own purposes. The most notorious of these was José Manuel Alemán, its head between 1946 and 1947, who embezzled a substantial portion of the ministry's budget and filled its payroll with ghost employees or *botellas*.²¹ A similar situation prevailed in the Ministry of Public Health, where expenditures were at an all time high during Grau's administration even as hospitals remained in short supply. Perhaps the grandfather of Reinaldo Arenas, the late 20th century Cuban exile novelist, was typical of Chibás' rural supporters. The old man was a peasant from Oriente Province who felt "great respect" for the Ortodoxo leader's anti-corruption campaign and bought a radio so that he could listen to his "hero." The broadcasts may have helped convince him that Cuba's politicians were "delinquents."²² The urban lower class also felt the sting of decrepit schools and badly managed hospitals, attracting them to Chibás, who promised to channel government monies toward honestly administered public services. Another group targeted for party appeals was Havana's middle class, especially given their revulsion to gangland style shootings (many in broad daylight) by "action groups" associated with the Auténticos. Lastly, there was the island's youth, especially University of Havana students, who, according to the Cuban-American political scientist Jaime Suchlicki, considered the Ortodoxo leader their "idol."²³

Chibás' Sunday evening radio broadcasts (1943-1951) were the highest rated on the island, confirming his reputation as the most admired politician in Cuba. Richard Pack, a *New York Times* correspondent, characterized them as, "a half-hour of verbal fireworks" from a man who was by turns, "reporter, crusader, gossip and muckraker." Pack acknowledged that some Cubans disapproved of Chibás' antics and deemed him "a clown, a demagogue or worse." Even so, "Eddy," as he was known, not only "puts on a good show," but was also scrupulously honest at a time when corruption was widespread in

²⁰ Inciso K (Paragraph K) of Law Number 7, April 15, 1943 along with Decree Number 3603, December 13, 1943 mandated a nine-centavo tax on each sack of sugar produced, all of which went to the Ministry of Education.

²¹ Ameringer, 34-35. Specifically, he notes that, "Alemán did not invent thievery in the Ministry of Education, but he would raise it to unprecedented levels." This is partially borne out by the fact that illiteracy levels for students ten years of age or over remained static, at 23.6 percent, even as education spending represented one quarter of the national budget in 1947. More importantly, Auténtico ministers, when they did spend on education, neglected rural areas, where the illiteracy rate was 41.7 percent. In Oriente province, a future Ortodoxo stronghold, the illiteracy rate reached 49.7 percent.

²² Reinaldo Arenas. *Antes que anochezca*. (Barcelona: Fábula Tusquets, 1998), 52.

²³ Jaime Suchlicki. *University Students and Revolution in Cuba, 1920-1968*. (Coral Gables: University of Miami Press, 1969), 56.

Cuban politics.²⁴ On the whole, Chibás coupled personal magnetism with pleas for probity and accountability in government, socioeconomic reform and Cuban nationalism. At times, Chibás was able to address all these issues at once – as in the case of the U.S.-owned Cuban Electric Company. During a 1949 broadcast, Chibás accused the Supreme Tribunal of Justice of taking bribes after the court refused to overturn a 70 percent increase in electricity prices. This imbroglio proved an ideal opportunity for Chibás, who inveighed against judicial malfeasance, unfair rate hikes and a predatory foreign monopoly all in the same breath. As a result, he was jailed for defamation, which appears to have enhanced his reputation still further. Chibás, predictably, lost no time exploiting the situation, proclaiming, “I’ll proudly go to jail to defend the (Cuban) people.”²⁵ Evidently, many Cubans were convinced that he was the ideal leader. A May 1951 poll in *Bohemia* thus showed Chibás to be the most popular of all potential presidential candidates – more than 10 percentage points ahead of his nearest challenger and the favorite of all the nation’s social classes.²⁶

From a personal and psychological standpoint, Chibás was considered somewhat eccentric. His nickname was “el loco,” or the crazy one – in part because of the intemperate remarks that helped popularize his radio program and the recklessness with which he made public accusations. For example, during a broadcast in May of 1951, Chibás accused President Prío of turning the nation’s hospitals into “morgues” because his corrupt administration was siphoning off their funds.²⁷ This exaggerated statement set off a panic among Chibas’ mass audience. As a result, he quickly backtracked, claiming Cuban doctors were the best in the world and pointing out that he had chosen to have abdominal surgery the year before in Cuba rather than traveling abroad. Such impetuousness was also reflected in his private life, which reportedly included eight duels. Of course, Chibás’ sense of drama,

²⁴ Richard Pack, “Report from Havana.” *The New York Times*, April 28, 1946, II, 7.

²⁵ “Por defender al pueblo iría a la cárcel con orgullo.” *Bohemia*. March 6, 1949: 46.

²⁶ *Bohemia*. May 20, 1951: supplement, 8, 10. Among other things, the *Bohemia* poll broke down the support of various presidential candidates by social class. Chibás was the leading contender among four distinct groups of varying degrees of wealth and prestige. The first, which included business owners, managers, executives, professionals and sub-professionals gave him 34.63 percent of their support. For the second group, which included office workers, middle class employees and shop assistants, the rate was 33.81 percent. In the third group, listed as “workers,” Chibás led the poll with 29.05 percent. The fourth and most humble of the groups, which counted domestic servants and other “minor” professions, gave him 24.34 percent of their prospective votes.

²⁷ *Ibid*, 755-756.

his inclination toward rashness, and sincere desire to inspire his countrymen were united in his final act, a *mélange* of the personal and political, which involved shooting himself in the stomach while broadcasting. He allegedly had intended for the shot to ring out over the air, at the end of his weekly show, but he had exceeded his allotted 25-minute slot and listeners instead heard an advertisement for Café Pilon. Moreover, there is a dispute as to whether Chibás intended to take his own life or whether he merely sought, in bizarre fashion, to shift attention away from a dispute with Arturo Sánchez Arango, Minister of Education under President Carlos Prío. Specifically, Chibás had publicly accused Sánchez Arango of stealing funds appropriated for supplies and school lunches in order to invest in Guatemalan real estate. This charge was based on rumor and in fact Chibás had unwisely attacked one of the most honest men in Prío's cabinet. On the evening Chibás shot himself he had promised to furnish proof for his allegation but, as none existed, may have sought to settle the debate (and win sympathy) with an extreme gesture. Sánchez Arango, in his 1972 memoir, claimed Chibás had attempted to do just that, performing a mere "simulation of suicide" which involved a careful calculation of the wound's location so as to cause a grave (though not fatal) injury.²⁸ Chibás, in fact, survived for eleven days afterward – which lends a measure of credence to Sánchez Arango's assertion. Also this action, albeit excessive, does not appear inconsistent with Chibás' penchant for stunts, his history of erratic behavior, and gnawing fear of losing ground in the polls.

Seven months after Chibás died, Batista and the military overthrew Cuba's elected government. The connection between these events is a matter of much speculation. It also raises an essential question that must be addressed by any political biography: namely, what is the importance of the individual in history? In particular the degree to which Chibás was central to Cuba's political system between 1940 and 1952 warrants a more thorough analysis – especially given the evidence that suggests he was indeed highly important. This is relevant not only in light of the 1952 coup but also in assessing whether an honest, competent politician could have confronted Cuba's shortcomings and maintained the viability and prestige of an elective, democratic system. Is there reason to believe Chibás would have been capable of mitigating the island's deep-rooted ills of corruption, economic inequality and over-dependence on sugar had he been elected president? Clearly, the movement

²⁸ Arturo Sánchez Arango. *Trincheras de ideas...y piedras*. (San Juan: Editorial San Juan, 1972), xi.

headed by Chibás addressed genuine Cuban concerns – namely government corruption, the economic divide between urban and rural dwellers, insufficient or shoddy public services, gangsterism and predatory foreign monopolies. More than any contemporary politician, he condemned these problems and proposed to resolve them through renewal of the party system and reform of the nation’s institutions. Such measures were by no means a panacea. On the other hand, there is reason to believe that genuine reform would have restored a great deal of confidence in Cuba’s government and dimmed enthusiasm for radical solutions proposed by Batista and the military.

Related Debates:

The Weakness of Cuban Political Parties & the Pervasiveness of Populist Tactics

This study will also briefly analyze the role of Cuban political parties from the inception of the Republic into the 1950s in order to establish the degree to which they were influential political actors or primarily vehicles for personalistic politics. In this manner, the nature of the Cuban political system and Chibás’ influence within that arena will be clarified. The U.S. political scientist Forrest Colburn, among others, has deemed political parties the “weakest link” in Latin American democracies.²⁹ More specifically, he notes that, “with limited exceptions, political parties in Latin America are not institutionalized, they are not stable, they do not have roots in society, they are not independent of ambitious leaders, and they are not democratic in their internal organization.”³⁰ This echoes the analysis of the Cuban intellectual Fernando Ortiz, writing in 1919,³¹ who lamented the island’s “lack of a regulatory law regarding the internal organization of political parties and absence of guarantees of legality of their interior activities” and a “lack of renewal of the directive elements.”³² William Stokes, commenting on the situation in Cuba shortly after the 1944 election, pronounced the island’s peaceful transfer of power and minimal evidence of fraud at the polls to be admirable developments. Even so, he noted that “(t)he parties continued

²⁹ Forrest Colburn. *Latin America at the End of Politics*. (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press), 37.

³⁰ *Ibid.*

³¹ At the time of the writing, Ortiz was a member of the Liberal Party and member of Cuba’s House of Representatives – affording him an insider’s perspective on the island’s political malaise.

³² Fernando Ortiz. “La crisis política cubana sus causas y remedios.” *Orbita de Fernando Ortiz*. (La Habana: UNEAC, 1973), 103.

to hover around personalities, the alignments and shifts in the coalitions responded to partisan profit rather than principle and program, (and) the campaign featured wordy and windy defenses of honor rather than intelligent analyses of economic, political and social issues.”³³ In short, weak political parties dominated by individual charismatic leaders were frequently the norm between 1902 and 1952 – a development that stifled reform, encouraged corruption and muffled new voices and ideas in Cuban politics. Chibás was representative of this trend as well, to a certain extent, which was one reason why his party lost a great deal of effectiveness after his death.

During the Republic’s early years (1902-1933), the political sphere was controlled by two political parties, both dominated by military veterans from the independence struggle. According to the Cuban American historian José Hernández, this is because the United States desired to “keep Cuba quiet” after re-occupying the island between 1906 and 1909. As a result, the author claims the United States was willing to “tolerate” the domination of Cuban politics by former military men.³⁴ Consequently, José Miguel Gómez, an ex-general of Cuba’s war of independence, controlled the Liberal Party until his death in 1921. After that, his friend and former Secretary of Government, Gerardo Machado, became the paramount figure in the party until he was ousted by a nation-wide revolt in 1933. Machado not only dominated his own party but also used his initial popularity as president, as well as co-optation and coercion, to win the submission of Cuba’s political elite. Thus, in 1926, the Conservatives and the smaller Popular Party agreed to “patriotically”³⁵ work together with Machado in an arrangement known as *cooperativismo*. Thus, Luis Aguilar noted that, “for all practical purposes, Machado had no political opposition.”³⁶ Similarly, the Conservatives were a virtual fiefdom of Mario García Menocal, another ex-general from the independence war, until his demise in 1941.

Jorge Domínguez argues that the United States-Cuba relationship changed, after the 1933 revolution, from imperialism to hegemony. As such, the United States was no

³³ William S. Stokes. “The Cuban Parliamentary System in Action, 1940-1947.” *The Journal of Politics*. Vol. 11, No. 2 (May 1949): 351-352.

³⁴ José M. Hernandez. *Cuba and the United States: Intervention and Militarism, 1868-1933*. (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1993).

³⁵ Wilfredo Fernández, “Los nuevos horizontes,” *Heraldo de Cuba*, December 9, 1925, 2. Fernández, who was a leader of the Conservatives, wrote that Machado’s programs were so good for Cuba that, “true opposition was unpatriotic.”

³⁶ Luis Aguilar. *Cuba 1933, Prologue to Revolution*. (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1972), 58.

longer concerned with Cuba's "details of internal rule." Rather, its priority was maintaining the "stability of the system as a whole," especially as that system benefited the United States economically (through trade) and politically (through diplomatic loyalty). Hence, the United States focused less on the merits of individual leaders than whether they would uphold the system.³⁷ Fulgencio Batista, the army sergeant who ruled behind the scenes between 1934 and 1940, was careful to cooperate. Under him, the island's political parties were relatively tame. For example, in 1936 he permitted a presidential election with candidates from the Liberals (Manuel de la Cruz), Conservatives (Mario García Menocal) and Republicans (Miguel Mariano Gómez, son of José Miguel) competing for a highly circumscribed office. Gómez, in a flawed vote, was victorious largely due to Batista's backing. However, he was replaced within a year because of an unwelcome tendency to "seriously challenge" Batista.³⁸ When Batista ran as a civilian in the presidential election of 1940, which he won, he forged alliances with the Democratic Party (formerly the Conservatives) and the newly legalized Communists – offering both the perks of proximity to power in exchange for their support. Nevertheless, in 1944, Ramón Grau San Martín, a former University of Havana professor, was elected president as head of the Auténticos. He had led this party since its formation in 1934. This was quite appropriate as much of its original membership had been idealistic University of Havana students who, like him, had opposed and helped topple the dictatorship of Machado (1928-1933). Although Cuba's 1940 constitution barred reelection, Grau considered this possibility throughout his term but finally settled for a handpicked successor, Carlos Prío.

As a result of an administration characterized by nepotism,³⁹ corruption, *pistolerismo* and personal enrichment, Prío had severely eroded his party's credibility – providing Chibás, as head of the Ortodoxos with an excellent opportunity to win the presidency in 1952, implement his reform program and establish his party as a powerhouse in Cuban politics. His suicide, however, proved to be a particularly crushing blow. In part, this was because the Ortodoxos, as a relatively new organization, depended on Chibás' personal popularity rather than on a well developed party apparatus. After his death, Chibás was replaced on the

³⁷ Jorge I. Domínguez. *Cuba: Order and Revolution*. (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1978), 54.

³⁸ Whitney, 133. Specifically, he challenged Batista over perceived military interference in civilian affairs.

³⁹ Prío's brother Antonio was named Secretary of the Treasury despite having no qualifications for the position.

Ortodoxo ticket by Roberto Agramonte, his cousin and running mate from 1948. Agramonte, a former sociology professor and vice rector at the University of Havana was a man of integrity, like Chibás, but he had a bland personality and very little personal connection with the Cuban populace. Nonetheless, he led in the polls and, as the U.S. historian Charles Ameringer notes, a win by Agramonte would have been “a personal victory for the martyr Chibás” had Batista and the military not staged a coup three months before the scheduled presidential election.⁴⁰

* * *

This study will also analyze the degree to which populism permeated Cuban politics and was used by Chibás as a mechanism to increase his influence and impose his political program. Populism and populist tactics have long been a mainstay of Cuban politics, both during the years 1940-1952 and before. Along with Batista and Grau, Chibás operated in what the U.S. historian Michael Conniff describes as the “heyday” of Latin American populism.⁴¹ This period, which roughly spanned the 1940s through the 1960s, was distinguished by increasing democratization and expansion of the franchise in the region. This was certainly true in Cuba, where the Constitution of 1940 upheld democracy and guaranteed the vote for women. Of these three, Grau and Chibás hew closest to Conniff’s definition of populists as leaders who had charismatic relationships with mass followings and who won elections regularly.⁴² Grau, who was constitutionally barred from a second term, left office diminished by scandal. Chibás, who was elected to the Cuban congress in 1940 and the senate in 1944, had perhaps reached the height of his popularity shortly before committing suicide – especially as his reputation for probity made him seem a perfect foil to Carlos Prío. Conniff also mentions the increasing role of “new media.” This, in fact, is the realm where Chibás exceeded the reach of all previous Cuban politicians. Radio had debuted in Cuba in the 1920s and was widespread by the 1930s but no one other politician had exploited this medium to greater effect. Chibás was in many ways ideally suited to the airwaves, especially given his verbal pyrotechnics and apparent ability to read the public’s

⁴⁰ Ameringer, 175.

⁴¹ Conniff, Michael L. , ed. *Populism in Latin America*. (Tuscaloosa, AL: University of Alabama Press, 1999), 11.

⁴² *Ibid*, 7.

mood. Moreover, an examination of Chibás' innovative use of radio as political theater will contribute to the general understanding of Cuban and Latin American populism during the mid 20th century.

Political Biography & Methodology:

A political biography must take special care not to overstate its subject's talents, accomplishments and influence while at the same time offering an accurate assessment of the individual's impact. This is especially pertinent given the pervasive tendency to lionize "great men" of Latin America generally and Cuba specifically. Hagiographies or favorably distorted portraits of Latin American icons abound, ranging from Columbus to Cortés and Bolívar to Castro. Nor are such treatments necessarily a relic of distant eras. For example, the British historian Matthew Restall has drawn attention to the persistence of the "great man" treatment accorded Cortés, among others. He notes that *Conquest: Cortés, Montezuma and the Fall of Old Mexico*, an account published in 1995 by the British popular historian Hugh Thomas, includes a "glorification" of the Spanish conquistador and "an endorsement of the myth that a few great and exceptional men made the Conquest possible."⁴³ Further, lest Thomas be dismissed as something less than a "serious" scholar, Restall also points out that the U.S. historian Charles Gibson, a widely respected specialist of colonial Latin America, was not immune from such characterizations. *Spain in America*, published in 1966, portrays Cortés as an "exception" and "archetype" even as much evidence exists to suggest otherwise.⁴⁴

In Cuba, a common variation on the "great man" theme involves premature death – leaving unanswered questions as to what might have been. The island's greatest example (and exemplar) of this phenomenon is José Martí, who died during the struggle against Spain for independence.⁴⁵ The reverence that Cubans of all political persuasions feel (and have long felt) for Martí can be summed up in his sobriquet, "El Apóstol." The religious overtone of this nickname is neither metaphorical nor accidental for he is quite literally the national secular saint. As such, a diverse collection of figures including Batista, Grau, Prío,

⁴³ Matthew Restall. *Seven Myths of the Spanish Conquest*. (New York: Oxford University Press, 2003), 18.

⁴⁴ *Ibid*, 19.

⁴⁵ Another figure, of almost equal acclaim and popularity is Antonio Maceo, who also died in the war and is known as Cuba's greatest military genius.

Castro and certainly Chibás claim to have been guided by his writings.⁴⁶ The Cuban-Spanish journalist Carlos Alberto Montaner aptly sums up the situation, asserting that “to deny Martí would be to renounce an ingredient – perhaps the basic one – of Cuban-ness.”⁴⁷ This being the case, biographers of Martí have been faced with a monumental challenge. Jorge Mañach, the ex-ABC member and onetime Ortodoxo, is representative. His 1933 biography, entitled *Martí el Apóstol*, is duly and unsurprisingly awestruck. He thus concludes that, “Seldom has the personality and work of a man been so consubstantial with the will of a whole people.”⁴⁸ Post-revolutionary works on Martí have been distorted as well but in a different fashion. According to the Canadian literary analyst John Kirk, the early goal was to use Martí to “justify” the revolution while later on conciliating his views with those of Marxism became the primary object.⁴⁹ Owing to these considerations, a first-rate biography of Martí remains elusive.

Unlike Martí, who is universally beloved but diversely understood, Cuba’s current “great man,” Fidel Castro, is a highly polarizing figure. On one hand, he is an icon within Cuba and to left-leaning sectors in Latin America and the world at large. The German journalist and Castro biographer, Volker Skierka, described how Castro’s celebrity in Argentina was such that his appearance at Nestor Kirchner’s 2002 inauguration easily overshadowed the event. Also, during his stay in Buenos Aires, a speech meant for 800 invited guests quickly turned into an open-air affair attended by tens of thousands of eager listeners.⁵⁰ At the same time, Castro is absolutely reviled by large portions of the Cuban exile community and United States officialdom among others. The Mexican American historian Luis Pérez, related in 1994 that a seething anti-Castro “genre” had long since become “a veritable cottage industry” within the United States, where a continuous stream of works dismiss him as a madman, megalomaniac or menace.⁵¹ Nevertheless a handful of interesting biographies have also appeared. These include *Fidel: A Critical Portrait* by the recently

⁴⁶ John M. Kirk. “‘From ‘Inadaptado Sublime’ to ‘Líder Revolucionario’: Some Further Thoughts on the Presentation of José Martí.” *Latin American Research Review*. Vol. 15, No. 3 (1980): 127-147.

⁴⁷ Carlos Alberto Montaner. *El pensamiento de José Martí*. (Madrid: Plaza Mayor Ediciones, 1971), 4.

⁴⁸ Jorge Mañach. *Martí: Apostle of Freedom*. (New York: Devon-Adair Co., 1953), 363.

⁴⁹ Kirk, 140-141.

⁵⁰ Volker Skierka. *Fidel Castro, A Biography*. (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2004), xvii.

⁵¹ Luis A. Perez, Jr. “Review of *Fidel Castro* by Robert E. Quirk.” *The American Historical Review*. Vol. 99, No. 5. (December 1994), 1786-1787.

deceased U.S. based freelance writer Tad Szulc and *Castro* by the British historian Sebastian Balfour. Szulc's book, published in 1986, is distinguished for its abiding interest in Castro's ideological evolution. In particular, he traces Castro's contacts with the Cuban communists in the pre 1959 and early revolutionary period. Balfour's more recent work (1995) describes Castro and his revolution as eminently adaptable. This quality rather than any set of quasi-mystical powers, he argues, has been paramount in maintaining his rule for nearly five decades. From a biographical standpoint, Balfour demonstrates some skill in placing Castro in perspective. The Cuban leader's cleverness is given full due (for example, his genius in the manipulation of national symbols – especially Martí) but never hyperbolized. His faults, among them persistent economic mismanagement, are not minimized either.

Eduardo Chibás, while far from approaching the status of Martí or Castro, has nonetheless been the subject of a “great man” style hagiography. Luis Conte Agüero's *Eduardo Chibás: el Adalid de Cuba*, published in 1955, represents the only in-depth biography of Chibás in any language. Conte Agüero, a journalist and close friend of Chibás, had been First Secretary of the Ortodoxo party. As with Mañach in 1933, he was perhaps seeking a Cuban hero in the midst of brutal dictatorship – in this case, that of Batista (1952-1958). While this book is a valuable source, it is also unabashedly reverential, referring to Chibás at times as, “the greatest of all Cubans.”⁵² Given the impact of Chibás on Cuban politics during the 1940s and early 1950s, it seems clear that new scholarship in this area is warranted and would contribute to a fuller understanding of the era. Further, this study will attempt to more accurately assess Chibás' actual impact on the evolution of the Cuban political system.

In addition to Conte Agüero's book, a host of smaller volumes and essays have addressed Chibás and his place in Cuban politics. Elena Alavez Martín, a professor at the Escuela Profesional de Periodismo “Manuel Marqués Sterling” in Havana, has produced two short volumes on Chibás. The first, from 1994, is less than 70 pages in length and provides a skeletal, approval-laden outline of the Ortodoxo leader's career. This was followed eight years later by *La ortodoxia en el ideario americano*, which details the party's struggle against corrupt Auténticos. As with Conte Agüero, the author is not above bouts of admiration. For instance, Chibás is described as having a mind that was “a sponge that absorbs everything that surrounds it,” which “nourishes itself on those circumstances in an alert

⁵² Conte Agüero, 798.

fashion for action and forges a body of ideas.”⁵³ Ramón Rodríguez Salgado’s 1998 essay, entitled *Ortodoxia chibasista: nacimiento, liderazgo y acción de un movimiento político* denounces Chibás’ “retrograde” anti-communism, but also praises his strong support of national sovereignty, economic independence, political liberty and social justice, which the author claims the Cuban revolution has attained. More recently, in 2001, the Cuban American historian Frank Argote-Freyre produced a brief article entitled, “The Political Afterlife of Eduardo Chibás: Evolution of a Symbol, 1951-1991.” Here, the author examines how the Ortodoxo leader passed from icon of various anti-Batista factions in the years 1952-1958 to revered martyr of the early revolution (1959-1961) and finally to diminished status over the next three decades due to the regime’s increasingly communist orientation and a new generation of heroes, especially Che Guevara.

Useful albeit cameo portraits of the Ortodoxo leader can also be found in Samuel Farber’s *Revolution and Reaction in Cuba*, Jorge Domínguez’s *Cuba: Order and Revolution* and Luis Aguilar’s *Cuba 1933: Prologue to Revolution*. None of these address the evolution of *Chibasista*-style Cuban populism nor do they treat more than superficially the Ortodoxo party’s formation, the degree to which it was dominated by Chibás’ personal popularity and the consequences for its future after his death. There are also quite a few publications of varying quality by politicians, literary figures and other notables of the era. For example, *Los días iguales*, a memoir by the former Liberal Party head Eduardo Suárez Rivas sheds some light on the political machinations of the era – especially regarding Auténtico malfeasance. *Mea Cuba*, a collection of essays by Guillermo Cabrera Infante, offers details surrounding Chibás’ suicide and its aftermath.

* * *

The methodology to be used in establishing Chibás’ centrality to the Cuban political system during the years 1940-1952 will involve analysis of his legislative program, radio show, party activities and administrative style. Chibás was a congressman (1940-1944) and senator (1944-1951) and his legislative contributions, including bills he proposed or supported will indicate his importance in shaping the

⁵³ Alavez Martín, 17. The exact quote is: “Su mente, su inteligencia, es una esponja que absorbe todo lo posible del medio que le rodea. Se nutre de aquellas circunstancias de forma alertadora y acción y forjadoras de un ideario.”

island's politics. Another factor to be examined will be the influence Chibás wielded as the nation's most popular radio personality. Specifically, Chibás was able to focus the attention of his listeners on the issues of corruption and *gangsterismo*. He emphasized that these problems (both of which undermined the government's legitimacy) were resolvable by committed reformers and put them at the forefront of Cuban political discourse. Thus, a 1951 *Bohemia* poll noted that 8.53 percent of respondents claimed "*mala administración*" as the worst aspect of Carlos Prío's term in office while another 2.2 percent mentioned "*gangsterismo*."⁵⁴ This, in turn, encouraged political parties (particularly the ruling Auténticos) to put forth candidates untainted by corruption. An examination of the way in which Chibás cultivated various sectors (i.e. blacks, rural dwellers, the middle class and urban workers) of Cuban society will provide a sense of his ability to mobilize support and generate enthusiasm for his program and the extent to which this led to changes in Cuba's political sphere. Finally, Chibás' talent for administration must be addressed. As previously noted, he was a man of probity who never embezzled, took kickbacks or abused any position of authority he attained. In order to posit Chibás as a potentially successful reformer, however, it will be proven that he possessed a knack for delegating authority to those who not only shared his ethics but also were efficient, talented and politically savvy. Such individuals, were they to become the norm at the head Cuba's institutions, could very well have inspired renewed faith in the government. In this sense, an analysis of Chibás' tenure as Ortodoxo party chief (1947-1951), where he wielded executive power, will yield essential clues about him as an administrator.

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