

FOREIGN SERVICE OF THE UNITED STATES OF AMERICA

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From: HABANA

763

April 10<sup>th</sup> 1950

Ref:

Subject: ATTITUDE OF DR. HERMINIO PORTELL VILA  
TOWARDS THE U.S.A.

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In recent months Dr. Herminio PORTELL Vilá, prominent professor, historian, author and lecturer, has written articles or given speeches in which he has criticized United States policy or persons in the United States Government. The most recent of these attacks was a radio speech in which he denounced Public Affairs Officer Dr. John HAMILTON for having sent him a letter setting forth certain facts about United States policy. The letter (a copy of which was forwarded to the Department) had been sent to Portell Vilá merely to give him certain correct information regarding United States aims and policies.

Because Dr. Portell Vilá is head of the Cuban-American Cultural Institute, is recognized by Cubans as an authority on international affairs, and has long been regarded as friendly to the United States, the Embassy has deemed it necessary to check more closely his recent utterances to attempt to find whether there has been any definite design in his anti-United States remarks. This has been considered particularly necessary since important people in Cuba have called the Embassy's attention to his various anti-U.S. statements and since Foreign Office officials have unofficially stated that they understand that the transfer of Dr. Hamilton is due to his "trouble" with Dr. Portell Vilá.

A review of Portell's speeches and writings fails to reveal any planned or definite anti-American slant. It is clear, however, that Portell Vilá has given vent to numerous gratuitous anti-American statements and innuendos which have not been in good taste and which obviously do not help to substantiate the claim that he is pro-American. It appears, nevertheless, that these statements are more a result of Portell Vilá's vanity, his extreme sensitiveness to any criticism, and his attempt to substantiate some of his pet theories, rather than a feeling of animosity towards the United States.

One of his favorite themes, a strong hatred for Franco and the present Spanish Government, has been the cause of some of his most rabid and irresponsible statements. For example, in an article in Bohemia dated December 4, 1949, he almost

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hysterically denounced Congressman James Glenn Beall for having included in the Congressional Record a criticism of Portell Vilá's attacks on Father Thorning. Repeatedly calling Beall a "petty politician" (and putting it in English each time, "so he will understand it"), "a Congressman without any specific distinction that is found in all parliaments", a "pork barrel politician", etc. Portell Vilá says, "I consider myself very superior to him [Beall] in religious conviction, in civic upbringing, in education attained, in work done, and in reputation as a citizen." He adds that both the Episcopatism of Beall and the Catholicism of Thorning are of "convenience only". He then attacks the State of Maryland (Beall's State) as being identified with anti-democratic practices. Aside from the personal attack on Beall, the article is devoted to a denouncement of the "totalitarians of both the left and the right".

Again, on December 18, he reverts to this same theme (anti-Franco) to launch a tirade on United States legislators. Stating that Franco is doing everything possible so that the United States Congress will influence the State Department to change its policy, Portell Vilá in a completely unstatesman-like manner directs his barrage against Senators McCarran, Elmer Thomas, Dennis Chavez, McClellan, Robertson, Stennis and Thyne. He attacks not only the personal characters of these Senators, but also the States from which they come. On the other hand, in an article in Bohemia on January 8, he praised Congressmen Joseph Pfeifer, Clement Zablocki and Thomas Gordon for their anti-Franco stand when they visited Spain.

As reported in despatch 376 of February 17, 1950, Portell Vilá considers himself one of the prime movers in the proposed Congress for Defense of Democracy. In urging the need for such a congress, he has strongly attacked all dictators, and has on occasions referred to United States Latin American policy as being responsible for their having come into power. On January 29 he said, "the United States has been shaken by the series of events which have brought dictators into power in many Latin American countries, and has decided to drop its complacent attitude, which has contributed a great deal to the success of the enemies of democracy."

In this respect his strongest such attack was that in his radio speech of December 4 in which he severely criticized "as an inadequate document" Secretary Acheson's reaffirmation of United States Latin American policy last September. He indicated that he considers United States policy as largely responsible for the maintenance in power of Latin American dictators. He scoffs at the projected meeting of Ambassadors (he says to be held in Washington), and says that solutions

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of inter-American problems are not very likely to be forthcoming from such a conference. He said the diplomats could not be expected to correct a policy "outlined for them from Washington, one which has been so regrettably mistaken, and which has disregarded so much the opinion of the peoples and democratic principles."

At other times Portell Vilá has criticized United States immigration laws, the Army-Navy debate over defense needs, and the "big stick" policy of Theodore Roosevelt. On the occasion of the dedication of a portrait of Roosevelt to be placed in the Hall of Heroes at the San Carlos Club, one of the oldest civic institutions of Santiago de Cuba, at which ceremony Portell Vilá was especially invited to speak, and at which a member of the Embassy staff was present, Portell Vilá seemed to take particular pains to point out all of the unfavorable aspects of the former President. He referred to his physical handicaps as a youth, his big teeth, his falsetto voice, his early political defeats, and stated, "there cannot be any doubt that Theodore Roosevelt was a thoroughly convinced expansionist". He intimated that Roosevelt had entered the fray in Cuba as a political stepping stone to the Presidency of the United States. "He tolerated Canada and Mexico if they behaved and more than once showed himself ready to invade them if necessary." This, on an occasion when the people of the locality were trying to pay homage to Roosevelt and had invited Portell Vilá to speak in his honor.

On the other hand, Dr. Portell Vilá continues in his praise of many American things. A devotee of Franklin Roosevelt, he also praises President Truman and past United States leaders. He admires United States institutions, our way of life, and evidently recalls with pleasure his many visits to the United States. His anti-Communist stand very often brings him to cite the United States as the principal hope against Communist aggression.

In summary, Dr. Portell Vilá's critical outbursts are not at all helpful; and in fact are probably injurious coming from a man who is known to be an important director of the Cuban-American Cultural Institute. These outbursts appear principally to come as a result of his development of his favorite theme of anti-Francoism, anti-dictatorship in the Americas, his extreme vanity and his inability to accept criticism. It is doubtful if he is actually anti-American. Instead it appears that he is a very self-willed, rather spoiled and peevish individual who has no scruples about using any means of justifying his own contentions.


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Whatever may be the reasons, the Embassy feels that some reservation must be made to the blanket statement of "pro-American" heretofore used to describe Dr. Herminio Portell Vilá, and intends to regard him accordingly. At the same time, it feels that, in the development of Cuban-American cultural relations, Portell Vilá's influence is no longer helpful.

For the Ambassador:

  
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