

Volume 1, Issue 5, 2016

**Shuttle Diplomacy, Cuban
Style: How José Martí's Florida
Travels Built A Movement—And
Funded A Revolution**

Alfred J. López, *Purdue University*

Eighty-three years before journalists covering Henry Kissinger coined the term, José Martí was practicing shuttle diplomacy *avant la lettre*, essentially making him the first “shuttle diplomat.” At the time of Martí’s first visit to Tampa in November 1891, decades of political infighting among U.S. Cuban exile organizations had hampered, if not doomed, numerous attempts at an uprising that would end Spanish rule on the island. Although Martí resided in New York City during the last 15 years of his life (1881-1895), in the 38-month period between November 1891 and January 1895

he made at least 43 documented visits to six different Florida cities.

Martí was hardly the first Cuban activist to visit Florida, or to see exile communities in Tampa and Key West as a source of funds, arms, and volunteers. But it was his ability to raise money and build consensus where none had existed that made him the public face and primary architect of the 1895 revolution that eventually ended Spanish rule in Cuba. During this same period Martí also organized and raised funds in Philadelphia, New Orleans, and Atlanta, and internationally in Costa Rica, Panama, Jamaica, and the Dominican Republic. But the final, and most crucial, part of the exiles’ financial and political coalition came from Florida’s revolutionary clubs, most decisively those in Tampa and Key West.

The waxing and waning of the New York exiles’ appetite for revolution had long vexed Martí,

who dreamed of the kind of unyielding support enjoyed by separatist groups in Florida. Tampa's and Key West's Cubans were committed supporters of independence and its most reliable underwriters. As the older of the two, Key West had since the Ten Years War been a required stop on the itinerary of any would-be revolutionary seeking to finance the next filibuster. Tampa's Cuban community actually started in the mid-1880s as an offshoot of the older group, as some Key West cigar businesses relocated northward to enjoy the advantages of the new railroad. The Cuban-built suburb of Ybor City was now home to both the city's thriving cigar industry and predominantly black Cuban population (Ronning 19-38).¹ Both Key West and Tampa were hotbeds of revolution, prosperous Cuban enclaves that would make much more reliable partners than New York's more fickle and divided community.

None of this was lost on Martí, who had shown an interest in Florida long before that first Tampa visit in 1891. We know this

because of a July 6, 1882 letter by a certain "P.Y.," intercepted by a Spanish agent and delivered to colonial authorities in Cuba, which named Martí among a group of Cubans involved in a failed fundraising scheme in Key West (See Sarabia 94-95). Martí may also have had limited involvement in an ill-fated April 1884 expedition headed by Cuban insurgent General Carlos Agüero and launched from Key West. Agüero and a small group of fighters (about 40 men) hoped to launch a guerrilla campaign that would rouse Cubans to fight; by March of the following year the rebellion was crushed and Agüero was dead.

By the mid-1880s, Florida's revolutionary clubs were beginning to need a leader of Martí's caliber at least as much as he needed them. Agüero's defeat was only the latest in a long line of failed filibusters that had begun to wear down the exiles' revolutionary will. It led to a new round of disagreements and infighting among the Florida groups, on matters ranging from political issues to fundraising strategies

(Stebbins 126). It was also becoming obvious that the proliferation of independent clubs operating as individual “cells” was making it nearly impossible to coordinate the kind of action that a full-scale war would require. To succeed, a broader coalition of clubs in from Florida, Central America, and the Caribbean would have to submit to the leadership of a central party apparatus (Stebbins 190). But no such leadership was emerging from among the groups themselves. If there was to be a way forward, it would have to come from new, outside leadership.

By November 1887, Martí was thinking along the same lines as his Florida counterparts. At a November 30 meeting of New York’s military and civilian leaders, he successfully presented a new unification plan for their approval. At the same time Martí also reached out to Cuban revolutionaries in Key West, writing to José Dolores Poyo, leader of the Key West contingent, to share his ideas and ask for their support (Hidalgo Paz *José* 116-117). Martí’s

message to both Poyo and the New York leadership was that a methodically built, well-funded war effort launched with the cooperation of all exile clubs—and under the leadership of a single Cuban Revolutionary Party—was the revolution’s only real chance to defeat Spain. That would require an end to the stream of smaller-scale expeditions, as all involved would pool resources for the larger, more powerful force that would be ready in due course.

Even with the New York generals’ pledged cooperation, the dream of solidarity among all exiles remained elusive. The New Yorkers’ biggest practical hurdle was the active presence of at least three other major organizations in Tampa and Key West, each raising money independently and approaching the idea of insurrection somewhat differently. The Key West group, working under the umbrella name *Convención Cubana*, shared neither the New Yorkers’ democratic structure nor its goal; it did not seek to develop its own revolutionary plans, but made its

funds available to any expeditionary plan it found viable. In contrast to the New Yorkers' emphasis on democratic governance and transparency, the Key West Convención was not a single organization at all, but an agglomeration of cells that had little contact with each other (Hidalgo Paz *Incursiones* 110-111). This structure successfully frustrated Spanish attempts to infiltrate the groups, but had the collateral effect of making coordinated activity nearly impossible.



During the next several years, differences between exile military and civilian leadership persisted, primarily over who would control the increasingly plentiful funds now being raised by groups such as Los Independientes, a New York group dedicated to funding the revolution. The new influx of money convinced many, including close Martí allies, that the decision to wait was a mistake.

In the fall of 1891 Martí featured prominently, as he always

did, in the Cubans' October 10 celebrations commemorating the start of the Ten Years War in 1868 (Hidalgo Paz *José* 123). These celebrations had by now passed into tradition for Cubans in New York and elsewhere, and were especially important for both fundraising and raising the exiles' awareness of the homeland's ongoing plight. For Martí, however, this year's October 10 speech would be different, as it would be the first to broach the subject of race, which had long beset the Cuban cause and been partly responsible for its unraveling at the end of the Ten Years War. Martí framed his praise of former revolutionary President Tomás Estrada Palma—who was in the audience—and fellow hero Ignacio Agramonte explicitly in terms of race, noting their loyalty to the black Cubans who had fought alongside them: "We will tell [Afro-Cubans]...what in the majesty of his tent Ignacio Agramonte used to say of the mulatto Ramón Agüero: 'This is my brother'" (Martí 4:231). Racism had certainly been on Martí's mind in the weeks before

the October 10 commemoration; in a September 26 letter he notes disapprovingly “how around here there lurk those evil passions, and how blacks are considered little more than beasts” (Martí 1:227).

But beyond his personal distaste for racism, Martí had a more pragmatic reason for taking a stand. Despite the movement’s recent successes and renewed momentum, New York’s exiles had long wavered in their support; tiring of having the revolution’s objectives rely on the New York exiles, Martí had already decided to reach out to other, more receptive Cuban communities. And the most steadfast and dedicated revolutionary community, the one seemingly most compatible with his vision, was among the more politically-engaged cigar workers of Tampa and Key West—the majority of whom were black or mixed-race Cubans. If the revolution was ever to overcome the final obstacles to building a lasting, united front, its future must lie not with New York elites, but among the ranks of working-class black Cubans.

Shortly after the October 10 celebrations, he got his wish. On November 16 a thrilled Martí received—and immediately accepted—an invitation from Néstor L. Carbonell, President of Tampa’s Ignacio Agramonte Club (Hidalgo Paz *José* 144-145). Here at last was the chance to sell his vision directly to the city’s engaged and energized cigar workers. If he could convince them, and especially Key West’s workers, to unite behind a single, overarching revolutionary project that would serve all of their interests, the squabbling New Yorkers would have no choice but to fall in line.



Although Martí knew Tampa’s exiles to be fervent advocates for independence, he was not prepared for the enthusiasm and sheer raucousness of his welcome. His train reached Ybor City at midnight, where despite a torrential downpour hundreds of Cubans awaited him. Bands playing, people jostling for the chance to shake his hand, the

jubilant crowd formed a procession that more or less spontaneously conducted their pleasantly bewildered guest to the nearby Liceo [Lyceum], where an even greater and more jubilant crowd burst into boisterous applause as he climbed the building's front steps. Accounts describe the crowd falling into stone silence as Martí briefly spoke. Then the mass of happy Cubans converged upon him again in a blur of ovations and hand-shaking and back-slapping; after a time the crowd carried Martí off literally on their shoulders, through the streets of Ybor City in the early hours of a Thursday morning, singing the Ten Years War-era hymn of independence known as The Bayamo Anthem, and eventually delivering him to the door of host Néstor Carbonell (Rodriguez-Silva 256-257).

It was more than he could have dared hope for. Here at last were the revolutionaries of his dreams, Cubans who did not need firing up, whose commitment and ardor were a match for his own. On this night Martí glimpsed the revolution's future—and it was not in New York.

The next three days were a whirlwind of activity for Martí, with well-wishers and supporters at every turn and crowds packing the Liceo for his speeches. On November 26 Martí met with representatives from Tampa-area revolutionary clubs to help draft a manifesto they called "Resolutions," which the group then ratified as representing their collective beliefs and principles (Martí 1:272). He gave his first Tampa speech that evening at the Liceo, before a crowd that filled every seat and spilled into the aisles and onto the stage around his podium.

That night Martí delivered one of his most famous speeches, which has come to be known by its indelible closing phrase "With all, and for the good of all" (Martí 4:279). Martí's address distilled a decade of revolutionary speeches into a single cogent call for solidarity and support. From its opening portrayal of Cuba "as an altar, on which to offer our lives, not a pedestal on which to raise ourselves," Martí's revolution announced itself as a collective

one, inviting all into a partnership of equals sacrificing for the common good (Martí 4:269). The end of Martí's speech triggered a reprise of the previous evening, as the impassioned Cubans again carried their new champion on happy shoulders through the Tampa streets and sang hymns to the reborn revolution (Rodriguez-Silva 257-258).

The following day marked the 20th anniversary of the wrongful execution in Havana of eight medical students, who Martí had helped enshrine as the revolution's first martyrs.² In keeping with the anniversary's somber nature, Martí's traded the rhetorical fire of the previous night for a solemn tribute to the students' "beautiful and useful deaths," which he urged his audience to celebrate as contributions to a better future: "Death gives lessons and examples, death guides our finger across the book of life: from such enduring invisible ties are woven the soul of a nation!" (Martí 4:284). As with his address of the previous evening, Martí's November 27 speech came to be

known by its indelible closing image of young revolutionaries as "new pines" [*"pinos nuevos"*]:

Yesterday I heard it from the earth itself, as I came, through the darkening day, to this faithful town.... Up toward those tattered clouds stretched a single pine tree, defying the storm, raising its crown to the sky. The sun broke suddenly over a clearing, and there, by that sudden flash of light, I saw arising from the yellowed grass, from among the blackened trunks of the fallen, the joyful shoots of the new pines. That is what we are: new pines! (Martí 4:287)

As of Martí's first visit to Tampa in November 1891, the revolution no longer exclusively belonged to its veterans. A new generation would now take up the mantle of the Ten Years War without repeating its mistakes, or succumbing to fear or divisiveness or personal ambition or greed. What Martí saw in Tampa convinced him that his "new pines" were up to the task.

∞

Upon returning to New York, a reenergized Martí immediately moved to arrange a visit to Key West, whose exile community of nearly 10,000 quadrupled Tampa's Cuban population (Mormino 50-55).³ But he did not want to be seen as merely the latest in the long line of would-be expeditionaries stumping for money; it was crucial that he be received, as he was in Tampa, as the voice of a larger movement that encompassed all Cubans. "I burn in my desire to see the Key with my own eyes," wrote Martí to fellow organizer José Dolores Poyo, publisher of Key West paper *The Yara*. "But how can I come of my own volition, as a beggar for fame seeking friends...?" (Martí 1:275).

Poyo had briefly corresponded with Martí in 1887, but he had also been following the latter's work since his first New York speech in 1880, which had been distributed in Key West as a pamphlet (Poyo 138). Martí also admired Poyo as an important revolutionary leader, and especially recognized his role in keeping the cause alive during the fallow years of the 1880s (Poyo

139). What he needed was the chance to gain Key West's support for his vision of a carefully constructed war effort *and* a political coalition that would represent all Cubans through a single revolutionary party. What he needed was an invitation. "But send for me," wrote Martí, a request that Poyo readily granted (Martí 1:276).

In the weeks that it took to arrange Martí's visit, his health had again begun to flag; by the time he stepped off the train in Tampa, he was suffering from acute bronchial laryngitis and could barely speak. Upon arrival, his telegram from the steamer *Olivette* notified assistant Gonzalo de Quesada that he was "Sick, but nearing the noble Key" (Deulofeu 153). Another seeming multitude awaited Martí's arrival, cheering and waving flags and banners as they followed the local representatives who escorted the exhausted and feverish visitor. Spies at the scene reported to an alarmed Spanish Consul, who informed his superior of the "great number of Cubans, who greeted the approaching steamer with

shouts of "Viva Cuba libre" gathered to meet Martí, some two hundred of which followed him to the door of his hotel (Despacho No. 72). Despite his diminished state, Martí managed to give a brief talk to the leaders gathered at the Hotel Duval, and again later at the banquet they had organized in his honor (Rodríguez-Silva 260).⁴

By the next morning Martí's condition had deteriorated sufficiently to require medical attention. Fellow Cuban Dr. Eligio Palma prescribed bed rest and insisted that Martí receive no visitors—an order that he completely disregarded. From his bed he described himself in a letter as "surrounded by guards of love," as over the next seven days a stream of organizers, conspirators, and well-wishers visited him at the Duval (Martí 20:397). Although a public event scheduled for December 27 had to be canceled, Martí continued to work on the documents he was drafting for ratification by the assembled Key West leadership. He spent the New Year in bed, but by January 3 had recovered sufficiently to present

his "Bases of the Cuban Revolutionary Party" and "Secret Statutes." That evening he attended a gathering of exile leaders, and on January 4 he felt well enough to tour the Key's cigar plants and address the workers at Eduardo Hidalgo Gato's factory, the largest manufacturer in the area. Wherever he went that day Cubans hailed Martí as Cuba's future liberator, and homes and businesses had set out banners and decorations in the colors of the Cuban flag. The workers at Gato's factory greeted him with the Bayamo anthem and festooned him with gifts. The outpouring of support was unlike anything he had ever experienced in New York, rivaling even Tampa in its show of warmth and solidarity (López 255-256).

Martí departed Key West for Tampa on January 6, carrying the ratified party platform that the Tampa contingent also approved two days later. By early January 1892 Martí had accomplished in less than six weeks what no individual or movement had managed in 23 years: He had

united the vast majority of Florida's Cuban exiles behind the platform of a single revolutionary party. Key West's numerous clubs, each founded by a member of a central Cuban Convention, all communicated to some degree with the parent Convention, indicating that at least in Key West, exiles had made significant progress before Martí's visit (Ronning 24-25). But it was only through Martí's personal leadership, and the production of a common statement of purpose, that the loosely coordinated groups became a single powerful revolutionary force.

Martí's 1891-1892 visits to Tampa and Key West made him a champion of Florida's predominantly black cigar workers, whose engagement and fervor energized a revolution that had slumbered for years. More important than even the workers' solidarity was their collective financial strength, which far surpassed New York's in both the level and reliability of its commitment. After decades and the squandering of untold

hundreds of thousands of dollars on dozens of failed uprisings, Martí alone had succeeded in harnessing that prodigious source as a single economic engine that would drive a revolution—with Martí's the primary determining voice on how and when it would be spent.



After the triumphs of Tampa and Key West, the New York contingent began to finally converge, in some cases grudgingly, under Martí's leadership (Martí 2:362). The most visible sign of this new solidarity came in late January 1892, when Los Independientes, New York's most powerful exile organization, signed on to the Party "Bases" and "Secret Statutes" previously ratified in Tampa and Key West, effectively forming a single unified revolutionary organization for the first time (Hidalgo Paz *Incursiones* 124).

With the consolidation in early 1892 of the New York exiles, Martí now finally stood as the revolution's unquestioned civilian leader. He had engineered his

ascent by successfully shifting the movement's political and economic balance of power from New York south to Florida, where no rival had a comparable foothold. Mindful of suspicions voiced by some exiles that he was building the revolution as a springboard for his personal gain, Martí moved to pre-empt such criticisms by emphasizing the movement's rigorously democratic process and avoiding any appearance of official power. Although he was elected on April 8 by the collective membership of the New York and Florida clubs to head the Party, Martí rejected the title of "President" in favor of the "Delegate," whose powers were only those specifically vested in him by the membership. He further emphasized that the Party itself was not designed as a permanent political organization, but would disband after the revolution's success to make way for parties organized by Cubans on the island (Rodríguez-Silva 272-273). Token opposition remained, but with Martí's selection as Delegate the few remaining dissenters were

outvoted and outmaneuvered (Hidalgo Paz *Incursiones* 125-126).

Now the last remaining obstacle to launching the revolution was the continuing estrangement of erstwhile Martí ally General Máximo Gómez. All parties agreed that Gómez, the Ten Years War's preeminent military leader, was essential to the new revolution's success. In order to compel Gómez's return, Martí had to demonstrate that this new and unprecedented coalition would last, and would persevere despite the heightened scrutiny and the unrelenting efforts of Spain and others to unravel it (López 261).

Although Martí was now the primary agent and animating spirit of the revolution's solidarity, Gómez's return was not something he could accomplish alone. What he needed was a groundswell of support for Gómez's return, a collective clamor from exiles that the general would be unable to refuse.

Martí accomplished these crucial tasks via constant correspondence with regional party leaders—but more importantly,

through a punishing travel schedule among all the centers of revolutionary activity. Martí's successes had helped fuel a proliferation of revolutionary clubs, including in Philadelphia, New Orleans, and two new clubs in Tampa. Jamaica alone founded five new exile clubs during this period. An overlapping Puerto Rican movement also began to converge with the Cubans, which Martí welcomed into the fold as a partner in the fight for independence (Hidalgo Paz *Incursiones* 127-128). This upsurge required even more coordination, and more extensive travels, than Martí had ever attempted. Over the next three years he made 135 different visits to cities across the eastern U.S. and Caribbean, shuttling constantly as he weaved together from disparate strands the fabric of a revolution (Tablada 127).⁵

The question was whether his body would betray him. In January 1892 Martí turned 39, and his health had remained precarious after the previous month's illness in Key West. Martí had inherited none of his father's physical vigor;

the symptoms of sarcoidosis that had occasionally weakened him in his youth—joint pain, labored breathing, and a propensity to fevers—had by now become a chronic condition. In January he rarely visited his New York office, only rarely leaving his bed: "I do not write," he writes to friend Rafael Serra, "because my lung burns, and will not permit it" (Martí 1:301). An April 20 letter to José Dolores Poyo reveals his continued suffering: "I am still unable to leave my bed, from which I write this.... Not even the best doctor knows now what ails me: my intestines broken, and a weakness that will not allow me to lift my hand" (Martí 1:404). He nevertheless managed to conceal his illness from all but his inner circle, and soldier on for the cause: "'Dead' hardly describes my condition. But for my country, I live" (Martí 20:502).

It was July before Martí was finally well enough to travel again. The 24-day journey took Martí and his delegation, which now included Poyo and Generals Serafin Sánchez and Carlos Roloff, from the

established Tampa and Key West clubs to new ones in Ocala, St. Augustine, and Jacksonville (Rodríguez-Silva 278-280).⁶ In an important departure from previous insurrections, the generals and Martí concurred that the party should determine the existence and extent of support in Cuba, and plan for a coordinated and simultaneous launch of forces on the island and from abroad. To that end, and with the Party's backing, on August 4 Martí sent an emissary, Gerardo Castellanos, to Cuba on a mission to establish contact with key conspirators who would assist in preparing the coming war (Martí 2:85-89).

But the main purpose of Martí's Florida sojourn was to assess the clubs' level of coordination and readiness for action. Before departing he had directed the leadership of all exile organizations to take a vote among "all military veterans of the war in Cuba" to select the revolution's supreme military head in charge of "the military ordination of the Party" (Martí 2:43-44). Martí assumed, correctly, that their choice would

be Gómez. In anticipation of an eventual and inevitable meeting with the General, he wanted the Party's invitation to come with the full backing of his fellow veterans, and the assurance that the civilian exile population had fulfilled their share of the bargain in organizing the necessary financial and political support for the decisive war.

Shortly after returning to New York, Martí published news in *Patria* of his Florida trip and the revolution's progress, notably a moving essay on his visit to the St. Augustine tomb of Félix Varela, the Cuban priest exiled in 1823 advocating Latin American independence (Martí 2:93-97). On August 8 he also reported on his activities to the assembled New York membership, which with few exceptions welcomed the good news (Rodríguez-Silva 280-281).⁷



The last months of 1892 saw Martí continue his revolutionary shuttle diplomacy. Recent travels to Haiti, the Dominican Republic, and Jamaica kept him away from

New York until mid-October. Three weeks later, on November 7, Martí departed again for Florida with news of Gómez's return to the revolutionary fold. Martí spent the next six weeks spreading the word in Tampa, Key West, and Ocala, and raising funds for the now-certain war of independence (Rodríguez-Silva 164-169).⁸ Energized by the revolution's momentum and the raucous ovations that greeted him at every stop, he dismissed concerns for his safety expressed by his inner circle.

That Martí had been too sanguine about his personal safety became clear on December 16, when a plot to poison him narrowly failed. His delegation had received the by-now customary enthusiastic welcome in Ocala, where they attended the dedication of a new Cuban development, named Martí City in his honor. Martí tended to other ceremonial functions in Ocala, including presiding over Martí City's first-ever wedding and accepting an honorary membership to the city's revolutionary club. The next day's only significant event

was a public speech to an overflow crowd at Ocala's Marion Opera House, where he received yet another honorary club membership (Hidalgo Paz *José* 168).

The Martí contingent departed Ocala late that evening, arriving in Tampa in the early hours of December 16. Martí found the hotel where he had stayed on previous visits to be too noisy for his needs, and opted this time for a more quiet private apartment where he could better rest and work in between engagements. Already exhausted from weeks of work and travel, he gamely delivered a series of memorable public speeches over the next several days (Sarabia 160).

Unbeknownst to him, Spanish agents were again tailing him on this trip, attending especially to where he stayed and with whom. The agents in turn hired two local young Cubans to infiltrate Martí's inner circle, offering their services as personal assistants.

This was not an unusual occurrence for Martí, as workers especially sought his company wherever he traveled. After one

particularly grueling afternoon, a drained Martí fell back in his room, with only the two young Cubans to attend him. Due to his precarious health and punishing schedule, Martí had come to rely on the occasional boost from Vin Mariani, a cocaine-infused wine that many legally used in those days as a stimulant (Ripoll *Vida* 73-77). He sent one of his new aides for a glass of the Mariani, but immediately detected an odd taste and spit it out. In the time it took him to do so, the two young men had disappeared (Sarabia 160-161).⁹ A local doctor, Miguel Barbarrosa, brought in as a precaution, confirmed that the wine had indeed been poisoned, likely with acid.

The news that he had narrowly missed being assassinated shook his advisors more than it did Martí himself. Local leaders Ruperto and Paulina Pedroso insisted that Martí move to their home in Ybor City, where they could keep close watch on him. Ruperto Pedroso took to sleeping by the front door of Martí's bedroom, and other Cubans established rotations to guard the

house around the clock. Martí swore Dr. Barbarrosa to secrecy, and insisted that the perpetrators not be pursued or punished.

Despite Martí's efforts, however, news of the attempt soon spread throughout the city (López 265-266).

The rest of Martí's Tampa stay transpired without further incident, and by December 24 he was back in New York. Despite the life-saving instinct to spit out that first mouthful of poisoned wine, he had apparently ingested enough to weaken him considerably, and he remained for a time under medical supervision (Hidalgo Paz *José* 169-170). Martí wrote to Serafin Sánchez that his "illness in Tampa was not natural," and that he still suffered "the consequences of an evil that could have been averted in time" (Martí 2:467). Despite his weakened condition, it was now time to begin final preparations for war. This meant the recruitment of volunteers from all the exile clubs, as well as the acquisition of arms and supplies and a final fundraising push; it also required the establishment of a strategy for

coordinating the insurrection's launch from both the U.S. mainland and on the island, and determining a point of departure for the first expeditionary forces.

Political developments in Spain left the revolution little room for error. Facing worsening economic conditions and burgeoning unrest in Cuba, Madrid embarked on a last-ditch effort to reform its relations with Cuba. In January 1893 Minister of Ultramar [Overseas Territories] Antonio Maura proposed a series of constitutional changes, including the acceptance of Autonomists as a legitimate opposition party. Maura also hoped to replace the island's current colonial administration with an autonomous island government run by Cubans, a move calculated to undermine the revolutionaries (Thomas 303). Martí understood that the only way to avert the threat of Spanish reforms was to launch the war before they could happen.

In February Martí learned that an emissary was bringing funds raised in Cuba, who also held important information about the

impending war. Travel had become both more crucial for Martí's work and more uncertain; after the assassination attempt, he started taking great pains to conceal his whereabouts from the Spanish agents that he knew shadowed his every move. He would travel at night if at all possible, seldom staying in the same place on consecutive nights and always departing before dawn. Only Gonzalo de Quesada, Martí's personal assistant and most trusted aide, would know his travel routes or precise location. These precautions made the proposed meeting especially complicated, since he could not reveal the rendezvous location to the Cuban visitor until shortly before his arrival (Rodríguez-Silva 299).

Martí arrived in Savannah, Georgia on February 13 or 14, but upon arrival moved the meeting some 130 miles south to Fernandina, a seaport just across the border on Florida's Amelia Island (Sarabia 163).¹⁰ Several days passed before Martí finally met the Cuban envoy, who turned out to be General Julio Sanguily, a

hero of the Ten Years War. Upon seeing Fernandina beach, the two agreed that it would be an excellent place from which to launch the exile forces (Rodríguez-Silva 299).¹¹

Although by subterfuge Martí had managed to temporarily throw Spanish agents off the trail, word of his presence in Fernandina soon spread. In order to avert speculation regarding the seaport as a possible departure point for the war, he proceeded to make the rounds of the various Florida clubs in hopes of making Fernandina appear as just another fundraising stop (Rodríguez-Silva 299).

Upon returning to New York on March 9, Martí worked relentlessly to raise the funds necessary to launch the war. Despite years of such efforts and the selfless contributions of thousands of Cubans, by its own calculations the Party remained well short of the amount necessary to arm and support the thousands of men preparing to fight (Rodríguez-Silva 299-301).¹² Thus in late April Martí moved to further expand his field of operations, fundraising with

exile clubs in Philadelphia, Atlanta, and New Orleans. He spent no more than a day in each city, hoping with his multi-city itinerary to evade Spanish agents before departing for his other crucial objective: to meet in Costa Rica with General Antonio Maceo, the revolution's last important holdout.

But the long-sought meeting with Maceo would have to wait, as events compelled Martí back to Florida. On April 29 Martí's departure for Costa Rica was imminent when news broke of a rogue uprising in Cuba, led by brothers Manuel and Ricardo Sartorius in the eastern province of Holguín. The incident hardly qualified as a rebellion, as it consisted at its peak of no more than 60 badly armed men (Despacho No. 45). Yet precisely because of its disorganized, impromptu nature, the surprise rebellion threatened to damage the true revolution's credibility, providing an unwelcome reminder of Cuba's long history of revolutionary futility and inviting renewed calls for a negotiated settlement; it could also potentially

heighten the urgency in Madrid to introduce reforms that would further undermine the revolutionary rationale. Most crucially, the uprising could encourage others to abandon Martí's carefully-wrought movement to join the Sartorius brothers or strike out on their own, thus diffusing the Party's fundraising apparatus and endangering the cohesiveness of the revolution itself.

Martí immediately aborted the Costa Rica mission and moved to control the damage (Martí 2:314-316). Making an unscheduled trip to Tampa to meet with exile leaders, he found Cubans in a celebratory mood, unaware that this was not the revolution the Party had planned. A public meeting was hastily convened in a bid to quell the exiles' ill-informed exuberance and counsel patience. Martí then rushed to Key West to continue damage control, only to learn that the rebels had accepted a pardon and surrendered to Spanish authorities ("Cuban").

Although the abortive rebellion had been a serious distraction for

Martí and continued to cause problems for the revolution in its aftermath, it did not at all dampen the exiles' enthusiasm. It also failed to hinder Martí's fundraising initiative; on May 6 he wrote Máximo Gómez that he had raised US\$30,000 (over \$750,000 in 2012 dollars) for the war, despite "the intrigues of the Spanish government" that he believed had encouraged the credulous Sartorius brothers in hopes of discrediting the real movement (Martí 2:321). The windfall came at a propitious time, as a larger threat loomed in the form of an international economic crisis that seriously endangered the revolution's strongest backers. Florida's cigar factories were especially hard-hit by the so-called Panic of 1893; with several factories closing and others forced to reduce their work force, the workers who had largely underwritten the revolution could no longer maintain anything close to their accustomed level of support (Thomas 303).

In January 1894 the Party's Florida supporters suffered another, nearly fatal blow that

directly threatened a core constituency and the heart of the Party's livelihood. The cigar factories' return to full capacity after the previous year's downturn did not augur a return to good times; seizing on the continuing economic uncertainty as a pretext, many factory owners pressured returning workers to accept lower wages. Although this had long been a successful tactic among U.S. employers, it was a non-starter for Key West's skilled, highly organized workers, who immediately announced a strike (Thomas 304).¹³

Key West's cigar workers had a long history of strikes, the most recent coming shortly before Martí's first visit in 1891. For most of the Ten Years War they avoided work stoppages for the sake of the cause, which they were largely financing. That support gradually waned as workers recognized that employers were taking advantage of their unwillingness to strike, and dwindled further with the rebel leadership's ambivalence regarding abolition. Workers first walked off the job in 1875 and by 1890 had

staged four more major strikes, signaling that Cuban independence was no longer their first priority (Ronning 28-29). Martí's arrival in 1891 changed that for a time, his more broadly democratic, racially progressive vision inspiring the workers to again believe in both the possibility of a free Cuba and their own enfranchisement. But Cuban factory owners now threatened to undo that progress, in effect daring workers to strike at a time when the movement's apparent inertia gave them no reason not to do so.

Beyond the temporary interruption of contributions to the Party, the Key West strike of 1894 also created an opening for a Spanish government eager to neutralize the revolution's most crucial funding source. During previous disputes, the workers held all the cards; as an organized labor force and a skilled, essentially irreplaceable commodity, factory owners had no choice but to concede to their demands (Westfall 44-45). This time, however, the owners made a deal with the Spanish government to import

non-union Spaniards from Cuba to replace the strikers (Thomas 304-305).

Martí immediately moved to thwart the Spanish strikebreakers by legal means. He quickly dispatched a young American attorney named Horatio Rubens to assess the situation and determine possible remedies. Martí at first intended to accompany Rubens; but the attorney persuaded him that his presence among the strikers—as well a group of hostile loyal Spaniards—could well inflame the already tense situation and reflect badly on the revolutionary movement. Only with his closest associates, as in his January 8 letter to Maceo, did Martí share his fear that “the Key’s revolutionary capacity has begun to come undone, and will not last long” (Martí 3:36).

In his public statements, however, the Party’s Delegate remained defiant. Of his writings during the Key West crisis, Martí’s January 29 editorial “To Cuba!” offers the most substantive indictment of the United States as an enemy of the Cuban revolution.

An indignant Martí expresses regret for the exiles’ misplaced trust in their adopted country and its leaders: “Excessive trust and gratitude were the foremost, and perhaps only, errors of that nascent partnership” (Martí 3:49). For Martí, the recent manifestation of America’s betrayal in Key West demonstrated that there could be no true peace for Cubans except in their own country:

Who desires a secure nation, let them conquer it. Who does not conquer it, let them live by the whip and by exile.... There is no firmer ground than that on which one was born. To Cuba! cries out one’s entire soul, after this deception in Key West.... (Martí 3:50-51)

Meanwhile in Key West, Rubens discovered that the strikebreakers had been hired in Havana, not on U.S. soil. This technicality allowed him to argue that their importation violated Federal law prohibiting such practices. Rubens persuaded U.S. Treasury officials to prosecute the cases, and eventually to deport the more than 100 Spanish workers (Appel 44-45).

The Cuban workers' victory was thus also a triumph for the Party, which through its timely intervention managed to reignite their most important political and financial base. That base nevertheless declined significantly in the aftermath of the strike, with both factories and several thousand workers quitting the city for Tampa in 1894 alone (Deulofeu 84).¹⁴



Contributions from Key West dwindled in the aftermath of the January strike; on July 7 Martí wrote to Serafín Sánchez that the Party treasury contained "not a single dollar from the Key," and urged him to send at least 2/3 of the pledged money at once: "Less, is not possible" (Martí 3:227). The Key's labor unrest also continued, with owners more willing to relocate to Tampa rather than accede to workers' demands. On May 18 Martí wrote to organizers George Jackson and Salvador Herrera in hopes of averting another potentially damaging

strike, this time over a factory owner's refusal to host a visit by Martí. "The point may be right," he argues, "but the occasion is wrong" (Martí 3:178).

Identifying and culling suspected informants and traitors from the Cuban ranks also became a priority, as any deployment of forces would depend for success on its secrecy. Spain would surely move to expose any seemingly imminent launch, and Martí now understood that the U.S. would also act on any credible leads from Pinkerton agents or the Spanish themselves. It thus became imperative to remove from their plans anyone who might have been planted by the Spanish, or who might turn to them for money or out of fear. A May 27 letter to Sánchez in Key West instructs him to remove a certain "Ramírez," whose "contradictory and unnecessary conduct" had aroused his suspicion, "from all knowledge of the real action that at any moment may be required." Martí further suggests that "Ramírez" may yet be useful as a means of feeding false information that

would divert the Spanish from assessing the true progress of preparations (Martí 3:186).

This atmosphere of intense surveillance and pressure made travel more complicated than ever, but did not slow down a summer of feverish activity. By the time Martí returned to New York in September, he had met with exiles and raised funds in six countries spanning two continents over a three-month period. Beyond the routine Florida stops, Martí visited New Orleans, Costa Rica, Panama, Jamaica, San Antonio, Mexico City, and Veracruz (Hidalgo Paz *José* 294-295). With all preparations apparently in place and awaiting only Gómez's order, Martí notified Maceo to be "absolutely ready" to deploy by mid-October (Martí 3:269).



That did not happen. It would in fact be another six months—February 1895—before Cuban forces would rise up on the island, and two additional months before Martí, Gómez, and four fellow

Cubans would reach Cuba to lead the war effort. The reasons are too complex to adequately cover here; but they include a failed, and nearly catastrophic, attempt to launch the war from Fernandina Beach, Florida (López 277-280). Martí's greatest fear in the aftermath of the failed Fernandina plan was that the revolution's enemies would cite it as proof of the ultimate impossibility of armed rebellion. Such an argument, if accepted by Cubans on the island and abroad, would pave the way for Cuban autonomy or annexation by the U.S. and doom the independence movement for the foreseeable future.

To Martí's great surprise, the opposite happened. Far from being dismissed as incompetent, the exposure of the Fernandina plan paradoxically raised the Party's stature in the eyes of both its adherents and its enemies, observers on both sides expressing surprise at such a precarious and complicated plot having come so close to fruition. News of the Florida and Federal officials' role in unraveling the plan also

heightened the enmity toward the U.S. that Cubans on the island and in exile had been nurturing since the previous year's Key West strike. In a January 1895 letter to Gómez Martí expressed his wonder at "the discipline and respect of the island, astonished at this effort,— and the love of the diaspora, enflamed by this patent villainy" (Martí 4:19). His January 17 letter to fellow conspirator Juan Gualberto Gómez likewise took a comforting tone, assuring his friend that even the failure of such an ambitious plan "serves to further unite all of our supporters, heightens public respect, and leaves intact all our powers, with no more real damage than the restorable loss...." He goes on to reassure Gualberto Gómez that the Party will be prepared once again to deploy in "one or two months" (Martí 4:19).

The Cubans rewrote their invasion plans, this time omitting Florida. Whatever its shortcomings, the Fernandina plan had the advantage of surprise; the U.S. State Department had dismissed the revolutionaries as rank

amateurs, and even Spanish agents who closely monitored their every move were shocked by the operation's scope and ambition. But given the combined and now-relentless surveillance of Spain, the Pinkerton Agency, and the U.S. Coast Guard, no new plan to land expeditionary forces in Cuba could possibly have Florida as a departure point. Martí's Florida travels had likewise come to an end, partly because of the invasion's imminent launch, but also because of the now-heightened risk to his safety (López 280-281).

Martí thus spent his final weeks in New York making final preparations for war and dodging Spanish and Pinkerton agents—moving from safe house to safe house, moving always at night, always in closed carriages, and almost never entering or departing by the front door. On January 29 Martí's fulfilled his promise to Gualberto Gómez with the renewed Deployment Plan, which was put into action within a month (López 281).

Martí never returned to Florida, and did not live to thank the many thousands of Cubans in Tampa, Key West, and across the state whose support and solidarity had made the decades-long dream of revolution a reality. We have no reliable count of how many among the thousands of Afro-Cuban cigar workers that Martí inspired during his Florida visits left to fight on the island.

We do, however, know of at least two young men who, as Martí correctly predicted, served their country, one of them with distinction. A few days after the December 1892 attempt on Martí's life, one of the would-be assassins, whose name was Valentín, returned to ask his forgiveness. Over the violent protests of his Key West host, Ruperto Pedroso, Martí

brought the chastened young man into his rooms for a private conversation. Legend has it that after the young Cuban left, Martí predicted that young Valentín would be "among the first to fire a shot in Cuba" (Sarabia 161).

He was right. When the war came, both of his would-be assassins were among the first to join it. And by war's end the repentant young Cuban in Martí's bedroom had become war hero Commander Valentín Castro Córdoba.

Works Cited

Appel, John C. "The Unionization of Florida Cigarmakers and the Coming War with Spain." *Hispanic American Historical Review* 36.1. February 1956. 44-55.

Burrows, Edwin G., & Mike Wallace. *Gotham: A History of New York to 1898*. Oxford: Oxford UP, 1999.

"Cuban Patriots Surrender." *New York Times*. May 4, 1893.

Despacho No. 45 de Laureano Pinero, Lt. Alcalde de Velasco, Holguín, al AlcaldeMunicipal de la Ciudad de Holguín [Dispatch No. 45 from Laureano Pinero, Lieutenant Mayor of Velasco, Holguín, to the Municipal Mayor of the City of Holguín]. April 26, 1893. Archivo del Museo de Historia La Periquera, Holguín, Cuba.

Despacho No. 72, Sección V del Cónsul de España en Cayo Hueso, Pedro Solís, al Excmo. Señor Ministro Plenipotenciario de S. M. en Washington [Dispatch No. 72, Section V of Pedro Solís, Spanish Consul in Key West, to the Honorable Plenipotentiary Minister in Washington D.C.] December 26, 1891.

Deulofeu y Lleonart, Manuel. *Héroes del destierro: La emigración, notas históricas* [*Heroes of Exile: The Diaspora, Historical Notes*]. Havana: M. Mestre, 1904.

Hidalgo Paz, Ibrahim. *Incursiones en la obra de José Martí* [*Invasions in the Work of José Martí*]. Havana: Centro de Estudios Martianos, 1989.

---. *José Martí 1853-1895: Cronología*. 2nd ed. Havana: Centro de Estudios Martianos, 2003.

- López, Alfred J. *José Martí: A Revolutionary Life*. Austin: U of Texas P, 2014.
- Martí, José. *Obras completas [Complete Works]*. Havana: Centro de Estudios Martianos, 2001.
- Mormino, Gary R. & George E. Pozzetta. *The Immigrant World of Ybor City 1885-1985*. Urbana: U of Illinois P, 1990.
- Pérez Jr., Louis A. "Cubans in Tampa: From Exiles to Immigrants 1892-1901." *Florida Historical Quarterly* 57. October 1978. 129-140.
- Poyo, Gerald E. *Exile And Revolution: José D. Poyo, Key West, and Cuban Independence*. Gainesville: UP of Florida, 2014.
- Ripoll, Carlos. *La vida íntima y secreta de José Martí [The Intimate and Secret Life of José Martí]*. Miami: Dos Ríos, 1995.
- Rodríguez-Silva, Delfin. *Cronología martiana: La ruta apostólica de José Martí 1853-1895 [Martian Chronology: The Apostolic Route of José Martí 1853-1895]*. Miami: Ediciones Universal, 1996.
- Ronning, C. Neale. *José Martí and the Emigré Colony in Key West: Leadership and State Formation*. New York: Prager, 1990.
- Sarabia, Nydia. *Noticias confidenciales sobre Cuba 1870-1895 [Confidential Reports on Cuba 1870-1895]*. Havana: Editora Política, 1985.
- Stebbins, Consuelo E. *City of Intrigue, Nest of Revolution: A Documentary History of Key West in the Nineteenth Century*. Gainesville: UP of Florida, 2007.

Tablada, Ricardo Hodelín. *Enfermedades de José Martí [Illnesses of José Martí]*. Santiago: Oriente, 2007.

Thomas, Hugh. *Cuba or The Pursuit of Freedom*. 1971. Updated Ed. New York: DaCapo, 1998.

Westfall, L. Glenn. *Key West: Cigar City U.S.A.* Key West: Historic Florida Keys, 1984.

Notes

¹ See also Pérez.

² For a fuller discussion of the November 27, 1871 executions and Martí's efforts to organize events for its commemoration, see López 78-82.

³ See also Ronning 20.

⁴ See also Hidalgo Paz *José* 147.

⁵ For a full list of Martí's known travels during this period, see Hidalgo Paz *José* 286-298.

⁶ See also Hidalgo Paz *José* 154-156.

⁷ See also Hidalgo Paz *José* 158.

⁸ See also Hidalgo Paz *José* 164-169.

⁹ See also Tablada 112-114.

¹⁰ See also Hidalgo Paz *José* 170.

¹¹ See also Hidalgo Paz *José* 170.

¹² See Rodríguez-Silva 299-301.

¹³ See also Burrows 1041.

¹⁴ Estimates of the Cuban population in Key West are conflicting and not very reliable, as the island's proximity to Cuba enabled a fluid and partly undocumented population.

Census counts are thus unreliable. However, different sources estimate the early 1890s Cuban population in Key West at anywhere between 1,000 and 10,000, out of a total 18,000-21,000 inhabitants. See also Ronning 20.