

# Memories of April 17, 1961

By MARIFELI PEREZ-STABLE

I had just turned 12. My aunt woke me up with the news: "They've landed! We'll go back soon!" I spent that day — April 17, 1961 — at the Little Flower parochial school, anxiously awaiting the good news. I so much wanted my life back, the real one, not the one I had been living since the previous October when I had arrived in Miami. I wanted eventually to graduate from my school, *el Sagrado Corazon*, like my mother and grandmother. I wanted to look forward to my *fiesta de quince* with my family and friends in Havana. I again wanted to sleep in my room, surrounded by the dolls that I had not long ago outgrown and the books that had rapidly taken their place.

It did not happen. The Bay of Pigs invasion failed. I lived another life, one that I could never have anticipated in the placid world of my childhood. As I grew into adolescence in Pittsburgh and found myself celebrating my 15th birthday with my parents at an Italian restaurant there, I often remembered the terrible sadness of April 1961.

Later, I would forget — willfully. The civil rights and antiwar movements would radicalize me and lead me to look at the revolution differently. In time, I would conclude — a conclusion I still hold — that April 19, 1961, the day I had gotten the news that we would not be returning soon, marked the long-postponed affirmation of Cuban sovereignty, at last abrogating the spirit of the Platt Amendment. (The Platt Amendment was a U.S.-imposed provision of the 1901 Cuban Constitution sanctioning U.S. intervention to maintain order.)

More recently, my memories returned and, with them, came a longing for which I had no name. I could not bring myself to choose between my terrible sadness at 12 and the vindication of Cuban nationalism. Fortunately, I have finally realized that I do not have to make a choice. Instead, I have decided to reconcile them, in my mind and in my heart. Perhaps this personal struggle might serve as a metaphor for the collective challenge we — Cubans and Cuban Americans — have yet to meet, a challenge that promises to give a name to my longing: national reconciliation.

To reconcile means to bring together what has been apart, and it requires neither denying nor



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forgetting. Thirty-three years ago Cubans of good will died for what they considered just causes: a nationalist social revolution or a democratic redemption. The choices appeared simple in their starkness but were complicated because of the political context and the myriad of personal meanings with which they were fraught. For all the complexity, the outcome was clear-cut: The revolutionary government won, the exiles and the internal opposition lost. But if our aim is national reconciliation, we cannot continue fighting the old battles.

Today the tables seem almost to have turned. The Cuban government is confronting a daunting crisis: economic bankruptcy; widespread popular discontent; social disintegration. Although a combination of fear, apathy and helplessness best describes the sentiment of the majority, a not-insignificant minority still endorses the government. And these Cubans are likely not only to stand by the current leadership until the end, but also to continue living in Cuba afterward. Would a new government then unleash against them a "democratic" version of the infamous rapid-response brigades?

National reconciliation is a moral imperative. And only a democracy where all have a voice — including the Communist Party, commensurate, to be sure, to the strength it can demonstrate in free and openly contested elections — will provide us with the means to come together without denying or forgetting. The alternative is to let loose a new round of vengeance, recrimination and hate. The choice is ours.

At present, it appears there are insurmountable obstacles. Fidel Castro and some of his supporters are bent on holding on to power at all costs: Having so far resisted meaningful political reforms, they seem to have opted for the risk of facing the Cuban people with tanks rather than at the polls. The United States is insisting on an atavistic policy that inadvertently provides sustenance to the Cuban government's last bastion of legitimacy — nationalism. With their revisionary intransigence, some exiles espouse a *revanchismo* that further fuels the paralysis of many Cubans on the island. These realities are undoubtedly preempting the climate of negotiation and compromise needed to embark upon national reconciliation.

But, today, let us — all of us, all Cubans and Cuban Americans of good will — look inward. Let us remember all of the dead and mourn the joys they never had, the tears they never shed. Let us heal our wounds. Let us give our compatriots — here and on the island — the benefit of the doubt and listen, really listen. We speak with many voices and therein lies the promise of our reconciliation, our democracy, our patrimony. Let us, this time, forge a common outcome so that future generations — in the diaspora and on the island — may yet live in peace. Let us resolve to look forward with tolerance, backward with forgiveness and compassion. Indeed, the choice — simple and complicated — is ours.

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