

Witness

an online magazine

Cuba: An Island In Transition

Photographs & Text by Richard Falco

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Cuba is approaching a crossroad. The end of an era is at hand and the nation will have many new choices and decisions to make.

On December 17, 2014, after eighteen months of secret talks, President Obama and Cuba's President Raúl Castro made the announcement that full diplomatic relations between the two countries would be restored. The United States will reopen its embassy in Havana for the first time in more than a half-century.

Announcing the agreement on national television, President Obama said, "These fifty years have shown that isolation has not worked. It's time for a new approach. I do not believe we can keep doing the same thing for over five decades and expect a different result."

The citizens from both nations were taken completely by surprise by the announcements.

"We will end an outdated approach that for decades has failed to advance our interests, and instead we will begin to normalize relations between our two countries," said Mr. Obama. "The deal will begin a new chapter among the nations of the Americas ... and move beyond a rigid policy that is rooted in events that took place before most of us were born."

The announcement by both presidents was followed by a prisoner swap. Three jailed members of the Cuban Five were released in exchange for a U.S. intelligence asset, Rolando Sarraff Trujillo, who had been imprisoned in Havana for nearly twenty years, and the American government contractor, Alan Gross.



A parade of students celebrate the birthday of Jose Marti, a hero of the first war for independence.



Cubans debate the issues on a street corner in Havana.



Children play in a plaza in Trinidad. Fidel Castro is an anomaly. He is an icon, an intellectual and a dictator who is loved and hated by his own people -- loved and hated by the rest of the world.

The agreement received a great deal of encouragement from Pope Francis. Letters sent by the Pope culminated in a meeting, hosted at the Vatican, to finalize the terms of the deal and broker the prisoner exchange between the two nations.

In addition to the prisoner releases, the United States agreed to ease restrictions on remittances, travel, and banking. Cuba agreed to release fifty-three prisoners the United States had classified as political dissidents. After U.S. officials confirmed that all fifty-three were released, President Obama announced that he had instructed Secretary of State John Kerry to review Cuba's designation as a state sponsor of terrorism.

In January 2015, new travel and trade regulations were enacted that enable U.S. travelers to visit Cuba without first obtaining a government license. Airlines will be permitted to provide service to the country. The

new rules also chipped away at some economic sanctions by allowing:

- 1) travelers to use U.S. credit and debit cards;
- 2) banks to facilitate authorized transactions;
- 3) U.S. insurance companies to cover health, life, and travel insurance for individuals living in or visiting Cuba;
- 4) U.S. companies to invest in some small businesses; and
- 5) shipment of building materials to private Cuban companies.¹

The head of the U.S. delegation, Roberta Jacobson, called the first face-to-face meetings between the U.S. and her Cuban counterpart, Josefina Vidal, "positive and productive." "Our efforts to normalize relations will be a continuing process that goes beyond establishing diplomatic relations or opening an embassy," Jacobson, the assistant secretary of state for Western Hemisphere affairs, said in a statement. "Today, we have made further steps in this new direction." Both delegations will continue bilateral talks.

¹ Danielle Renwick, U.S.-Cuba Relations - Council on Foreign Relations



A young boy stands in front of the Cuban flag surrounded by the images of two famous Cuban martyrs of the revolution, Jose Marti and Che Guevara.

Even though diplomatic relations have been restored, Congress maintains control over the U.S. economic sanctions. President Obama can continue to use his limited executive authority to open other areas related to trade, investment, banking, immigration, telecommunications, and travel. However, the 1992 Cuba Democracy Act and 1996 Helms-Burton Act are still in effect. It will take an act of Congress to repeal them and many experts say that repeal is unlikely to happen anytime soon. Already a number of Republicans and a few Democrats have voiced concern about the agreement. That said, the actions to date have created a new landscape for both countries, particularly for Cuba.



A policeman watches pedestrians on a street in Havana.

A man waits in a government office in Pinar del Rio. The words above him read: "Without culture no liberty is possible. In the world of the future, the greatest and most important wealth will be your intelligence." - Fidel





Early evening in Havana.

The last fifty years have left Cuba in a unique position. Its development as a nation has been checked, and in many cases determined, by the pressure of international forces and events. Internally, its culture has been determined by the persona of one man, Fidel Castro. For many, Castro has become an icon: a dictator and liberator; a voice for the oppressed and an oppressor. He is a contradiction to anyone who has tried to define him. However, both he and his brother, Raul, are at the end of their lives and their control over policy will diminish. Their passing will signify the end of an era that no outside force has been able to overcome. Cuba begins a new life that while still tied to a powerful past, is fraught with new choices. A sea change is inevitable.



Above: A young man fishes along the Malecon in Havana.

Opposite page: An older gentleman smokes one of Cuba's best known products - a Cuban cigar.



In many respects, Cuba straddles two centuries. The past and present are continually merging. The Spanish colonial traditions stand side by side with Marxist philosophy, Christianity, and Cuban nationalism.

The island is a place of contradictions. On the world stage it is the loud and defiant voice of ideology, while at the same time it is an under-developed country of sun and quiet villages. Though a socialist economy dictates the rules for the Cuban people, underneath the surface a vibrant black market thrives and yearns to expand. Even the United States embargo is a source of contradiction. On one hand, it has crippled the economy and brought painful, if not harsh conditions to the Cuban people. Yet on the other hand, it is one of the main reasons Cuban culture is alive and well. Whereas the rest of the Caribbean has lost its sense of self to "resort culture," Cuba is distinctively Cuban.



A restored section of La Habana Vieja.

Havana is the heart of Cuba. Here the past and present are tied together. It is the political, cultural, and economic center of the island. Although many of Havana's houses and buildings are run down and in great need of repair, the heavy traffic, rampant commercialization, and extensive slums that choke many of Latin American's other cities are absent here. The city's population now exceeds 2.2 million people. In 1982, La Habana Vieja (the old colonial section of the city) was declared a World Heritage Site by UNESCO. Because of that, millions of dollars have poured in for restoration. Nevertheless, the U.S. embargo, poor management, and the collapse of the economy after the Russians pulled out have left a good deal of the city in disrepair. Even with these problems the city is filled with many historical sites and the exuberant friendliness of its people. Everywhere the city is teeming with life. The Cuban people are well educated and hard working.



A young boy plays ball against the wall of a gutted building slated for restoration.



No one will dispute the poverty that touches vast segments of the Cuban population. However, change has begun to take hold. Policy changes have opened a number of free-market initiatives. This has given the Cuban people new opportunities. In 2011, the Cuban Congress approved the buying and selling of houses by individuals. This was a significant milestone of economic change.

Another sign of economic reform can be seen in the “paladars” that dot almost every city and town. These are restaurants that are privately owned and operated. The owners must pay a tax to the government. For the first time since Fidel Castro seized power in 1959, the government is officially allowing some capitalism to openly exist.

Over the last decade, the Cuban government has also allowed foreign investments to grow. Tourism has replaced sugar as the country’s largest source of income. Many European and Asian countries have established strong working relationships with the Cuban government. American companies, which have been watching from the sidelines, have longed for the opportunity to invest in Cuba.



The reestablishment of relations has the support of the U.S. Chamber of Commerce and many major agricultural interests. Though the potential market for U.S. exports of goods and services can be significant, the Cuban authorities will be walking a tightrope as they attempt to implement economic reform.





Cuban society is a diverse racial mixture. It is predominately white (65.1%), with minorities that include mulatto and mestizo (24.8%), and blacks (10.1%). The Caribbean region in general is strongly influenced by its African heritage, a legacy of the slaves brought in from Africa during colonial times, as well as of the Europeans and particularly the Spanish, who controlled the island. Whether today's society is a product of the equality proclaimed under socialist philosophy or the control exerted by a repressive regime that crushes any unrest, Cuba does not seem to have the racial tension and angry polarization we see in the United States and Europe. From a cultural perspective, the mixture of European, Latin-American, Indian, and African backgrounds gives the overall population a rich diversity of influences that have become integrated into everyday life. This is most apparent in the arts. The music, dance, and the fine arts of Cuba all reflect these influences.



Above: The Buena Vista Social Club performs in Havana. Right: Cuban artist, Julio Cesar Pena Peralta, examines prints at the Taller Experimental Grafica.





Pulsating and hot, Cuban music is a synthesis of latin-jazz, Carribean, and African rhythms.

As you move from the city to the country, Cuba suddenly becomes a tropical island. The focus of daily life still revolves around agricultural tides and the land. The transition between the developing world and the modern world is most evident here.

Agriculture is an important component of rural life. Over one-third of Cuba is arable land. The soil is highly fertile, but the highly variable nature of annual precipitation has historically plagued agriculture. Since the eighteenth century, the Cuban economy has depended heavily on the sugarcane crop. However, production of sugar as an export has continued to decline. The other major crops are tobacco, citrus products, coffee, rice, and beans.

Unfortunately, Cuba cannot grow enough food to feed its population. The country is very dependent on imports for its food supply. Under Raúl Castro's rule, some private farmers have been permitted to cultivate unused government land to increase food production. Only time will tell if this proves significant enough to change the country's import needs. One of the industries that will gain the most from expanded trade with Cuba will be U.S. agriculture.





Sugar is still an important crop for export in Cuba.

The pace of life in the country is also much slower than that of Havana. People live close to the land and the local services that are connected to it. Technology does not reach far outside of the cities. Most of the road system is in need of repair or has yet to be built. Travel is often along a bumpy road where there is constant stream of people walking and waiting. You will see others on horse-drawn carts as small trucks and vehicles try to pass them. Horses are still used as a means of transportation. Periodically, you will notice once-beautiful buildings that now show signs of their former grandeur amid their disrepair. Yet there is a quiet dignity to life in the smaller towns and villages.



Above: A man plays checkers with his grandson.

Above right: Two boys spin a top on a village street.

Below right: Boys on bicycles watch another on horseback outside of Trinidad.





In a village along the southern coast, the locals meander home at the end of the day to prepare dinner.

The road ahead for Cuba will be filled with decisions that will directly affect the future generations of the island. If the governments of the United States and Cuba can find a way to get past the history they have created for themselves—that is, if the political leaders of both countries actually look and listen to the desires of their own people -- they will probably discover that they have more in common than they have differences.

The Cold War mentality must change. Immigration and economics will be at the forefront of many of the policies negotiated between the two nations. The United States will be the dominant player in how these talks evolve. The politics that have dictated the course of action over the last fifty years is obsolete and needs a new approach.



Above: People make their way home outside of a small village in southern Cuba. Right: The Festival of Jose Marti. This day marks a national holiday and celebration. The festival is also a day when you can see the rich diversity that is Cuba. Che Guevara and Jose Marti have become the two patron saints of the revolution. On January 28, the entire country celebrates the birthday of Jose Marti. He was one of the leaders who led the First War of Independence. He was killed on May 19, 1895. Along with Che, he is a national hero.



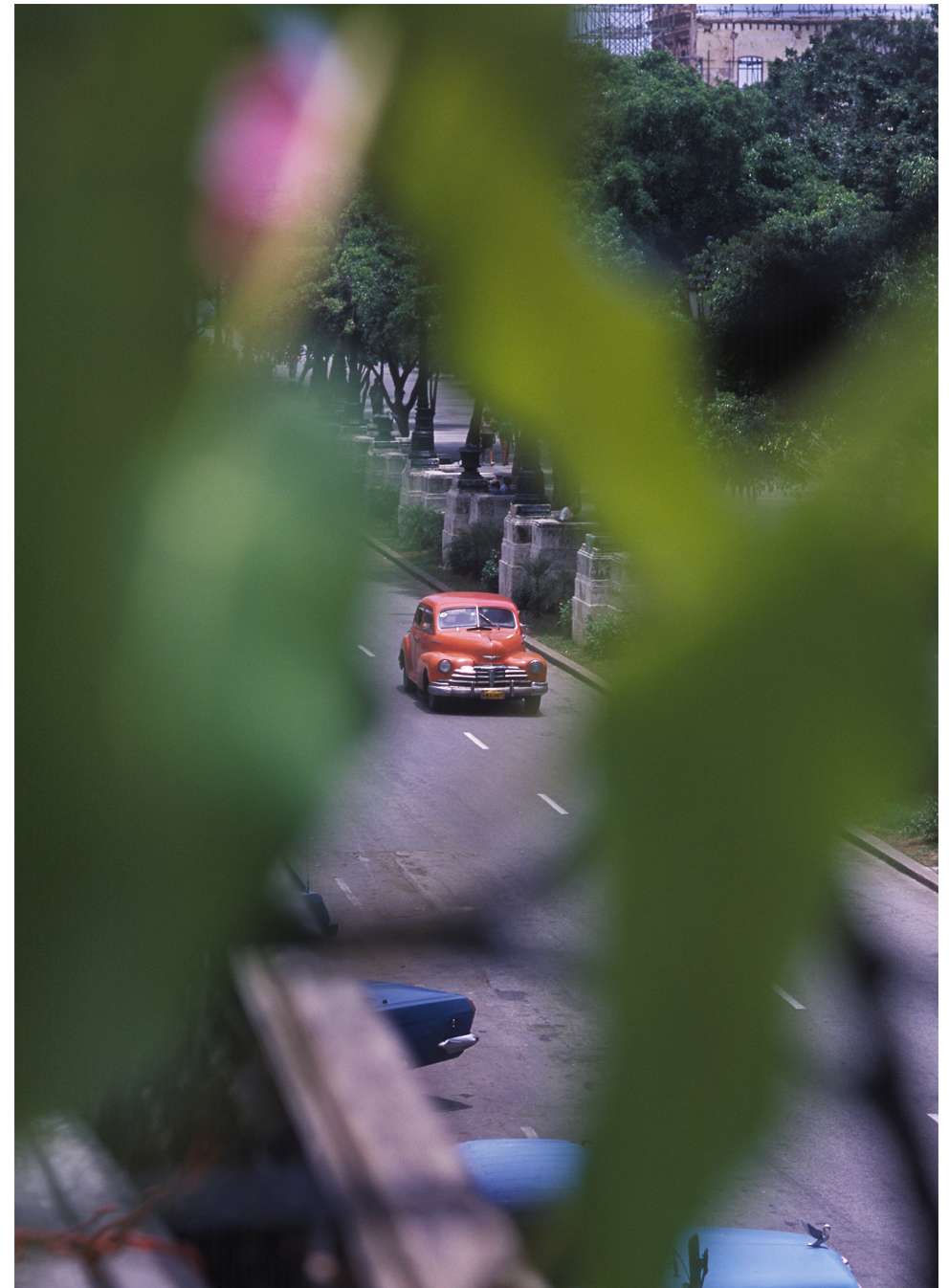


Two young girls share a secret during a parade celebrating the birthday of Jose Marti.

Polls conducted after the U.S.-Cuba announcement in December found that a majority of Americans supported reestablishing diplomatic ties. A Pew Research poll found that 63% of Americans supported resuming diplomatic relations and that 66% would like an end to the trade embargo. A June 2014 Florida International University poll indicates that a majority of Cuban-Americans also support normalizing ties and ending the embargo, signaling a generational shift in attitudes toward the island. Global support for the normalization of U.S.-Cuba relations was also overwhelming, particularly in Latin America. In 2013, the UN General Assembly approved a resolution condemning the U.S. embargo for the twenty-second consecutive year, with 188 member countries backing the resolution and only two—the United States and Israel—opposing. It seems that only the older generation of Cuban-Americans who fled during the early years of Fidel Castro's authoritarian regime want to maintain the embargo and remain the strongest opponent of change. However, they like Cuba's old guard, are dying off.

The next generation of Cubans will have many choices. They are ready for economic change and will embrace it. Social and political change may be slower to evolve. The nation may literally need to wait until the death of Fidel and Raúl Castro. When that happens, the Cuban people will be able to examine their future from a different perspective. The bridge that connects the past with the future will be wrought with a myriad of complex decisions. A new horizon will open before them. They will then need to decide which paths they will take and the United States will need to be secure enough as a world leader to help facilitate a positive transition.

Right: The image most people have of Cuba is a city filled with American cars that date back to the 1950s and 1960s. A visit to Havana will instantly confirm that impression. The streets are filled with them. It is amazing to think that they are still running. Parts are impossible to get and the engines have been repaired over and over for the last fifty years. People will fashion parts from every imaginable machine that exists on the island to fit into their automobiles. Often, you feel as if you have stepped back in time.



This project is a production of

VISION PROJECT Inc.

Richard Falco

Richard Falco is the President of Vision Project. For the past thirty years he has worked as a photographer, filmmaker, and journalist. He has had assignments on four continents in over thirty-five countries and has worked for many major magazines, including: *Time*, *Newsweek*, *Geo*, *Life*, *New York Times*, *U.S. News & World Report*, to name a few. There are two published books of Mr. Falco's work: *Medics: A Documentation of Paramedics in the Harlem Community* and *To Bear Witness/ September 11*, and two eBooks: *Hunger and Rice in Asia* and *Witchcraft: Ancient Traditions Alive in Salem*. He is the director of the films *Crossroads: Rural Health Care In America* and *Holding Back The Surge*, and is the executive producer of *Josie: A Story about Williams Syndrome*.

Mr. Falco has twenty-five years of teaching experience. He has taught and lectured at a number of universities and institutions, notably the New School for Social Research, the State University of New York at Purchase College, New York Film Academy, and the School of Visual Arts. He is presently Coordinator of Multimedia Journalism in the Masters in Communication Program at Sacred Heart University and the director of all of Vision Project's educational programming.

Vision Project is an organization dedicated to the development of investigative journalism, documentary photography, multimedia, film, and education.

The goal of Vision Project is to produce documentary material and educational programs that encourage understanding and awareness about a broad variety of social issues. This information and programming are made available to the general public with a particular focus on members of the younger generation.

Vision Project seeks to reinforce the social, cultural, and historical contribution that visual documentary work contributes to society. To reach these goals, we have assembled a group of talented professionals with extensive expertise in photography, web technology, journalism, video, design, and education.

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For further information contact:

Vision Project Inc.

P. O. Box 230

North Salem, NY 10560

USA

www.visionproject.org

info@visionproject.org

(914) 277-2706