

During the summer of 2003, Vanderbilt University Divinity School Professor Fernando F. Segovia directed a travel seminar titled “Religion and Society in Cuba” for Divinity School students and alumni. After 41 years of absence, he returned to his native country with his wife, Elena Olazagasti-Segovia, senior lecturer in Spanish in the College of Arts and Science. Segovia recounted his experiences during a community breakfast sponsored by the Divinity School last April. The text of this article is derived from his remarks.

Accompanying Segovia’s homecoming story are photographs by Peabody College alumnus E. Wright Ledbetter, MED’00, who traveled to Cuba five times between 1997 and 2001 in an effort to capture the small Caribbean island’s mystery, culture and people with his camera. In 2002 the University of New Mexico Press published Ledbetter’s stunning collection of photographs in the book *Cuba: Picturing Change*, which may be purchased from booksellers including amazon.com and barnesandnoble.com. The images seen here are from that book.

Vanderbilt Magazine is grateful to Professor Segovia for granting permission to publish his lecture, and to Wright Ledbetter for allowing the use of his photography in this issue.

40 Years Later

Reflections on going home

By PROFESSOR FERNANDO F. SEGOVIA

Photography by E. WRIGHT LEDBETTER, MED’00





"Parked Car," 1999

Given my still-raw memories of our departure, our characterization and treatment as the dregs of society, I had come prepared for the worst.

Forty years later, I returned. On July 10, 1961, I boarded a KLM flight from La Habana, Cuba, to Miami, U.S.A. It was the height of the Cold War, indeed one of its hottest moments: Three months earlier, in April, the Bay of Pigs invasion had taken place; a month later, in August, the building of the Berlin Wall would begin. Mine was to have been a temporary absence—a period of brief exile in *el Norte*. On June 4, 2003, I boarded an Aeroméxico flight from Cancún, Mexico, to La Habana. The Cold War was by now a distant memory, frozen in time. More than a decade had elapsed since the demolition of the Berlin Wall (1989) and the dissolution of the U.S.S.R. (1991). The socialist block of

European nations, formerly members of the Warsaw Pact and the Council for Mutual Economic Assistance (COMECON), were to be found at various stages in the process of joining the European Community and the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO). Russia itself was but a specter of its former imperial presence and power. My envisioned sojourn in the North had by then become a lifetime.

Why did I return at this point? From a historico-political perspective, the time was ideal. With the myths and stereotypes of Cuban reality and experience in swift collapse, both on the island and in the diaspora, the sense of a forthcoming and inevitable transition was unmistakable. This would be a chance to observe and analyze the transition at work

before the Transition itself. From a personal point of view, such a trip was both overdue and imperative. Way overdue, because I had long wanted to share my Cuba with my wife, just as she had shared her Puerto Rico with me, bringing me back to the magic and tragedy of the Caribbean after years of absence. Highly imperative, because not only was my own life beginning what I can only hope will be a broad turn toward fulfillment, but also because the death of my father in the spring of 2001 had awakened in me a profound desire, a deeply felt need, to go back—to resume the beginning of my life, to see where we had lived, and to walk where we had walked.

Indeed, this was a return haunted by spirits. Spirits of the past, to be sure, but also spir-

its of the present and of the future. The sightings weaved in and out at will and without fail. These were insistent spirits—forcing their way upon me, claiming my attention, pointing the way. I should like to share a few of these encounters with you.

From the moment I set foot on the tarmac in Cuba to the moment I boarded my flight out, I was met with nothing but warmth and hospitality from the people of Cuba. Given my still-raw memories of our departure, our characterization and treatment as the dregs of society, I had come prepared for the worst. Not once, however, did I receive or hear a challenge or an insult, neither from the people on the streets nor from governmental authorities. Going through customs upon arrival, I was asked how long ago I had left the country and then greeted with a word of welcome. Going through customs for departure, I was asked whether the trip had been fulfilling for me and then invited to return. In between: openness, helpfulness, friendliness. Such was the Cuba I remembered. I was overjoyed to see and feel such sentiments again, despite all the conflicts and the travails, though I would readily confess to a touch of sadness as well, for a people too kind for its own good—the mark and scourge of the Caribbean in general.

Throughout, not only did I feel Cuban again, in a way that I had not in decades—not even in Miami, the capital of the diaspora—but also I was acknowledged as Cuban everywhere and by everybody. From the hotel porter who brought our bags to the room on the very night of our arrival, to all sorts of individuals with whom I had dealings, to people on the streets with whom I would exchange pleasantries or have a chat. All, without fail, would remark, “But, you are from here” and, similarly without fail, would proceed to ask me how long I had been away. Then, upon learning of the circumstances of my visit, my long absence and first return, they would express profound sympathy for the emotions surmised at work within me—many pointing to their own hearts, with a palpitating gesture, as they spoke—and welcomed me back. Such identification was not simply a matter of language. It was that, to be sure, but far more as well. Indeed, I walked through the city with full remembrance of things and places, people

and events, dates and stories. I knew where to go and where to turn, what I would find and what had happened there. I was in my city and among my people, and my memory, physically triggered into action after a long hiatus, gushed abundantly and endlessly.

As I wandered around La Habana, an *habanero* re-found, I was struck by the unreal combination of magnificence and deterioration of the city. The city finds itself, at present, in an advanced and advancing state of decay. Aside from the outstanding project of renovation and reconstruction at work in the Old Quarter, *La Habana Vieja*, and away from the well-kept areas of tourist accom-

modations and attractions, conditions in the city are desolate indeed. There was little new construction, none of note, since the 1950s; the existing construction, much of it dating from the first half of the 20th century, was in a state of thorough abandonment and severe disrepair. Buildings and houses collapsed and close to collapse; overcrowded homes and precarious living arrangements; worn-out paint, condemned balconies and doors, boarded-up windows. Yet, behind such signs of moribund neglect, still very much a glorious city, even in ruins. Its distinguished perch on the sea; its broad and elegant avenues; its magnificent street por-



“Boris y Anicia,” 2001



“Liliasne, Santiago de Cuba,” 2000

I distinctly recall the early tirades against the exploitation of women, most concretely in terms of prostitution, and the social and cultural conditions responsible for such practices. All would be equal, women and men, with full access and full dignity.

tals for blocks on end, providing shelter from the furious rain and the merciless sun of the Tropics; its striking architecture, from the colonial to the modernist, all thrown together in delirious mixture. From across the bay, taking in such splendor and degradation at once from the ramparts of the old fortress of La Cabaña, I could not but intone a solemn hymn of praise and lamentation.

Despite undeniable achievements in the social realm, such as education and medicine, I found the contradictions at the heart of the system overwhelming, beyond all expectations.

I well remember the early denunciations against the virtual system of separation at work in society and culture, with access to certain properties and spaces reserved for the upper classes and denied to the lower classes. All would belong to all. During this visit, though, I witnessed ongoing separation in

culture and society. Access to certain facilities and spaces reserved for foreigners and denied to locals.

I distinctly recall the early tirades against the exploitation of women, most concretely in terms of prostitution, and the social and cultural conditions responsible for such practices. All would be equal, women and men, with full access and full dignity. But I heard many stories of ongoing machismo and saw few women among the circles of the elite. I also witnessed the trade of sexual tourism at work, openly. Mostly, local women courting foreign men—strikingly attractive young women and strikingly repulsive older men—in search of a few dollars for themselves and their families.

I well remember the early denunciations against racial discrimination in society and culture at large. All would be equal, black and

white and all shades in between. But I experienced racial discrimination everywhere. I visited tourist facilities with not one person of color on the staff and where persons of color were denied access, creating difficult situations for foreigners of darker skin. I also observed a preponderance of people of color in the poorer neighborhoods of the city and their absence from the circles of the elite.

I well recall the tirades against the excesses of wealth and the presence and consequences of poverty. All would share all. But I encountered signs of poverty everywhere: people begging for anything in the streets; stores with next to nothing on the shelves; clinics and pharmacies almost entirely devoid of medicines; a measure of homelessness; sharp unemployment and underemployment. I also encountered signs of wealth, none more lacrating than the abundance of goods in phar-

macies and stores trading in foreign currencies, both the dollar and the euro.

Such a house—a house that has created so many well trained men and women in so many fields, some of whom we had the privilege of meeting—I reflected to myself, cannot stand, not given its principles and commitments.

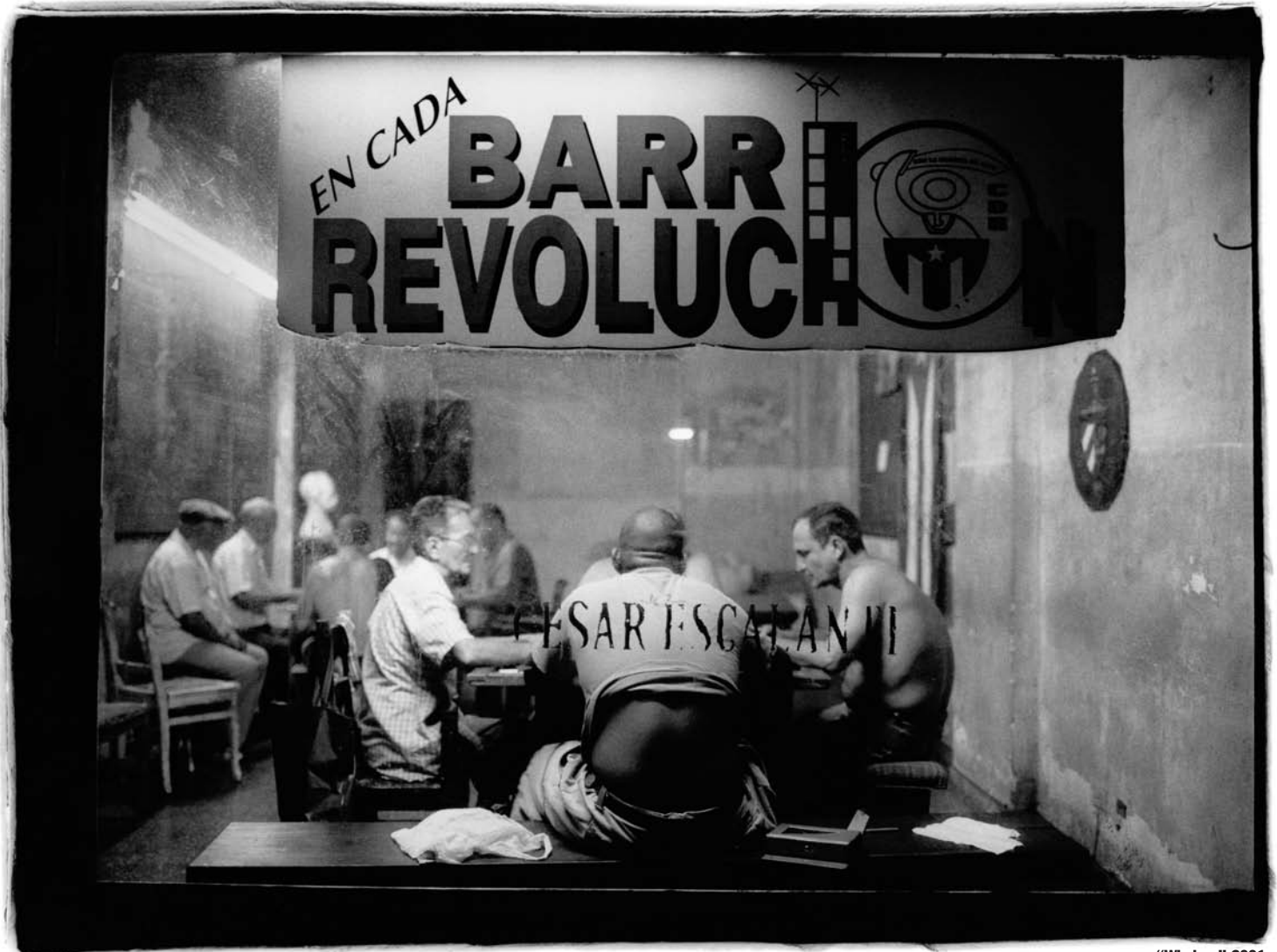
As I made my way around the city, with the group in tow, I was fascinated by the number of people who would come up to us. Everywhere—in parks and plazas, churches and monuments—individuals, young and old and in-between, would approach. Some would do so in order to sell something, from drawings to peanuts; to ask for something, money or other items; or to offer something, services ranging from music ensembles to home restaurants. Most simply wanted to strike a conversation. They sought to find out where we were from and what we were doing; to inquire about life outside the island; to

exchange views on any subject. This they did in the open, without any palpable sense of fear, even when there were authorities round about. With me in particular, once identified as Cuban and further established as born in the island but living abroad, the lines of inquiry were broad, rapid, endless.

Through such exchanges I learned much about the situation and concerns of the people in general: how many had relatives living in exile, everywhere and for any number of years; the great thirst for information or news of any kind, beyond official government channels; the open desire to talk about those who had left and the phenomenon of exile as such; the conditions of everyday existence and the hopes for the future. In these exchanges I learned much about myself as well: I had left the country as an adolescent in bloom, younger than most, taught to show respect for and to learn from those older than myself;

I came back as a man in full maturity, older than most, a fountain of information and an object of deference. I, unlike so many others now, had known the times prior to, of, and following the Revolution. I, unlike all, had known the world of Cuba and the world outside Cuba. I was a window on history, an informant on the world, and an invaluable one as well. The years weighed upon me, but lightly so. Such curiosity, I thought, would stand us all in good stead for the future.

These conversations on the street further revealed, quite often and to my utter stupefaction, not only scant devotion to the ideals of the system but also open criticism of it. Nowhere did I come across—aside from the official media, its outlets and spokespersons—the kind of consuming commitment to the faith of the Revolution, passionate apologetic for its creeds and practices, and rapturous exercise of its rituals that I remembered from



“Window,” 2001

the formative years. Not among the young; not among the old; not among anyone in-between. The Revolution—once a driving faith and organized religion, with its pantheon of deities, foreign and local, its dogmas and codes, its liturgical ceremonies—no longer appeared to be a subject of impact, a subject of relevance, a subject for conversation. It seemed displaced, and utterly so.

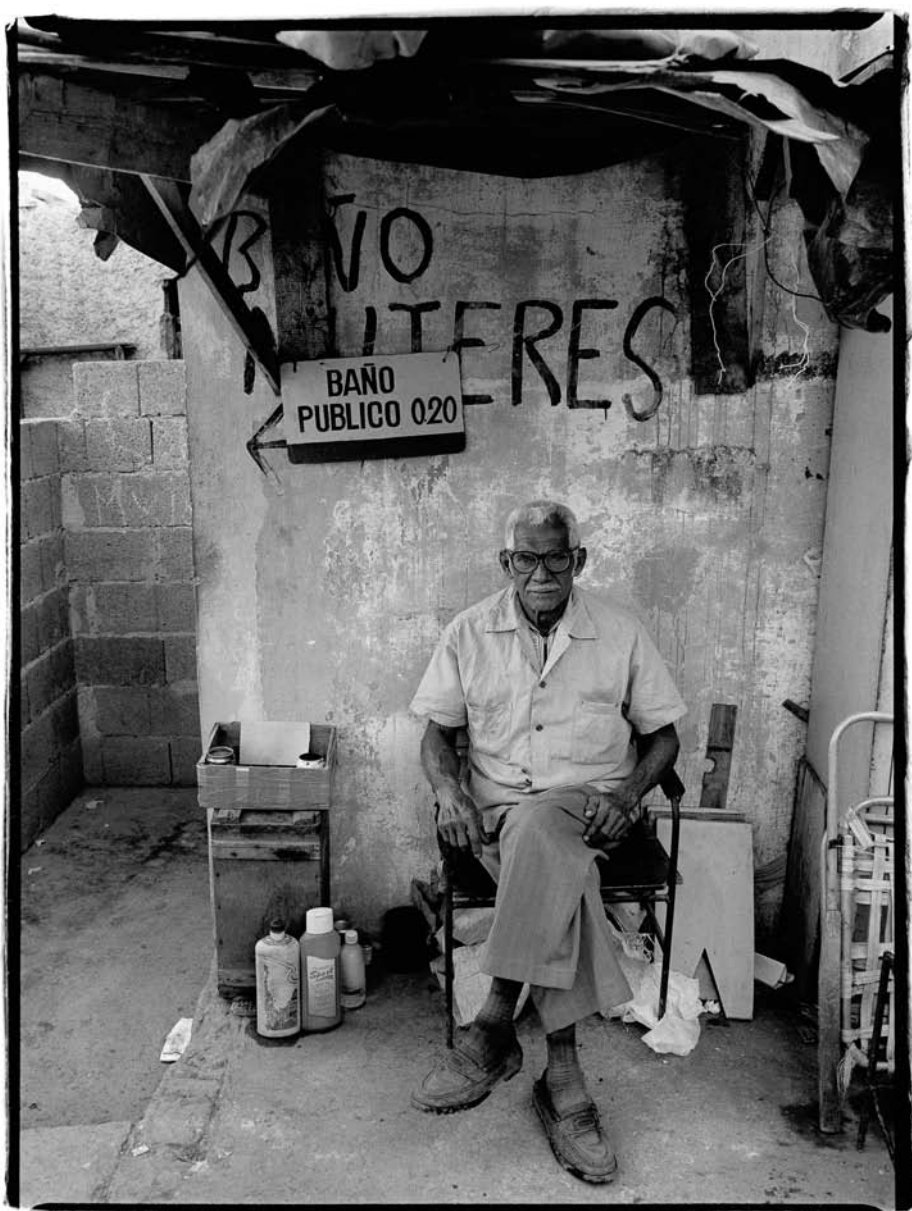
Other topics prevailed: the harsh demands of life in general; the way of life on the outside, at any level, from the political to the musical; the life of exile and the relationship between those outside and those inside. More than occasionally, I also ran into critique, from the mild to the severe: dissatisfaction with the legacy of the revolutionary experi-

ment; rejection of paternalism on the part of the leadership and its maximum leader in particular, often painted in terms of senility or madness; discontent with the lack of options across the whole of society.

Not uncommonly, such critique emerged from religious circles and in religious language, across the spectrum: from predictions of a forthcoming transcendent event of supernatural character, to appeals to the Bible as the ultimate source of all power and authority, to devotions to Mary as the queen of Cuba. In other words, batteries of religious beliefs and practices, once dismissed as retrograde and superannuated, hammering away at the ideological ramparts of the Revolution. To me this was a supremely tired people, ideologically devastated, looking

for exits, from the informational to the symbolic to the supernatural. A people, I observed, ready to move onward.

Throughout, I had the intense feeling of being observed, followed, even directed. Not by the populace as such, constant and curious witnesses of our presence and movements—always forthcoming and inquisitive; nor by the security apparatus, mostly in evidence around hotels and points of interest—courteous and helpful at all times. It seemed, rather, as if I had entered, through a deployment of magical realism, a world where various temporal and spatial dimensions intersected and interacted with one another, a world where vigorous presences long vanished and active spirits long departed were juxtaposed along-



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"Irmel," 1999

side and consorted with present-day actors and realities.

This I sensed all around the city, as events and faces manifested themselves as if still unfinished, ongoing. Posing for pictures at the corner of Carlos III and Marqués González, I saw the leaders of the Revolution, arm in arm, leading a march after the sabotage explosion of a freighter, *La Coubre*, in the harbor; standing before my old school, the Colegio de La Salle in El Vedado, I felt my father's hand as he rushed me out of the building and home, having just learned of the attack on the Presidential Palace and having just witnessed the assassination of José Antonio Echevarría, a foremost student leader. Sitting by the waterfront, across from the Parque de las Misiones and looking towards the Morro Castle, I heard my parents' call, after a full Sunday afternoon of play, that it was time to go home.

I sensed it keenly in the streets of La Habana Vieja, the old center of town, where so many of my relatives had lived—grandparents and great-grandparents; great-aunts and great-uncles—and where a maternal great-grandfather had owned a hat store on Obispo Street in the 1920s. I saw their silhouettes as I looked at the buildings where they had lived and the balconies where they had once stood—places where I had visited as a child; balconies where they had waved greetings or goodbyes; individuals on whom I could always count for a drink or a snack.

I sensed it as well in my old neighborhoods, where old friends of the family had lived—people who had held me as a baby in their arms, who had looked after me while playing in the streets or at the park, who had shared life with us through so many personal and national events. There was Ester Ponsada, our next-door neighbor, now in her 90s and confined to her bed. As I embraced her, I heard her making music with her husband, both members of the Philharmonic, and leading a slide show in the open patio after one of their many travels abroad. And Daisy López, from around the corner, in her 80s and ever so thin. As I opened my arms, I felt her kiss upon my cheek as she met my mother and me on the way to the Aguirre Park, right across from her house.

I sensed it deeply at the Colón Cemetery, that magnificent necropolis where more than



"Denia," 1999

2 million *habaneros* lie buried. There, in front of the tomb where so many of my relatives continue their daily chats and repasts, I stood, as I had done many times as a child. Always on Sundays, as flowers were laid upon the tomb. As I read the inscriptions, I saw their smiles and felt their caresses as I bore greetings from afar, from exile—from the living, for the dead had already, no doubt, paid their visit.

I sensed it most acutely perhaps at the top of the esplanade where sits the majestic old campus of the University of La Habana, there where the conscience of the nation has always resided and where the statue of the Alma Mater extends its arms wide open to city and population alike. I cringed at the encounter:

the idealist students coming down the steps, locked in arms and bearing political banners; the repressive guards coming up the steps, bearing wooden sticks and water cannons. I heard my grandmother open the street door, ready to take students, now in retreat, through the adjacent streets, seeking a place to hide; I smelled the *café con leche* she always prepared for them, as we all waited for the tumult to die down. Next to the Alma Mater, I heard my father, both a graduate and a faculty member of the university, speaking of his ideals for the country, as I felt the touch of his hand upon my right shoulder.

Not only did I feel watched and accompanied, I also felt driven. Places where I had

lived opened their doors to me. Someone just happened to be there and bid me in. I took in rooms and walls, patios and porches, of long ago. Old friends were found and hugged. Someone just happened to be nearby and pointed the way. I continued conversations interrupted many a year ago. A place of burial disclosed itself forthwith. Someone just happened to know where to look for the old registry card. I nipped a wildflower from the ground and set it upon the tomb, for the first time in decades. I felt here and there. Past and present had come together, indeed pushed together, in a magical world of (un)real fusion. The living and the dead intermingled at will. I was young and old at the same time. In this enchanted and enchanting world, I could not but think of the future.

What will the future bring for Cuba? To be sure, such a future is already here, its traces all about. I saw it and I see it. Beyond all doubt, the transition has begun, both within the island and in the diaspora, among Cubans as well as in the eyes of the world. The tropical experiment in real socialism is in its final throes, kept afloat by a leadership elite whose devotion to *caudillismo*—that oh-so-traditional mixture of authoritarianism and paternalism—remains unflinching, indeed growingly defiant, driven by sheer panic in the face of implosion and annihilation. This experiment has been severely compromised from within and has lost its luster from without. In body and face, its supreme leader reflects the exhaustion and the madness of the system. For this future, only the Transition remains, inevitable and ever closer. At the same time, the future is not yet, its ultimate configuration(s) beyond precision at this point. What follows the Transition is not at all clear. This future I did not see as such. On this score, I am afraid, the spirits were silent, much too terrified perhaps, and the living reticent, just trying to survive. Still, on the basis of what has transpired both in Cuba and elsewhere, it does not take a visionary to conjure up the various options possible, and by no means mutually exclusive.

Cuba could easily go the way of Russia and other post-Soviet states. From within, individuals and factions among the elite will make every attempt to remain in power, officially or unofficially. Rapidly discarding their previous identities and loyalties, with loud renun-

ciations of *fidelista* intransigence and appeals to a Nuremberg-like defense, they shall try to hang on to political leadership. If need be, they shall bury the knife deep into castroite entrails, and thus one another as well. It will not work; it never does. The alternative may very well be the development of a powerful mafia, in control behind the scenes, relying on an extensive client network and wielding vast sums of money. This option is not only feasible, but it will happen, to one degree or another; already corruption reaches into the highest levels of the leadership elite.

Just as easily Cuba could follow the path of many countries in the Caribbean Basin and

Central America. From without, individuals and companies will seek to exploit the dire conditions of the population by bringing the country under the aegis of globalization, singing the glories of the world economy and the virtues of free-market capitalism. This shall be done through the establishment of a *maquiladora*-style economy, with low wages and no benefits for the workers, whose entire social apparatus would be brought down. This social net is already beyond the breaking point. This shall be done as well through the promotion of a tourism industry based on resorts and casinos and sexuality. Such industry is already very much at work and advertised as

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"Cleudis and Osmel," 1999

such. This option is not just theoretical; it too shall happen, to one degree or another: The social net has been largely replaced by remittances from abroad, and the sensuous image of the island has replaced, with official sanction, the virtuous image once cultivated by the Revolution. Workers by the tens of thousands, if not the hundreds of thousands, will seek to go north, in search of jobs and food; barred from doing so, absolute poverty and rampant criminality will go through the roof.

Among Cubans themselves, a bloodbath, actual or metaphorical, may ensue. The use of Manichean discourse and practices for so many years and in such unrelenting fashion cannot but create problems for the future. Everyone, whether with the Revolution or in the opposition, fell under its trance, to one degree or another. Such raw exercise in inclusion and exclusion cannot but engender, as it has, a poisonous atmosphere of mutual rejection, mutual abuse and mutual hatred—a spirit of repudiation alongside a spirit of revanchism. Those whom the authorities have taken pleasure in calling “worms” have always retorted that, in the end, it is the “worms” that devour the “corpses.”

Those who were forced to abandon everything, in a circus-like atmosphere, remember who it was who shouted slogans against them, who took inventory of each and every one of their belongings, who moved into their apartments and houses. Those who have experienced years of banishment from education or work or public life on account of real or suspected dissident beliefs, who have undergone the unremitting surveillance of the security apparatus, down to the local Committees for the Defense of the Revolution in each and every block, who have endured years of imprisonment in conditions beyond human imagination—they too remember, and they have faces and names and addresses to go with such memories. This option, I regret to say, is also unavoidable: Long-standing and recent scores will be settled on the perpetrators, perhaps their children, and perhaps even their children’s children.

The future, therefore, will, in all likelihood, involve all of these options at once—absolute chaos. Desperate hanging on to power, alongside powerful and violent cartels; utter financial collapse leading to massive exploitation,



“Honor Cuba,” 1997

massive poverty and massive emigration; severe rupture in the body politic at all levels of society and culture. A chaos, in other words, of apocalyptic proportions.

Against all hope, my own hope is for a different option altogether. It is the hope of a reconciliation based on truth and justice. A hope based on the best instincts already in evidence within a transition already at work, where mutual myths and stereotypes continue to give way to visions of understanding and solidarity. A hope grounded in a fundamental respect for human dignity and, thus, with eyes set undeviatingly on human and social rights. A hope that all religious groups and all Christian churches will raise in loud

accord. A hope that perhaps all spirits on both sides of the Florida Straits—surely reconciled by now and shaking their heads in horror as they look back, around and ahead—will finally push us all beyond that hurricane out of the Cold War that ensnared us, beat us mercilessly about, and left us in tatters.

A hopeless hope, I readily admit, but a hope to which I have no option but to devote the rest of my life, for the spirits will have it no other way. ▼

Professor Segovia’s recollections of his Cuban homecoming originally appeared in The Spire, the alumni publication of Vanderbilt Divinity School.