

A Tribute to Martí

Five years ago, Cuba's capital hosted the International Conference "For World Equilibrium", which was attended by delegates from forty three countries of all continents, to honor Martí on the occasion of his 150th birthday.

I talked to them all on the evening of January 29 of that year 2003. By a mere chance --or rather, by more than a single chance-- that moment of 1953 repeated itself, although under significantly different circumstances. Back in 1953 we had to honor Martí's memory by liberating our Homeland from the imperialist yoke. This time it was necessary to wage our struggle in the field of ideas to counter the threats against humanity uttered by the US President in his speech at the West Point Academy. What I said on that day, which is consistent with my deepest convictions, has become a starting point for most of the reflections I wrote during the period of convalescence I went through. It is my modest tribute to the Master. I likewise salute the hundreds of intellectuals, men and women of thought, who once again gather with the same purpose of paying tribute to José Martí on the occasion of his 155th birthday. I could not find any better words to honor him! I would request our press to publish it, if possible, in the inner pages, to avoid taking space from other important news about this commemoration.

Fidel Castro Ruz

Speech given by Dr. Fidel Castro Ruz, President of the Republic of Cuba, at the closing of the International Conference for World Balance, held in honor of the 150th anniversary of the birth of our National Hero, José Martí,

January 29, 2003

Distinguished participants in the International Conference for World Balance, held in honor of the 150th anniversary of the birth of José Martí;

Esteemed guests;

Fellow Cubans:

What does Martí mean to Cubans?

When he was barely 18 years old, Martí wrote a document entitled "Political Prison in Cuba", after his own experience of being cruelly imprisoned, with his feet shackled, at the age of 16. In it, he declares, "God exists, however, in the idea of good, which watches over the birth of every being, and leaves in the soul that embodies it a pure tear. The good is God. The tear is the source of eternal feeling."

For us Cubans, Martí is the idea of good that he described.

Those of us who resumed the fight for independence first initiated on October 10, 1868 on July 26, 1953, precisely 100 years after the birth of Martí, had learned from him, above all else, the ethical principles without which a revolution cannot even be conceived. From him we also learned his inspirational patriotism and a higher concept of honor and human dignity than anyone in history could have ever taught us.

He was a truly extraordinary and exceptional individual. The son of a military man, born into the home of a Spanish father and mother, he grew into a prophet and forger of the independence of the land of

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Published on FIDEL Soldier of Ideas (<http://www.comandanteenjefe.org>)

his birth; an intellectual and poet, still an adolescent when the first great battle broke out, he was later able to conquer the hearts, the following, the support and the respect of old and experienced military leaders who had covered themselves in glory in that first war.

A fervent lover of peace, unity and harmony among men, he did not waver in organizing and initiating the just and necessary war against colonialism, slavery and injustice. His blood was the first to be spilled and his life was the first to be offered up as an indelible symbol of altruism and self-sacrifice. For many years, he remained forgotten and unknown to a large part of the people for whose independence he had fought. But his immortal ideas rose up from his ashes, like the Phoenix, so that almost half a century after his death, an entire people took up a colossal battle, confronting the most powerful enemy any large or small country had ever faced.

Today, a few hours after the 150th anniversary of his birth, hundreds of brilliant thinkers and intellectuals from throughout the world have rendered him an emotional tribute with the profound recognition deserved by his life and work.

Beyond Cuba, what did he give to the world? An exceptional example of a creator and humanist worthy of being remembered throughout the centuries.

Why, and whom to? To those who are struggling today, and those who will struggle tomorrow, for the same dreams and hopes of saving the world; and because as fate would have it, humanity today has awoken to the dangers that he foresaw and warned of through his profound vision and inspired genius.

The day on which he fell, May 19, 1895, Martí was sacrificing his own life for the right to life of all the inhabitants of the planet.

In his now famous unfinished letter to his close friend Manuel Mercado, which Martí interrupted to march off to an unexpected battle, a battle that no one could keep him from, Martí left recorded for history his innermost thoughts. And although they are so often repeated and thus so well known, I will nevertheless repeat them once again: "I am in daily danger of giving my life for my country and duty, for I understand that duty and have the courage to carry it out – the duty of preventing the United States from spreading through the Antilles as Cuba gains its independence, and from overpowering with that additional strength our lands of America. All I have done so far, and all I will do, is for this purpose."

Weeks earlier, in Santo Domingo, Martí had signed the Montecristi Manifesto alongside that exemplary Latin American patriot Máximo Gómez, a native of the Dominican Republic chosen by Martí to serve as military leader of the Cuban forces. At that moment, shortly before setting off for Cuba, Martí expressed, among many other brilliant revolutionary ideas, something so admirable that I feel the need to repeat it, at the risk of becoming tedious: "The Cuban independence war (...) is an event of great human significance and timely service which the judicious heroism of the Antilles lends to stability and fair treatment among the American nations and to the still uncertain balance in the world."

What foresight is reflected in this last phrase, which has become the central theme of this conference. There is nothing more necessary and vital today than that distant and seemingly utopian balance.

One hundred and six years, four months and two days after José Martí's letter to Manuel Mercado, and 106 years, five months and 26 days after Martí and Gómez signed the Montecristi Manifesto, the president of the United States, in a speech to that country's Congress on September 20, 2001, made the following statement:

"We will [use] every necessary weapon of war."

"Americans should not expect one battle, but a lengthy campaign, unlike any other we have ever seen."

"Every nation, in every region, now has a decision to make. Either you are with us, or you are with the

terrorists."

"I've called the Armed Forces to alert, and there is a reason. The hour is coming when America will act, and you will make us proud."

"This is civilization's fight."

"The great achievement of our time, and the great hope of every time – now depends on us."

"The course of this conflict is not known, yet its outcome is certain. [...] And we know that God is not neutral."

In a speech made on June 1, 2002, on the 200th anniversary of West Point Military Academy, the president of the United States, among other things, declared:

"In the world we have entered, the only path to safety is the path of action. And this nation will act."

"Our security will require transforming the military you will lead – a military that must be ready to strike at a moment's notice in any dark corner of the world [...] ready for preemptive action when necessary to defend our liberty and to defend our lives.

"We must uncover terror cells in 60 or more countries."

"We will send diplomats where they are needed, and we will send you, our soldiers where you're needed."

"We are in a conflict between good and evil... we do not create a problem, we reveal a problem. And we will lead the world in opposing it."

I wonder what thoughts would have flashed, at the speed of light, through the brilliant mind of a man like Martí, wounding him deep in his soul, had he been around to hear these words in a world now inhabited by over 6.4 billion human beings, all of whom, for one reason or another, from the super-rich to the super-poor, are facing a grave threat to their very survival.

It was not a madman who spoke these words from the dark corner of an insane asylum. They are backed by tens of thousands of nuclear weapons; millions of bombs and warheads; tens of thousands of precision guided missiles; thousands of bombers and fighter planes, manned and unmanned; dozens of naval squadrons and detachments with aircraft carriers and nuclear and conventionally powered submarines; military bases, held with and without consent, in every corner of the world; military satellites that spy over every square kilometer of the planet; secure and instant communications systems, capable of wiping out the communications of any other country and simultaneously intercepting billions of conversations; fabulous arsenals of chemical and biological weapons; and a military spending budget of close to 400 billion dollars, which could be used to confront and resolve many of the world's most pressing problems. It was the man who controls and can order the use of all these means who made the threats contained in the statements quoted above. The justification? The brutal terrorist attack of September 11, which cost the lives of thousands of people in the United States. The entire world joined in solidarity with the U.S. people and indignantly condemned the attack. With the unanimous support of world opinion, the scourge of terrorism could be confronted from every angle and all political and religious currents.

The battle, as Cuba maintained, had to be fundamentally political and ethical, in the interests and with the support of all of the peoples of the world. Nobody could conceive of the idea of confronting absurd, discredited and unpopular terrorist strategies that hurt innocent people, implemented by individuals, groups, organizations, and even some states or governments, by fighting back with brutal state terrorism on a global scale, with one superpower claiming the right to the possible extermination of

entire nations, and perhaps even resorting to the use of nuclear arms and other weapons of mass destruction.

At this very moment, as we commemorate the 150th anniversary of the birth of José Martí, quite possibly the first person in history to put forward the concept of world balance, a war is about to break out as a consequence of the most colossal imbalance in military power ever seen on this Earth. Yesterday marked the deadline issued by the most formidable power in the world for the use of its unilateral right to unleash its arsenal of the most sophisticated weapons in existence against another nation. And it would do so with or without the authorization of the United Nations Security Council, an institution that is in itself questioned owing to the existence of veto power, the exclusive prerogative of five countries that are permanent members, and the resulting negation of the most basic democratic principles for the remaining almost 200 states represented in the United Nations General Assembly.

It is precisely the government that today proclaims its right to go over the head of this Council that has most often exercised the privilege of veto power. Seldom used by the other five, the radical changes in the balance of military power among its members over the last 12 years will make it almost impossible for this prerogative to be used against the wishes of one so powerful not only because of its overwhelming military force, but its economic, political and technological might as well.

The vast majority of world opinion is opposed to this announced war. But what is most important is that according to recent surveys, up to 65% of Americans oppose an attack without the approval of the Security Council. This does not, however, constitute an insurmountable obstacle: now that the troops have been sent and are ready for action, and the most sophisticated weapons need to be tested, it is highly unlikely that war will not break out, if the authorities of the country threatened with extermination do not comply with all of the demands of those threatening them.

No one can know or predict what will happen in any war or similar situation. The only thing one can say for certain is that the threat of a war in Iraq has weighed down considerably on the world economy, currently facing a grave and profound crisis which, combined with the fascist coup against the Bolivarian government of Venezuela, one of the world's largest oil exporters, has raised the prices of this vital commodity to intolerable levels for the vast majority of the other countries, especially the poorest, before a single shot has even been fired in Iraq.

It is already generally accepted that the purpose of the war in Iraq is to take possession of the world's third largest reserve of oil and gas, something that greatly concerns almost all of the other developed countries, such as those of Europe, which import 80% of their energy, as opposed to the United States, which currently imports barely 20% to 25% of the energy it consumes.

Yesterday, January 28, at 9:00 p.m., the president of the United States declared to the U.S. Congress:

"The United States will ask the UN Security Council to convene on February 5 to consider the facts of Iraq's ongoing defiance of the world."

"We will consult. But let there be no misunderstanding: If Saddam Hussein does not fully disarm, for the safety of our people and for the peace of the world, we will lead a coalition to disarm him."

"And if war is forced upon us, we will fight with the full force and might of the United States military."

He does not say a word about prior approval by the Security Council.

If we move away for the moment from the terrible consequences of a war in that region, which the world's sole superpower could impose at its will, the imbalance suffered by the world today in economic terms is an equally enormous tragedy.

Differences related to the rich and poor countries, both between them and within them, have grown and

deepened; in other words, there is an ever wider gap in the distribution of wealth, the greatest scourge of our era, resulting in poverty, hunger, ignorance, disease and unbearable pain and suffering for countless human beings.

Why do we not dare to declare that there can be no democracy, free choice or real freedom in the midst of such horrific inequalities, ignorance, total or functional illiteracy, poor education and overwhelming lack of political, economic, scientific and artistic knowledge, accessible only for a tiny minority, even in developed countries, while the world is inundated with a trillion dollars worth of commercial advertising, pushing consumption and poisoning the masses with frustrated desires of unattainable dreams and aspirations, creating waste, alienation, and the implacable destruction of the natural conditions essential for human life? In barely a century and a half from now we will have used up all of the available energy resources and the known and potential reserves that it took nature 300 million years to create, without a viable substitute anywhere in sight.

What do the masses know about the complex economic problems facing the world today? Who has taught them what the International Monetary Fund is, or the World Bank, the WTO, and other similar institutions? Who has explained to them the economic crises, their causes and consequences? Who has told them that capitalism, free enterprise and free competition barely even exist anymore, and that 500 big transnational companies control 80% of world production and trade? Who has taught them about the stock market, the growing speculation with the commodities that the Third World countries depend on and the buying and selling of currencies, totaling trillions of dollars daily? Who has informed them that the Third World currencies are pieces of paper that constantly decrease in value, while their reserves of real or almost real money flee inexorably to the wealthiest countries, like Newton's law of gravitation, and who has told them of the terrible material and social consequences of this reality? Or why we owe trillions of dollars that can never be paid or collected, while tens of millions of people, including children between the ages of 0 and 5, die of hunger and curable diseases every year? How many know that the sovereignty of states hardly even exists anymore, thanks to treaties that are drafted without absolutely no participation by the Third World countries, and yet are used to keep us ever more exploited and subjugated? How many are aware that our national cultures are being increasingly destroyed?

The list of questions would be endless. I will pose just one more to those who live off of hypocrisy and lies about the most sacred rights of all human beings, all of the world's peoples, and humanity itself as a whole: Why not erect a living monument to the beautiful and profound truth contained in Martí's maxim, "To be educated is the only way to be free"?

I say this on behalf of a people that has unwaveringly resisted for more than four decades under a rigorous blockade and relentless economic war, compounded by the loss of almost all its foreign markets, trade and supplies after the collapse of the socialist bloc and the USSR, and which stands today as one of the most united, socially developed peoples in the world, with one of the highest degrees of basic knowledge, political awareness, and artistic culture.

If we have succeeded in some way in honoring the hero whose fruitful birth we are commemorating today, it is by having demonstrated that a small and poor country, despite inevitable errors committed in its learning process, can do much with very little.

The Cuban people's greatest monument to his memory is having built and defended this trench, so that no one could overpower with that additional strength our lands of the Americas and the world.

From him, we learned the infinite value and power of ideas.

The economic order imposed on humanity by our powerful neighbor to the north is unsustainable and unendurable. The most sophisticated weapons can do nothing to impede the course of history.

Those who for centuries have supplied and continue to supply surplus value and cheap labor now

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number in the billions. They cannot be exterminated like flies. They are becoming increasingly aware of the injustices inflicted on them, through the hunger, suffering and humiliation they endure as human beings, rather than through the schools and education denied to them, and despite the worn-out lies with which the monopolistic use and abuse of the mass media attempts to maintain them in eternal and impossible submission. They have been given eloquent lessons in rather recent times, such as those of Iran, Indonesia, Ecuador and Argentina. Without firing a single shot, without even having a weapon to fire, the masses can wipe out governments.

There are ever fewer soldiers of national armies willing to shoot and massacre their own compatriots. The world cannot be governed with a foreign soldier carrying a rifle, helmet and bayonet in every factory, every school, every park, every community, large or small.

A growing number of intellectuals, educated workers, professionals and members of the middle classes of the developed countries are joining the struggle to save humanity from the relentless wars against the peoples and against nature.

Throughout history, it has been demonstrated that great crises give rise to great solutions, and that great leaders have arisen in and from these crises.

Let no one believe that individuals make history. Subjective factors have an influence, and historical processes can be speeded up when individuals have the right ideas, or set back when they are wrong, but they do not determine the final outcome. Not even a man as brilliant as Martí –or we could also mention Bolívar, Sucre, Juárez, Lincoln, and many other admirable men like them– would be remembered by history if he had been born, for example, 30 years earlier or later.

In the case of Cuba, if our national hero had been born in 1823 and turned 30 in 1853, in the midst of a slavery-based and annexationist society owning large plantations and enormous masses of slaves, and without the existence yet of the powerful national and patriotic sentiments forged by the glorious precursors who initiated our first war of independence in 1868, then he would not have been able to play a major role in the history of our country.

That is why I firmly believe that the great battle will be fought on the battleground of ideas, not of weapons, but without renouncing their use in cases like that of our country or others in similar circumstances if a war is forced upon us, because every force, every weapon, every strategy and every tactic has its antithesis borne of the inexhaustible intelligence and awareness of those who fight for a just cause.

In the people of the United States themselves, whom we have never viewed as our enemy, or blamed for the threats and aggression we have suffered for more than 40 years, we can see a friend and potential ally of the just causes of humanity, based on their ethical roots. We saw this already during the war in Viet Nam. We saw it in something that touched us as closely as the kidnapping of little Elián González. We saw it in their support for the struggle of Reverend Martin Luther King. We saw it in Seattle and Quebec City, where they fought alongside Canadians, Latin Americans and Europeans against neoliberal globalization. We have begun to see it again in their opposition to an unnecessary war, without at least the approval of the Security Council. We will see it tomorrow, as they join with the other peoples of the world to defend the only path that can save the human species from the insanity of human beings themselves.

If I were to dare to make a suggestion to the illustrious visitors gathered here, it would be something that I can see you are already doing. Nevertheless, at the risk of tiring you, I will allow myself to repeat and reiterate: in the face of the sophisticated and destructive weapons with which they seek to intimidate and subject us to an unjust, irrational and unsustainable social and economic world order: Sow ideas! Sow ideas! And sow ideas! Build awareness! Build awareness! And build awareness!

Thank you very much.

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28/01/2008

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