

A Bridge to Cuba

By Ruth Behar

The candidate Bill Clinton went to great lengths to prove to Cuban-Americans that he would not be soft on Fidel Castro's Cuba.

He courted the community's conservative elements, like the Cuban American National Foundation. And he supported the Cuban Democracy Act, which would prohibit U.S. subsidiaries from trading with Cuba.

Yet for all his efforts, Mr. Clinton didn't get much. In Florida, he won only 20 percent of the Cuban-American vote, while George Bush took 75 percent. Mr. Clinton would do well to reconsider his approach.

The Cuban-American community is not a monolith of fanatics obsessed with bringing down the Castro regime. There is a second generation of Cuban-Americans, of which I am a member, who seek to build bridges, not walls, between the U.S. and Cuba. We want to go beyond the Castro fixation and create cultural and emotional ties among all Cuban people.

I was born in Cuba but left at the age of 5 with my parents two years after the revolution. I grew up speaking Spanish, eating black beans and

pounded steak smothered with onions in Cuban restaurants on Junction Boulevard in Queens and listening to old cha-cha-cha songs. My parents told me that they had burned the bridge back to Cuba and that I must never return so long as Fidel Castro was there lest I turn into a pillar of salt.

But maybe because my parents never stopped talking about sunset walks along Havana Bay, the silvery sands of Varadero Beach and the dream of the revolution that held so much promise for them in their youth, it was inevitable that I would feel the need to return to Cuba.

So, like many second-generation Cuban-Americans, I traveled to the forbidden place with the paranoia of my parents on my back. The brave ones returned in the 1970's to build houses and schools and were viewed with suspicion by the U.S. and Cuban Governments. Others, like me, followed to do research, visit family, search for home and tell the Cubans who stayed behind that we don't hate them and that they shouldn't hate us either.

My generation was taught to work hard and assimilate. I was always the good student, the one through whom my parents could vicariously claim that the *yanquis* had been good to us. When I go back to Cuba, I am profoundly aware that I didn't sweat out the revolution, that my parents saved me from what would certainly have been a harder life. But in the U.S., I find that I neither fit in with the old Cuban-American community and its hatred for the new Cuba, nor with U.S. leftists who distrust Cuban-American

efforts to promote dialogue.

This is the predicament of many second-generation Cuban-Americans. We are caught in the middle, as we try to connect our old homes with the comfort of our nice homes here. The Cuban Government makes it difficult

Unlike our parents,
we want peace
with the island.

for us to get visas. The U.S. maintains its aggressive policy.

Mr. Clinton has an opportunity to articulate a different vision of U.S. relations with Cuba. Let him show us that he will offer something more inspired than a policy of strangling Cuba. Let him take heed of the U.N. resolution calling for an end to the 30-year embargo, a stance that was overwhelmingly supported by the General Assembly last month. Let him permit tourism, make it easier for food and medicine to reach the island and foster more communication between Cubans on the island and people in the U.S.

Bill Clinton can help heal the psychological wounds of Cubans and Cuban-Americans. And if he makes the first gesture of peace, he might just end the cold war for all Americans, north and south. □

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