

CHAPTER 26

Eduardo Chibás: Incorrigible Man of Cuban Politics

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Abstract: Eduardo Chibás (1907-1951) was a unique figure in Cuban politics between 1947 and 1951 - the last years of democratic rule before a military coup in March of 1952. His flamboyant manner and shocking public accusations, transmitted to a nationwide audience via radio, allowed him to dominate the island's political discourse, introduce an original political style and present himself as a preferable alternative to the ruling Auténtico party. Chibás was a charismatic senator and presidential candidate who headed the newly formed Ortodoxo party and attracted a large, varied and often fanatical following. Supporters were drawn to Chibás' personal integrity, his appeals for honesty in public life, his denunciation of gangster violence, his insistence that schools and hospitals be improved and his revelations of malfeasance by contemporary politicians. He thus revitalized enthusiasm for the island's democratic institutions at a time when successive corrupt administrations had engendered widespread disappointment and cynicism.

By spring of 1947, the mayor of Havana was frustrated, perplexed and contemplating drastic measures. Having been elected on a platform of bringing water to the parched capital city, Manuel Fernández Supervielle had failed and his constituents were irate. Upon being recognized in public, chants of "agua" trailed him relentlessly. During trips to the cinema, he sat apart from the crowd so as not to be seen and if his image appeared on a newsreel it was greeted with derisive whistles. Even Havana's merchants, whom Supervielle had saved from a series of onerous taxes in his former post as treasury minister, turned their backs on him. Presiding over the celebration of Retailer's Day, in the lush gardens of the Tropical brewery, the mayor was greeted by angry demands that he fulfill his pledge to build a new aqueduct.¹

1. en Cuba, "Duelo," *Bohemia*, May 11, 1947, 43.

Supervielle was a proud man who took these slights to heart. His campaign, marked by the slogan, "Havana will have water!" had aroused a genuine fervor - especially as the city, with a population of 600,000, contended with a water supply suited for 150,000.² Now, a short while later, and despite his lengthy career as an honest and conscientious politician, Havana's denizens assumed he was a fraud and a liar. Even so, he was not the sort to complain or welter in pity. At times, Supervielle attempted to explain his predicament but always did so privately. One such case was on Sunday, April 20, when, accompanied by a group of municipal employees, he visited a hospital where the chief of the city's education department was convalescing. Finding himself among a sympathetic crowd and perhaps responding to some gentle prodding, he began recounting the details of his ordeal.³ He confessed that his friend Ramón Grau San Martín, Cuba's president and a fellow member of the Partido Revolucionario Cubano (Auténtico), had persuaded him to leave his post as treasury minister and run for mayor. After taking office in September of 1946, everything initially proceeded smoothly and with the president's full support. Grau's enthusiasm was such that he once kept Clinton P. Anderson, the U.S. Secretary of Agriculture waiting (and hungry, as Anderson had been invited to dinner) for two hours while he and Supervielle examined preliminary plans for the aqueduct.

Once the blueprints were finalized, Supervielle estimated the cost to be six million pesos.⁴ He then contacted José Morell Romero, president of the Sugar Workers Retirement Fund, who had offered to finance the aqueduct.⁵ Morell Romero not only considered lending to the city a good investment, he confessed to unhappily presiding over 21 million "unproductive" pesos.⁶ The two quickly reached a verbal agreement and then considered the legality of their proposed transaction. Supervielle, who was a lawyer before entering politics and had been an elected member of

2. Humberto Vázquez García. *El gobierno de la Kubanidad*. (Santiago de Cuba: Editorial Oriente, 2005), 316.

3. Archivo Nacional de Cuba, Fondo Eduardo R. Chibás. Legajo 35, Expediente 1097: 104-106. Armando Mier Vega and Rafael Fernández Núñez, both of whom were present at the hospital where Supervielle spoke, reproduced his words from memory just over two weeks later. A slightly different account of the situation also appears in, en Cuba, "Municipio," *Bohemia*, January 26, 1947, 38-39.

4. The Cuban peso during this period was interchangeable with the United States dollar.

the constituent assembly that drafted the island's constitution, devised a formula by which the loan would jibe with the city's legal code. The following day, Supervielle arranged a meeting with Grau, Morell Romero and Jesús Menéndez, president of the National Federation of Sugar Workers. Menéndez expressed approval, saying that water was always a good business and the aqueduct would represent "another triumph for the working class."⁷ As everyone prepared to leave, Grau, who had been silent until then, warned in his smiling, affable manner that the loan presently being negotiated did not fulfill "specific requirements" of the constitution and urged them to be careful. According to Morell Romero and Menéndez, the mayor turned "intensely pallid" upon hearing these words and for good reason.⁸ Instantly, the project was thrust into political quicksand. First, a commission of legal experts was convened to examine the issue. After they assented, Grau convoked a committee of engineers to inspect the aqueduct's blueprint for design flaws. When none were encountered, the president contracted a panel of financiers to analyze the cost. Finding no irregularities, Supervielle once again approached Morell Romero. In the intervening two months, however, the president of the Sugar Workers' Retirement Fund had developed a case of cold feet. Claiming the loan was now "a very big responsibility," Morell Romero deferred to the assemblies of workers, tenants and landowners that governed the fund.⁹ When two of these delegations attached unreasonable conditions to their consent, Supervielle was forced to abandon this avenue.¹⁰

At various points during Supervielle's monologue, his listeners suggested he make a declaration that would clarify the facts. The mayor

5. Financing the aqueduct through a loan from the Sugar Workers' Retirement Fund had been the centerpiece of Supervielle's plan, in large part for nationalistic reasons. President Grau had devised the refrain, "An aqueduct without concessions and with Cuban money," in response to a previous proposal under the mayoralty of Raúl García Menocal (1943-1946), who was a Democrat, and which called for concessions and foreign financing.

6. Archivo Nacional de Cuba. Fondo Eduardo R. Chibás: Legajo 35, Expediente 1097, 104.

7. Ibid, 105.

8. en Cuba, "Municipio," *Bohemia*, January 26, 1947, 39.

9. Archivo Nacional de Cuba. Fondo Eduardo R. Chibás: Legajo 35, Expediente 1097, 105.

replied that he preferred not to harm anyone nor did he wish to hinder the country's progress. As treasury minister, he had witnessed the negative effect of scandals on Cuba's economy. At the same time, Supervielle repeatedly wondered why he had been made mayor if he was only going to be thwarted. He also groped for an explanation as to why Grau, whom he had believed to be a close friend, had changed his mind suddenly and so completely. While the president's behavior was surely vexing, both the mayor and his sympathizers were wrong to imply his harassment in the street was the result of an ignorant citizenry. For example, *Bohemia*, the nation's most popular magazine, reported on every stage of the negotiations.¹¹ A piece appearing on January 26, 1947 informed readers not only of Grau's reservation regarding the Sugar Workers Retirement Fund but also of shady dealings in the municipal council, where opposition aldermen demanded a "slice" of the six million pesos earmarked for the project in exchange for their support.¹² The public was even aware that the "municipal first lady" had suggested her husband visit a blood bank as a way of drumming up positive publicity. Cubans were also notified that Supervielle had deceived them even in this small endeavor. After being photographed by the Havana papers with his shirtsleeve rolled up, the mayor refused to have his blood drawn on account of his fragile health.¹³

As Supervielle wrestled with mounting disappointment, he was acutely aware of the looming first anniversary of his election. With the Sugar Workers Retirement Fund off limits, the mayor had no choice but to

10. The tenants' assembly approved the loan on the condition that Cuba's legislature pass a law establishing a Tribunal of Accounts. This, obviously, was outside of Supervielle's control. The landowners' delegation also desired something from Cuba's legislators. They demanded that the Sugar Workers' Retirement Fund, which had been established by presidential decree, must be formalized by an act of Congress. Supervielle was powerless here as well. The workers' delegation, perhaps swayed by the enthusiasm of Jesús Menéndez, approved the loan without reservations.

11. *Bohemia's* weekly circulation at this time was 140,000. Subsequently, the magazine conducted a study in urban and suburban areas revealing that approximately six people read each issue. When *Bohemia's* rural subscribers were taken into account, the number of total readers each week was "conservatively" estimated to be more than one million, or 20 percent of Cuba's population. See: "Un Survey de *Bohemia* Sobre Sus Lectores Adultos," *Bohemia*, March 7, 1948: 58-59.

12. en Cuba, "Municipio," *Bohemia*, January 26, 1947: 38.

13. en Cuba, "Política: Ni sangre ni agua," *Bohemia*, April 6, 1947: 35.

court foreign companies. At the same time, these would almost certainly not pass muster with a president who had sloganeered to the tune of, "An aqueduct without concessions and with Cuban money." Nevertheless, Supervielle entered negotiations with a series of overseas ventures, including Frederick Snare Corporation of the United States and a Canadian investment company among others, but each time he demurred before a deal could be reached. On a different occasion, the mayor apparently considered a loan from the proprietor of the building where he lived - perhaps believing the man, who was Cuban, was preferable to an outsider. The feverish, semi-distracted state of Supervielle's dealings led a Bohemia correspondent to write that, "In municipal circles, there is speculation as to the identity of the next fortunate mortal who, within a week's time, will enter into negotiations with the mayor, with the objective of beginning the eagerly awaited aqueduct, although it's suspected the mayor will accommodate whomever crosses his path next."¹⁴

Two weeks after that Sunday in April, when Supervielle had unburdened himself before some of the few people who still believed in him, he awoke early and appeared bathed and clean-shaven in his garage at around 7:40 AM. There, as usual, he encountered Sergio Alvarez - the policeman assigned to protect him since his days as treasury minister. "Sergio," said the mayor in a playful tone, "you carry a revolver I don't like. It's old and ugly. Show it to me. One day, I'm going to give you a new one."¹⁵ Alvarez disarmed the pistol, a .38 caliber, and handed it over. Supervielle briefly examined the weapon, insisted again it was not to his taste and told Alvarez to call for a police car as he had an errand that required attention. Alvarez, who was seated next to the mayor, asked for his gun, saying he felt uncomfortable going out into the street unarmed. Supervielle returned the weapon, watched Alvarez insert the magazine, and then snatched it from him. He then quickly shot himself in the chest. Later on, as the mayor's corpse was laid out on a city hospital's operating table, two letters escaped from his jacket pocket: one addressed to the judge of instruction, the other to his wife of 18 years. The former was dated May 2, two days before the suicide. "I deprive myself of life," it read, "because in spite of my efforts to resolve the problem of water in

14.en Cuba, "Municipio: Supervielle el Irresoluto," *Bohemia*, May 4, 1947: 41.

15.en Cuba, "Duelo," *Bohemia*, May 11, 1947: 42.

Havana, due to multiple inconveniences and obstacles that have been placed in my way, I have found it impossible and this implies for me a political failure and leaves unfulfilled the promise I made to the people."¹⁶

Among the first to arrive at Supervielle's residence in the plush suburb of Miramar was Eduardo Chibás, accompanied by his friend and political confidant, Luis Orlando Rodríguez. They, along with two reporters who had preceded them, listened as the mayor's grief-stricken widow, Aurelia Palacios, screamed, "Grau is responsible! He's the only one responsible for Manuel's death!" She then looked at Chibás and said, "You know everything. You have to awaken the people. You have to open their eyes."¹⁷ Chibás, a 39-year-old Auténtico senator, cut a unique swath in Cuban politics. Eddy, as he was widely known, was Cuba's most gifted orator, a bona fide radio celebrity and budding messianic figure whose followers sometimes compared him to Jesus Christ.¹⁸ His Sunday evening broadcasts regularly topped the popularity charts, often surpassing the island's famed *radionovelas*.¹⁹ Richard Pack, a *New York Times* correspondent, characterized Chibás as a "reporter, crusader, gossip and muck-raker" who treated listeners to a weekly half hour dose of "verbal fireworks."²⁰ The show offered more than mere entertainment, however. Chibás urged his audience to relate examples of injustice or corruption and every week letters poured in from all corners of the island. "As long as any Cuban suffers," he reminded listeners, "I will fight for him." For

16. Ibid.

17. Ibid., 42-43 See also, Luis Conte Agüero, *El Adalid de Cuba*. (Mexico: Editorial Jus, 1955), 502. When President Grau arrived at the Supervielle residence shortly thereafter, he told the mayor's wife, "Señora, the nation has lost one of its most illustrious sons. You were a great help to him." Without missing a beat, she replied, "And you helped him to end up like this."

18. For example, a letter to Chibás by Jorge González Rojas, of Havana, stated, "I admire your bravery, courage and incorruptible dignity and I'm sure that just as God chose Jesus Christ to save Christianity from the wave of perverts that exploited it, He has chosen you to realize a similar labor in Cuban politics." Archivo Nacional, Fondo Eduardo R. Chibás: Legajo 34, Expediente 1089: 1. Another Chibás admirer sent him a poem, the opening lines of which read, "Like Jesus Christ, you tell the truth to men without scruples." Ibid, Legajo 35, Expediente 1094: 155.

19. The first *radionovelas* in Latin America were written and produced in Cuba during the late 1930s.

20. Richard Pack, "Report from Havana." *The New York Times*, April 28, 1946, II, 7.

this reason, Supervielle's widow pinned her hopes on Chibás, adding that some city council members had demanded \$5000 apiece in exchange for supporting the aqueduct.²¹

More to the point, it was no secret that Chibás had lately suffered troubles of his own with Grau. They had met in 1925, when Chibás as an impressionable 17 year old, as passengers on a luxury steamship.²² Eddy, a recent high school graduate at the time, had been set to spend three months in Europe with his parents and younger brother, Raúl. Grau, who was 20 years older, already boasted a lucrative medical practice along with a professorship in physiology at the University of Havana. During the next two decades, they fashioned a close personal and political relationship. In 1927, Grau backed the Directorio Estudiantil Universitario (Student Directorate) of the University of Havana in its opposition to the constitutional "reform" of President Gerardo Machado y Morales (1925-1933) which extended his term and provided for an uncompetitive re-election.²³ As a result, he endured intermittent jail and exile during the next six years but also became the idol of many university students. Chibás returned the favor by nominating Grau for Cuba's presidency on behalf of the Student Directorate on September 8, 1933. By this time, the island was in turmoil after Machado's ouster on August 12 and the overthrow of the United States sponsored successor government of Carlos Manuel de Céspedes on September 5. Grau's brief first presidency, known as the "100 days" (despite lasting 127), formed the basis of his future political career. During this period, he issued a series of popular decrees that enshrined the eight-hour day, minimum wages for cane cutters, voting rights for women, autonomy for the University of Havana, a 45 percent reduction in the price of electricity and a mandate that half of all workers in agriculture, commerce and industry be Cuban citizens. Grau

21. en Cuba, "Duelo," *Bohemia*, May 11, 1947, 43. See also, Conte Agüero, 503.

22. The passenger list of the steamship *Lafayette* was a veritable who's who of Cuba's business and political elite. Others of note who made the voyage were Aurelio Hevia, a hero of Cuba's independence war, and his son Carlos, a future prime minister and political rival of Chibás. Miguel Mariano Gómez, son of former president and war hero José Miguel Gómez was also on board as was Miguel Arango y Mantilla, his father's vice-presidential candidate in 1921.

23. Each of Cuba's three legal parties nominated Machado as their candidate, ensuring his re-election.

was deposed on January 18, 1934, but his decrees, few of which had been implemented due to the government's weakness, remained his calling card. In the decade that followed, when Fulgencio Batista ruled Cuba first as a military strongman (1934-1940) and later as a democratically elected president (1940-1944), the frustrated promise of Grau's tenure grew in the imagination of many Cubans. For this, the former physiology professor owed a considerable debt to Chibás, his most charismatic and popular disciple.

In 1944, Grau won the presidency in what many considered the cleanest elections Cuba had ever held. Chibás, who gained a senate seat in the voting, termed Grau's restoration, "the glorious journey." During the campaign, Grau's adherents had so effusive and greeted him with such ebullience that he suffered broken bones in his right hand, which came to be known as the "hand made sick by popularity."²⁴ He was also inundated with brief, laudatory poems called *décimas*. In one, a female admirer from Santa Clara declared: "In the end, Grau, who could possibly arrive in your presence and explain the impatience with which the People await you?"²⁵ According to *Bohemia*, the new president's inauguration set off "an explosion of popular jubilation never before seen in Cuba."²⁶ Grau thus entered office a near mythic figure, almost more ethereal than human, and in this sense he was certain to disappoint. What no one expected, however, was for the ex physiology professor to prove so tolerant of corruption and contemptuous of the island's constitution. On January 19, 1947, Chibás addressed a 12-page letter to his friend.²⁷ He urged Grau to end the re-election campaign being waged on his behalf by government functionaries, to fire corrupt ministers and send them to the courts for trial and crush the black market that raised the cost of living and made wealthy men of dishonest officials.²⁸ The re-election effort was particularly galling for Chibás on two accounts. First, Cuba's 1940 constitution, which both men had a hand in crafting as members of the constituent assembly, strictly

24. José Pardo Llada, "Gestos, manías y hábitos de nuestros hombres públicos." *Bohemia*, May 4, 1947: 10.

25. Quoted in Vazquez Garcia, 62.

26. en Cuba, "Balance," October 10, 1948: 107.

27. Chibás also sent his letter to the newspapers. On January 21, 1947, *Diario de la Marina* printed it in its entirety.

forbade the practice and Grau's own *Auténtico* party had proposed the measure, which had been approved unanimously.²⁹ Second, Chibás harbored presidential ambitions of his own and longed to correct his erstwhile master's mistakes. In any case, Grau ignored the missive even as many of his policies sowed anger and distrust among Cubans who had expected great things from him. Thus, an editorial in the weekly magazine *Carteles* declared, "Never has a government defrauded the faith of Cubans so rapidly and radically as that of Dr. Ramón Grau San Martín."³⁰

On March 1, 1947 a bloc of pro-Chibás *Auténticos*, known as the *grupo ortodoxo*, met in Senator Pelayo Cuervo Navarro's home to discuss the formation of a new political party. By this time, Grau had renounced re-election but those present were certain he would take revenge. In their view, remaining within the fold would be "political suicide."³¹ Nevertheless, Chibás promptly shocked everyone by asserting that the right "historical juncture," had not yet presented itself.³² Cuba's political sphere was fragmented, with no party attracting more than half the island's votes in presidential polls. As head of a new entity, Chibás reasoned, he would require pacts in order to win the presidency. This would entail diluting the prospective party's platform just as the *Auténticos* had done in 1944 when they allied with the Republicans.³³ Chibás thus told the group, in what would become one of his political hallmarks, that he was interested more in "ideology without pacts than pacts without ideology."³⁴ Aside from an attachment to the organization he had helped build, Chibás also believed

28. The fact that Chibás now criticized Grau for fomenting the black market represented a complete about face. During a broadcast of April 15, 1945, he had strenuously defended Grau's system for supplying Cubans with basic foodstuffs. Moreover, he excoriated Santiago Rey Pernas, a senator from Las Villas, for lacking the moral authority to criticize Grau—especially given his poor record as former governor of that province. Three days later, Chibás and Rey fought a saber duel in which the former was lightly wounded on the forearm and back.

29. Although the constitution forbade consecutive re-election, ex presidents could run again after they had been out of office for eight years.

30. "El Gobierno y la denuncia de Chibás," *Carteles*, January 19, 1947: 25.

31. Conte Agüero, 488.

32. en Cuba, "Política: Conflicto Emocional," *Bohemia*, March 9, 1947: 40.

33. As part of the deal, Grau's vice-president, Raúl de Cárdenas, was a Republican.

34. "Política: Conflicto Emocional," 40.

the *Auténticos* were capable of winning the presidency without coalitions if they chose the right candidate, namely himself, and jettisoned the party's crooked elements.³⁵ Eight days later, on his radio show, Chibás likened the *Auténtico* party to a warship lashed by a tempest, leaking water and infiltrated by enemies. What, asked Chibás, are the responsibilities of loyal crewmembers under such circumstances? They must denounce traitors and struggle to save the boat along with the ideals it represents regardless of the consequences. Amused by this allegory, a *Bohemia* reporter noted that Chibás had "turned himself into a mariner, whose love of the sea rivaled Sinbad."³⁶ In a less metaphorical moment, Chibás announced that forming a new "political instrument" and heading a coalition of the island's other parties would almost surely guarantee him the nation's highest office in 1948. Even so, he declared, "I am unwilling to exchange my historic position in Cuba's revolutionary movement for the presidency of the republic."³⁷ On the other hand, Chibás continued associating with the *grupo ortodoxo*—whose leaders set a date for leaving the party. Manuel Bisbé, a congressman, professor of Greek and one of Chibás' closest friends assured them Eddy would join after resolving his "emotional conflict."³⁸

More than any Cuban politician, Chibás was obsessed with his legacy. He also felt an intense obligation to honor those who had endured martyrdom during the turbulent 1930s. At all costs, Chibás strived to avoid the fate of Inocente Alvarez, a fellow Student Directorate member and *Auténtico* party founder, who had since gained notoriety for a series of corrupt barter deal scandals as Grau's minister of commerce.³⁹ Cases of this sort betrayed the 1933 revolution and the ideals of those who died in the fight against Machado. Further, they called to mind the harshest stereotypes of

35. On July 14, 1946, the provincial assembly of the *Auténtico* party in Oriente, the largest and most populous of Cuba's six provinces, proclaimed Chibás their choice for the presidential nomination in 1948. This had been arranged beforehand, with Chibás' knowledge, by Emilio Ochoa, the *Auténtico* party president of Oriente. That evening, Chibás addressed a grateful speech to his supporters via radio in which he claimed his popularity coupled with that of the party would guarantee a "definitive and crushing victory" without pacts or coalitions. See Conte Agüero, 445.

36. en Cuba, "Política: Chibás el Marino," *Bohemia*, March 16, 1947: 43.

37. Ibid.

38. "Política: Conflicto Emocional," 40.

United States officials regarding Cuba's revolutionaries. On December 9, 1932, as a 25-year-old exile living in Washington, D.C., Chibás had listened incredulously while a radio announcer lauded the dictatorial Machado regime and dismissed the opposition as "office seekers."⁴⁰ Chibás, who earlier that month had been released from prison on Cuba's Isle of Pines, responded by posting a letter to U.S. Secretary of State Henry L. Stimson, excerpts of which later appeared in the *Washington Herald*.⁴¹ Written in Chibás' assured, prep school English,⁴² the five type-written pages bitterly denounced United States policy in Cuba. Among its practical consequences were the gruesome deaths of two friends at the hands of Machado's police after the United States embassy refused to intervene on their behalf. The youngest, Juan González Rubiera, was only 17 years old and his corpse bore 11 bullet wounds and "signs of having been savagely tortured."⁴³ Chibás thus proclaimed toward the missive's finale that, "the students from thirteen to twenty-five years of age who are daily being victimized with bullets in defense of freedom and justice, are not office seekers."⁴⁴ Ironically, a passel of office seekers had indeed sprouted from among the students. Chibás dreaded being perceived as one too if he left Cuba's largest revolutionary party and the only one founded by members of the Student Directorate.⁴⁵ In contemplating his future, he therefore proclaimed the "historical aspect," namely, how he would be remembered by future generations, trumped short-term political considerations.⁴⁶

39. As minister of commerce (1944-1945), Alvarez devised a series of barter deals with other Latin American countries as a way to remedy Cuba's shortage of basic goods. Under this system, Cuba traded excess sugar for commodities such as Ecuadorian rice or Mexican black beans. Chibás himself initially supported the plan, which did, in fact function as advertised. Unfortunately, Alvarez also manipulated the price between crude and refined sugar to earn himself and his collaborators a hefty profit.

40. Department of State Files, Record Group 59, Decimal File 1930-1939, Box 3336.

41. Chibás' message to Secretary of State Stimson resembles an earlier, albeit shorter letter he sent to the United States ambassador in Cuba, Harry Guggenheim. In this version, instead of the Cuban opposition being dismissed on the radio as "office seekers" they are characterized instead as "politicians and grafters."

42. Chibás was enrolled during the 1924-1925 academic year at the Storm King School, a private school in Cornwall on Hudson, 50 miles north of New York City.

43. Department of State Files, Record Group 59, Decimal File 1930-1939, Box 3336.

44. Ibid.

While *Auténtico* bigwigs viewed the man known as *el loco* (the crazy one) with mistrust, the *grupo ortodoxo* wondered when Chibás would realize, as Bisbé had said, “the impossibility of continuing in the party.”⁴⁷ Hence, each new development became a test of Chibás' loyalties and intentions. On March 17, *grupo ortodoxo* senators drew up a motion to interpellate Grau's sleaziest cabinet members: minister of education, José Manuel Alemán and minister of commerce, César Casas. Asked whether he would add his name, Chibás agreed on two conditions. First, the motion must not attack the *Auténticos* as a party and second, no politicians from other parties would be asked to sign. If the *grupo ortodoxo* hoped Chibás would see the futility of his situation, this was indeed a shrewd tactic. In 1945, when Inocente Alvarez submitted to a seven-hour interpellation and Cuba's chamber of representatives subsequently voted “no confidence,” Grau was indignant and resisted removing him. When Alvarez did finally bow to calls for his resignation, Grau flouted the island's semi-parliamentary system by making him foreign minister shortly thereafter. Zeroing in on Alemán and Casas would almost certainly lead to similar contempt—especially as the president considered Alemán his “best minister.”⁴⁸ Though the *grupo ortodoxo* did not intend the motion as a ruse to lure Chibás, its members surely realized the potential symbolism. After all, Chibás and Alemán were nearly perfect foils.

Eddy joined the *Auténticos* in 1938, before the party was allowed to function legally in Cuba and could offer members little aside from persecution. Alemán, on the other hand, had been a Democrat and career civil servant in the ministry of education who supported Grau's opponent in 1944. Elevated to education minister in 1946, the erstwhile chief of bud-

45. The other two “revolutionary” parties were the ABC and the communists. The ABC was founded in 1931, initially as a clandestine terrorist outfit specializing in assassinations against Machado's security forces. The group also devised a detailed political platform advocating the liquidation of latifundia, pensions for workers, legalization of unions, nationalization of public services, voting rights for women and the creation of tribunals to punish graft. The communist party, which took orders from Moscow, was established in 1925 but remained very small. Their primary opposition to Machado took the form of two semi-successful general strikes in 1930 and 1932.

46. “Política: Chibás el Marino,” 43.

47. “Política: Conflicto Emocional,” 40.

48. en Cuba, “Balance,” *Bohemia*, October 10, 1948: 125.

gets and accounts quickly padded his briefcase. When that was full, he employed a suitcase—accumulating an estimated \$20 million in under two years on the job.⁴⁹ With his ill-gotten gains, he acquired a *finca* 12 miles south of Havana and prime Miami real estate for starters.⁵⁰ Alemán was no garden-variety grafter, however. Besides lining his pockets, he used the ministry's funds to become a major power broker within the *Auténtico* party.⁵¹ In this respect, the ministry of education proved an ideal plaything. Its budget was swollen beyond that of other ministries by a nine-centavo tax on each bag of sugar produced, the result of a law passed on April 5, 1943. Known as *inciso K* (clause K) for the section of the law's first article that mandated the tax, it was designed to finance the hiring of new professors, teachers and other necessary personnel. Alemán diverted a substantial portion of this money toward Auténtico candidates in 1946, helping the party gain a majority in congress and, fatefully, the mayoralty of Havana. With an eye toward the presidential poll in 1948, Alemán launched an all-purpose political fund known as BAGA (Bloque Alemán-Grau Alsina) in conjunction with Grau's favorite nephew, Francisco Grau Alsina. Chibás, who had taken note of these activities, taunted Alemán over the airwaves—accusing him on December 12, 1946 of stealing the breakfasts of schoolchildren. Being dressed down in this manner before a nationwide audience was undoubtedly embarrassing for Alemán, but the education minister inoculated himself against such attacks by charming the president.

As a longtime bureaucrat, Alemán was adept at cultivating vastly different masters. During Fulgencio Batista's presidency (1940-1944), he

49. Hugh Thomas. *Cuba: The Pursuit of Freedom*. (New York: Harper & Row, 1971): 758.

50. Alemán purchased the *finca* America, formerly the domain of ex president José Miguel Gómez (1909-1913)—another distinguished figure in the annals of Cuban political corruption. Gómez, affectionately known as *el tiburón* (the shark), was a general in the war of independence and dominated the island's Liberal party until his death in 1921. He entered the presidency with little money and exited a millionaire, albeit one who takes care of his friends. This gave rise to a refrain that played on his nickname, "El tiburón se baña pero salpica." (The shark bathes but splashes).

51. Alemán's rise within the party was nothing short of meteoric. Having joined the Auténticos only after Grau's victory in 1944, he had become the party's president in Havana by December of 1947 and won a senate seat in 1948. In the sort of irony that abounds in Cuban politics, Chibás occupied this seat two years later after Alemán's death from Hodgkin's disease.

served minister of education Anselmo Alliegro—helping him pillage *inciso K* from its inception. Under Grau, who loathed Batista for toppling his government of the “100 days” in 1934, Alemán radically changed course. References to Batista's civic-military schools were scrapped. He demolished the Cangrejas military barracks on the western edge of Havana and replaced it with a polytechnic school named for Paulina Alsina, Grau's widowed sister in law, who was Cuba's “First Lady.” Alemán also encouraged Grau's re-election hopes. This endeared him to the austere ex physiology professor who eschewed cigarettes, alcohol and even snacks between meals but possessed a sharp predilection for flattery. Alemán consolidated his position in the party by taking indirect control of the armed action group known as *Movimiento Revolucionario Socialista* (MSR). This outfit was one of numerous self-styled *grupos de acción* with ties to the Autenticos. After Grau won the presidency, these violent organizations sought government positions and pursued deadly rivalries among themselves. They also engaged in lucrative rackets, such as monopolizing the sale of textbooks at the University of Havana.⁵² Alemán utilized the MSR as a private army to bully detractors⁵³ and forcibly shut down schools, especially out of the way rural institutions. In this manner, he increased the available resources for his own purposes.

On April 8, 1947, the senate voted to interpellate Alemán and Casas. Chibás had prepared for this eventuality by asking listeners to send examples of government corruption. One letter, signed by 31 parents and neighbors of two nearby rural schools in Las Villas province, declaimed their children's lack paper, pencils, books, desks and blackboards. As

52. Thomas, 743. The University of Havana was an ideal place for the action groups as it was off limits to the police. On the other hand, Cuba's various police and security forces were themselves often run by members of action groups during Grau's presidency, so they flourished outside the university as well. For example, the chief of Cuba's *Servicio de Investigaciones* was Mario Salabarría, a friend of Grau and member of MSR. Havana's police chief, Fabio Ruiz, belonged to MSR's bitter rival, *Acción Revolucionaria Guiteras* (ARG). Ruiz was made police chief in exchange for ARG support in the 1944 elections.

53. On November 20, 1946, Senator Emilio Ochoa of the *grupo ortodoxo* submitted a motion to investigate irregularities at the polytechnic school of Holguín, his hometown. Alemán responded by sending “employees” of the education ministry to the Capitolio building armed with pistols and machine guns. By a strange coincidence, the senate lacked a quorum on that day.

“one of the purest men of our republic,” the authors begged Chibás to tell the education minister to “SPEND MONEY ON SCHOOL MATERIALS” because local children “HUNGER FOR TEACHING.”⁵⁴ Rolando Roque of Guara in Havana province claimed the right to an education in his town was a “sarcasm” given the absence of textbooks, seats, desks and water filters in the school.⁵⁵ Manuel Barruecos of Bayamo informed Chibás that the education minister was closing the Rural Normal School in order to rob the money designated for its upkeep. In addition, he described the recent visit of a group of MSR gangsters “pantomiming” the role of school inspectors.⁵⁶ In Calabazar de la Habana, the locale of Alemán’s recently acquired *finca*, residents noticed that instead of finishing construction on a nearby school, workers and supplies were now being transported to the education minister’s property. The author of this letter closed by urging Chibás to “fall with zeal upon the thieves.”⁵⁷

César Casas, the minister of commerce, was a less sinister figure than Alemán but his toleration of Cuba’s black market profoundly angered many citizens. The intermittent scarcity of goods such as rice, lard, flour, meat and milk had originally begun in 1942, when the United States entered World War II. Now, more than a year after the fight had ended, Cubans continued to endure shortages and black market prices. Responding to complaints, ministry officials denied the existence of a black market and, rather indelicately, grumbled that Cubans were “eating too much.”⁵⁸ Casas qualified these assertions, saying no “organized” black market was in force.⁵⁹ Everyday Cubans knew otherwise and eagerly detailed their experiences for Chibás. One letter described how a treasury ministry employee bought 350 sacks of cement at the officially controlled price of 98 centavos and subsequently sold them for three pesos each on the black market.⁶⁰ The man, named Andrés Plumas, was a recent hire and

54. Archivo Nacional de Cuba, Fondo Eduardo R. Chibás. Legajo 35, Expediente 1097: 58.

55. Ibid, 56.

56. Ibid, 37.

57. Ibid, 26.

58. Jacinto Torras. “¿Terminarán en 1947 la crisis de abastecimiento y la bolsa negra?” *Bohemia*, January 26, 1947: 29.

59. José Pardo Llada. “La bolsa negra.” *Bohemia*, January 19, 1947: 42.

confessed to a friend that his longer serving colleagues were entitled to far more than that. Esther Pérez, a fervid Chibás supporter from Carlos Rojas in Matanzas province, lamented the lack of rice in his⁶¹ town because of a common trick employed by wholesalers. This involved billing shopkeepers for one quantity while delivering a much smaller amount. As a result, local stores faced with a dilemma: break the law and sell items at higher than the official price so as not to lose money or avoid vending them altogether. For good measure, Pérez added that the town's children did not receive their school breakfasts nor did they have sufficient educational materials.⁶² Another missive reported that the chief of Santa Clara's office of commerce and his second in command controlled supplies of the city's basic items and sold them for exorbitant rates on the black market. As a result, both rice and soap were unavailable at official prices. Noting that the Grau administration had "turned out worse than we thought," the author deems himself a "Chibás *Auténtico*" and praised the *grupo ortodoxo*.⁶³

Worst of all, the sordidness of Cuba's black market underbelly, teeming as it was with dodgy functionaries and wholesalers, was only half the story. The government's official policy of price controls for foodstuffs such as rice, lard and flour, all of which were largely imported, amounted to subsidies for foreign producers. Rather than assisting overseas farmers, a wiser tactic would have been to stimulate domestic markets—particularly for rice, a Cuban staple suitable to the island's terrain. This was especially imperative now, while sugar prices were high, so that Cuba would have other options when profits inevitably dropped. After all, sugar growing rivals such as the Philippines, whose capacity had been largely destroyed during World War II, would not stay down indefinitely. Many of these points were outlined in a memo drawn up for Chibás on April 12;

60. Archivo Nacional de Cuba, Fondo Eduardo R. Chibás. Legajo 35, Expediente 1097: 72-73.

61. This is not a typographical error. Esther Pérez, who regularly corresponded with Chibás, reminded him in a postscript not to forget that he was a "señor," particularly as previous responses had been addressed to Señorita Esther Pérez.

62. Archivo Nacional de Cuba, Fondo Eduardo R. Chibás. Legajo 35, Expediente 1097: 12-13.

63. Ibid, 81.

four days after the interpellations were approved. The document also censured Alemán for sporadic distribution of school breakfasts and the building of showcase schools next to Cuba's *Carretera Central* (Central Highway) while rural inhabitants languished in want. Taking into account the gravity of these offenses and the vast resources at Alemán's disposal, it warned that the senate's obligation to examine and analyze the education ministry was "not to be delegated."⁶⁴ Chibás had no intention of shirking this responsibility, nor did many of his fellow legislators, especially those from other parties who were placed at a disadvantage by Alemán's campaign contributions.

At the same time, both ministers were determined to resist appearing before the senate. Prior to the vote, Alemán and Casas informed the president they suffered from stage fright. Upon learning of the motion's approval, Grau refused to honor it but seemed far less concerned with protecting his ministers than ridding himself of congress altogether. Notified by senate president Miguelito Suárez Fernández that the upper chamber was exercising a constitutionally sanctioned prerogative, Grau, wearing his characteristic smile, responded with the following anecdote:

Truly *amigos*, the constitution is charging me for more than the amount on the bill. At this moment, I'm remembering something very suggestive. A short while after assuming the presidency of the republic, I passed through Luyanó (a working class Havana neighborhood) on the way to Varadero (a beach resort 85 miles east of the capital) and noted a horrible smell emanating from a tallow factory. The next day, I called the minister of health and asked him to close it but he told me he couldn't do that because the factory was functioning in accordance with the constitution and the laws. A short time afterward, I again passed through Luyanó and the horrible odor still bothered me. This time, I called Lieutenant Colonel Hernández Nardo and instructed him to take some men along and close the factory immediately without any further explanation. Acting with great efficiency, he shut down the factory and said only that he was acting on orders from above. Right now, the congress is bothering me a great deal because it too smells horribly. It's a center of foul smells...⁶⁵

64. Ibid, 50. Entitled "Memorandum para el Sr. Chibás," this document contains minor editorial changes in Chibás' handwriting, suggesting that he read it carefully.

65. en Cuba, "Crisis: Un Foco Pestilente," *Bohemia*, April 20, 1947: 45.

The following Sunday, Chibás repeated this story on his radio show, spreading the “tallow factory of Luyanó” to an even wider audience than those who read about it in *Bohemia*. The island’s cartoonists happily joined the fray as well. For example, a sketch by Juan David portrayed Grau and the Republican senator Guillermo Alonso Pujol speaking to each other behind gas masks.⁶⁶

Tensions were exacerbated on April 21, when MSR gunmen loyal to Alemán fired shots into the *Capitolio* during an evening senate session dedicated to resolving the crisis with Grau. Two days later, as the senate awaited him, Casas sent word that he would not attend his interpellation. In response, Chibás submitted a motion of no confidence against Grau’s entire cabinet, which was duly approved, as the only way to defend the senate’s “legislative sovereignty.”⁶⁷ Even as this was humiliating, Grau was favored by a provision in the constitution excusing his new cabinet from interpellation for one year. Once again flouting the constitution he helped create, Grau elevated deputies in each ministry and made no secret of his intention to restore the original cabinet when the senate recessed. On May 2, when the no confidence vote became official, Prime Minister Carlos Prío Socarrás termed Casas’ refusal to appear before the senate as “legal and legitimate.”⁶⁸ For Prío, a lawyer, senator and former delegate to the constituent assembly that created Cuba’s constitution, this statement was understandable only in the context of his own presidential aspirations. Even as Grau had relinquished his re-election campaign, it was clear he (and not the party assembly) would choose the next Auténtico presidential nominee. Thus, the prospect of Chibás rescuing the party from the likes of Grau and Alemán seemed increasingly remote.

On the other hand, the president’s high-handedness was unpopular. As Chibás had attempted to collect signatures for his no confidence motion, Eduardo Suárez Rivas, a Liberal senator, exclaimed that those who refused would “look like idiots” before the public.⁶⁹ Grau, who once averred that his government represented “the combat of virtue against

66. Ibid, 48. The following week, David produced a cartoon entitled “Precaution” in which Grau sported a clothespin instead.

67. en Cuba, “Crisis: Casas no asiste al Senado,” *Bohemia*, April 27, 1947: 45.

68. “Senadores Auténticos estiman que tiene caracter transitorio el Gabinete recién designado,” *Diario de la Marina*, May 3, 1947: 2.

vice,”⁷⁰ now preferred to defy the constitution rather than rendering two widely disliked and corrupt ministers.⁷¹ Two days after this crisis had been resolved, essentially by sidestepping the legislative branch, Havana's mayor shot himself in the heart. Supervielle, who had been derided in the press and on the streets up to moment of his demise, instantly became a martyr. During his broadcast that evening, Chibás characterized the mayor's death as a “desperate scream of alert in the midst of political confusion.”⁷² He also reminded listeners of the Auténtico congressman (and unconditional Grau supporter) Segundo Curti's attempt to pass a law that would place the aqueduct under central government control because the mayor was a “failed, inept and incapable public servant.”⁷³ The next day a crowd of 4000 composed of all social classes squeezed into Havana's Colón cemetery to attend his burial. A reporter from *Diario de la Marina* called the ceremony, “one of the most well attended in recent memory.”⁷⁴ The “en Cuba” section of *Bohemia* noted that Supervielle's suicide was “taken by the people in general as an act of protest in favor of honest politics against the habit, too frequent among elected figures, of scorning the needs and necessities of the community.”⁷⁵ This was an obvious jab at Alemán and Casas, both of whom treated the “community” with disdain, stole with impunity and enjoyed the president's favor. Although Grau delivered a glowing eulogy, Supervielle lacked the president's full support even in death. The national government, unlike that of the city, did not declare an official day of mourning nor were the flags of the presidential palace, the primer minister's office⁷⁶ or the foreign ministry flown at half-

69. en Cuba, “Política: Vamos a Firmar Para Complacer al Presidente,” *Bohemia*, May 4, 1947: 43.

70. Miguel de Marcos, “¡Se cansa uno!” *Bohemia*, January 5, 1947: 52.

71. The depth of anger against Casas in particular cannot be overestimated, particularly as shortages and exorbitant prices affected all Cubans. On January 21, 1947, an anti black market demonstration took place in front of the presidential palace. Grau, who addressed the crowd, was met with whistles, catcalls and insults when he referred to the government's policy of supplying basic goods.

72. Conte Agüero, 503.

73. Ibid.

74. “Fue Imponente Manifestación de Duelo el Entierro del Alcalde Habanero Dr. Manuel Fernández Supervielle,” *Diario de la Marina*, May 6, 1947: 1.

75. “Duelo: Un hombre de honor,” 43.

mast. The administration's most pressing concern was to keep the multitude's palpable anger from bubbling over. As such, a police cordon restricted access to the mausoleum and the cemetery was lined with uniformed and plain-clothes officers. The government also cancelled eulogies slated to be given by figures representing the mayor's family and Havana's city hall, alleging a shortage of time. However, this decision smacked of nervousness and fear.

Chibás, who had zealously campaigned for Supervielle in 1946 and dubbed him "Super-votes," was ideally placed to understand the frayed relationship between mayor and president. After all, Chibás had once coveted the mayoralty for himself but yielded to Grau's preference for Supervielle. The president purportedly chose Supervielle because the post required an administrator rather than a politician. Most likely, Supervielle's middling popularity caught Grau's eye more than his efficiency or managerial skill as treasury minister. In terms of power, the Havana mayoralty paled only before the presidency and Grau, who cherished the idea of re-election, desired a weak candidate. Supervielle, who had twice run unsuccessfully for a congressional seat, was ideal. Even so, the prospect of bringing water to Havana aroused such passion that Supervielle became a sensation. He defeated his two opponents in a landslide and immediately set to work on the promised aqueduct. Supervielle also began mentioning himself as a presidential candidate. If he succeeded in supplying the water *habaneros* so desperately yearned for, his popularity would have skyrocketed, making him a formidable force and natural contender for Cuba's highest office. Hence, Grau effectively squashed the financing for Supervielle's aqueduct in late January 1947, a decision he refused to reverse even after the mayor publicly supported the president's re-election campaign the next month. Nor was this the first time Grau had played politics with the city's water supply. In August 1944, as president

76. Shortly after Supervielle's suicide, Chibás received a letter from someone who had been present at the house of the new mayor, Nicolás Castellanos. According to this account, one of the guests suggested that celebratory drinks were in order. However, Castellanos responded that, "this is a time of pain rather than one of joy." Moments later, Carlos Prío, the prime minister appeared shouting and applauding. He allegedly yelled, "There is no reason for sadness!" and addressing the new mayor's wife he cried, "Bring some champagne to celebrate as this is a great day for us!" See: Archivo Nacional de Cuba, Fondo Eduardo R. Chibás. Legajo 35, Expediente 1097: 95.

elect, he rejected a scheme by then Mayor Raúl García Menocal because the proposed aqueduct called for the use of foreign capital.⁷⁷ Suervielle was also not the first Auténtico to have his career derailed for becoming too popular. Grau's first education minister, Luis Pérez Espinós, was forced to resign in 1945 because his success in adding new classrooms and expanding the school breakfast program was considered threatening.⁷⁸

When Chibás took to the microphones on Sunday evening of May 11, he was ready to cast off what his friend Luis Conte Agüero called “the psychological conflict.”⁷⁹ He began his address by revisiting Supervielle's death. The mayor's suicide note, he mused, was reminiscent of a “patrician from the legendary age of Roman greatness.”⁸⁰ He contrasted this document, which avoided accusation or recrimination, with the “sordid meanness” of those responsible for his demise.⁸¹ Chibás also reminded his audience that the flag adorning the presidential palace fluttered at the top of its mast, “challenging public opinion” and smirking at the man whose poignant fate “destroyed thousands and thousands of hearts.”⁸² Following this prelude, Chibás devoted the remainder of his 25-minute show to yet another unfolding tragedy. The same underhanded characters, led by Grau, who had driven Supervielle to end his life had also irreparably harmed the Auténtico party. This damage could not be reversed because the party's national, provincial and municipal assemblies, which represented rank and file delegates, no longer possessed any influence over the current government. Chibás pointed out that the national assembly had not been convoked a single time since Grau had taken office in October of 1944. Declaring that, “The crisis of the government produces a crisis in

77. Chibás, who was Grau's chief propagandist at the time, framed opposition to Mayor Menocal's aqueduct in fiercely patriotic terms. During his broadcast of August 27, 1944, Chibás asserted that, “Cubans must rid themselves of their colonial mentality, shake themselves free of defeatism, feel proud of their country and march forward with their foreheads raised, toward the conquest of Cuba's economic independence.” See Conte Agüero, 322.

78. Charles D. Ameringer. *The Cuban Democratic Experience: The Auténtico Years, 1944-1952*. (Gainesville: University of Florida Press, 2000): 33.

79. Conte Agüero, 505

80. Ibid, 504.

81. Ibid.

82. Ibid, 504.

the party, which in turn gives rise to a crisis in the Cuban revolution,” Chibás signaled his readiness to found a new party based on the original Auténtico ideals of economic independence, political liberty and social justice.⁸³

The following Thursday, *grupo ortodoxo* members and their sympathizers met in the Auténtico Youth headquarters on the corner of *Neptuno* and *Amistad* in the *Centro Habana* district. They represented an impressive display of Cuba’s political elite, including six of the nation’s 54 senators, nine of its 127 congressmen, the governor of Matanzas province and the mayors of Bayamo, Holguín and Victoria de las Tunas. Younger notables in attendance included 19-year-old Natasha Mella,⁸⁴ daughter of Julio Antonio Mella, the magnetic student leader and founder of Cuba’s communist party. His assassination in 1929 converted him into one of the revolution’s first martyrs. Also present was 20-year-old Fidel Castro, then a law student at the University of Havana. Chibás opened the proceedings with a speech in which he said, “We can’t rebuild the party from within but don’t want to be accused of being impulsive or acting out of personal ambitions.”⁸⁵ He thus proposed that Grau be given 72 hours to convene the Auténtico national assembly, in front of which the *grupo ortodoxo* would accuse him of betraying the party’s founding principles. This proposal was approved unanimously. Later on, Senator Emilio Ochoa submitted a motion, also approved unanimously, to name a committee charged with establishing a “new political force.”⁸⁶ On May 18, two hours after the deadline for a response from Grau had passed, Chibás ascended his radio pulpit and launched the organization. He described this entity, so freshly born it lacked a name, as a refuge for Cuba’s honorable politicians. “In a party,” Chibás proclaimed, “fundamental ideas are very important but also essential are the men charged with putting them into

83. Ibid, 506.

84. Far from being a bystander, Natasha Mella was named to the 10-member committee charged with officially forming the new party. She was the youngest member of the group (although three others were in their 20s) and the only woman. However, her surname was among the most recognizable in Cuba and possessed undeniable power. She was also extraordinarily beautiful, a trait inherited from her father—whose handsomeness was immortalized in the photos of Italian photographer Tina Modotti.

85. Conte Agüero, 508.

86. Ibid.

practice. The world's most beautiful program, backed by empty speakers or a group of delinquents will never be able to win over public opinion or the people's enthusiastic support."⁸⁷

Asked by a reporter for his opinion, Grau dismissed the new party as *ortofónicos* or noisemakers. However, there was no denying this represented yet another black eye for the man viewed as a messiah less than three years earlier. By all appearances, a new savior was already laying the groundwork to supplant him.

87. Ibid, 510.

