

The First Contras

It is now an Electrolux store, that small building where the CIA recruited eager Cuban patriots—the first contras—for an invasion 25 years ago. The store is near "Calle Ocho"—Southwest Eighth Street, in Miami's "Little Havana" section. Down the street from the tiny park where old men play dominoes is the small monument to the young men who died at the Bay of Pigs on April 17, 1961, in a feckless use of U.S. power, one that foreshadowed others, from Vietnam to Lebanon.

Last week the House of Representatives, compounding the cruel folly of U.S. policy regarding the multiplication of Cubas in this hemisphere, voted to kill Nicaragua's contras. It is instructive that all but two of Florida's 19 representatives voted for the contras. It helps having reality just over your horizon and reality's victims on your voting rolls. As the House was consigning the contras to a fate comparable to that of the Cuban contras in 1961, Miami's Cuban-Americans could ponder this paradox: the Bay of Pigs helped them become proof of the continuing vitality of America's immigrant tradition.

Miami's new mayor is 36 and Cuban born. Elsewhere, America's key institution—no, silly, not the White House, the Coca-Cola Co.—is run by a Cuban-American. However, the most exciting success is the flourishing in south Florida of the average Cuban-American. Miami is America's most interesting city and ordinary people from Cuba are the stars of Miami Nice, a new installment in the saga of America's absorptive capacity.

New home: The failure of the 1961 invasion was followed in 18 months by the Pyrrhic U.S. "victory" in the missile crisis, in which the United States in effect guaranteed the survival of Castro's regime and gave the Soviet Union license to use the island for any purpose other than as a missile platform. (Nicaragua, the second Cuba, is not the final consequence of that capitulation.) When refugees from Cuba saw their dream of the liberation of their homeland indefinitely deferred, they turned their prodigious energies to the task of prospering in their new home. This they were well equipped to do. Castro's swift unveiling of his communist plans provoked a flight of human capital. Many of Cuba's professionals—upward of 5,000 doctors in the first two years—crossed the Florida straits. Of the many waves of immigrants that have enriched this nation's social soil, the Cuban wave is perhaps the only one in which the middle class came first. Like the first wave, the Pilgrims, the Cubans came from a competent, assertive and principled class.

You cannot throw a brick among Cuban-American leaders without hitting a hero of the cause they do not consider lost. Pepe Hernandez, 47, was 21 when Castro shot his father. He came to Miami, signed on with the CIA, was infiltrated in and out of Cuba and joined the Bay of Pigs brigade in Guatemala. After the debacle he spent 20 months in a Castro jail. Today he is a successful entrepreneur exporting technology to Latin

America. A million Cubans migrating to Florida have done what 5 million Minnesotans migrating here could not have done: they have made Miami the booming bicultural gateway to Latin America. Like divided Germany and Korea, the divided Cuban nation illustrates the fecundity of freedom. Hernandez says that, given the multiplier effect of Cuban-Americans on the U.S. economy, they produce many times more wealth than the 10 times as many Cubans isolated offshore.

Hernandez says Cuba is like Canada in that it has a history of high achievers achieving outside their country. José Martí, Cuba's George Washington, spent much of his adult life in the United States and Spain, less than two years in Cuba. Cuba's first president was an American citizen who had run a school in New York. For Hernandez, the salient point is that they returned. He helps run a splendidly militant lobby that promotes policies designed to isolate and weaken Castro and keep the United States unreconciled to a future of endless communism in Cuba. But he is a rooted American. Recently he built an office

complex. He could have given the contract to any of a number of Cuban-American firms. He gave it to the low bidder, a firm run by émigrés from . . . Nicaragua. If Congress continues its ways, one day south Florida will have freedom-loving people who have fled from communist regimes in Costa Rica, Honduras, Guatemala, Panama . . .

Patriotism: In a restaurant on Calle Ocho, drinking inky, bitter Cuban coffee,

seven leaders of the Cuban-American community (the 1984 vote was Reagan, 90 percent, Mondale, 10 percent) speak without bitterness about their one disappointment with America—its shallow misunderstanding of these years of living dangerously. Four served briefly in Castro's government until they concluded (as one of them, an economics professor, says dryly) that Castro was not just a post-Keynesian. One of the four served 16 years in prison for working in Cuba to prepare for the 1961 invasion. A fifth was infiltrated into Cuba 13 times, once to collect intelligence on the surface-to-air missile that downed the U-2 during the missile crisis. One runs a radio station where a commentator is Juanita Castro, the dictator's sister. Another, a woman who runs a real-estate firm, compares Cuban-Americans with American Jews, whose attachment to Israel in no way dilutes their patriotism. Indeed, to understand the heat in the heart of Little Havana, imagine the mood of Jews if Israel were tyrannized and were located 90 miles east of Long Island.

The day these exemplary Americans initiated a columnist to fried bananas and black bean soup and other Cuban contributions to the tanginess of American life, a 16-year-old Cuban in Miami was rhapsodizing about hospital food. His brother-in-law had drowned on the five-day float to freedom on a ramshackle raft fashioned from inner tubes. "Things in Cuba are very bad. There is no food. Look at this. Juice. Milk." And there is black bean soup on Calle Ocho, an American Main Street.



Ordinary
Cuban-Americans
are the stars
of Miami Nice