

CHAPTER
10

Section 2

AMERICAN LIVES **José Martí**
Poet, Patriot, Inspirational Leader

"It is my duty . . . to prevent, through the independence of Cuba, the U.S.A. from spreading over the West Indies and falling with added weight upon other lands of Our America. All I have done up to now and shall do hereafter is to that end. . . . I know the Monster, because I have lived in its lair."—José Martí, his last letter, written to a friend (1895)

José Martí (1853–1895) spent most of his brief life outside of Cuba, working for Cuba's independence from Spain. A writer and intellectual, he died in combat. A lover of freedom and democracy, he admired U.S. ideals but mistrusted its power and wealth.

Martí began his revolutionary activity when he was in his teens. Inflamed by his teacher with the desire for Cuban independence, he began publishing a newspaper called *La Patria Libre* ("Free Homeland") at age 16. He was arrested by Spanish officials and sent to prison. After six months of hard labor in a stone quarry, he was exiled to Spain. Only 18, he was forbidden to return to his country.

Martí studied law in a Spanish university and wrote essays, plays, and poems. His work was full of passion and politics. In 1875, he went to Mexico. Then, after a brief return to Cuba (in disguise, for his safety), he settled in Guatemala, married, and became a teacher and writer. His complete writings eventually filled 73 volumes.

Meanwhile, Cuban rebels were fighting for independence. The Spaniards finally won this ten-year war in 1878. They declared an amnesty, and Martí returned home. However, he continued his anti-Spanish activities, and he was exiled again.

By 1881, Martí had escaped to New York City, where he spent most of the rest of his life. He wrote a novel and more poems. He was hired as a diplomat by Uruguay—and later by Argentina and Paraguay as well. He wrote countless articles for newspapers, explaining Latin America to U.S. readers and explaining the United States to readers throughout Latin America. Most of all, he spent his time promoting the cause of Cuban independence from Spain. Many Cuban tobacco workers lived in Florida. Martí wrote to them and lectured to them, drumming up support for a rebellion. He convinced the workers to donate ten percent of their

wages to the cause. He gave lectures to other exiles, setting forth his goals for free Cuba: democracy, widespread education, tolerance between the races, and a varied economy that did not rely on the export of sugar.

He also pushed for Cuba's complete independence from the United States. Economic ties were increasingly linking the island to the United States. Many Cubans hoped that once free from Spanish control, they could join the United States. Martí admired democracy and freedom in the United States, which he called "the greatest [nation] ever built by freedom." However, he believed that capitalism and the growing spirit of imperialism threatened Cuba and all of Latin America. He feared the power of the nation he called "the Monster." His arguments helped convince other Cubans that full independence—not annexation—was the course to follow.

In 1892 Martí organized his supporters into the Cuban Revolutionary Party. He called for another armed rebellion against Spain. He contacted rebels in Cuba and urged them to prepare. He helped organize troops in the United States and elsewhere. In 1895, he announced that the war for independence had begun, and in April he landed in Cuba with a small force of men. On May 19, he was killed by Spanish soldiers in a brief battle. Cuban independence came three years later, and José Martí became a Cuban hero of mythic proportions. A statue of him is found even in New York City.

Questions

1. How did Martí contribute to the movement for Cuban independence?
2. What do Martí's goals for a free Cuba reveal about his thinking?
3. Why did Martí call the United States "the Monster"?