

On the 13<sup>th</sup> of March, 1957, forty two Cuban patriots died for planning and carrying out an attack on the presidential palace with the aim of ousting, and if possible assassinating, then Cuban President Fulgencio Batista. Jose Antonio Echeverria was one of those patriots that met their death for the end of overthrowing the then dictator, he was assassinated by police minutes after the failed storming of the presidential palace shortly after declaring its victory on a sacked Cuban radio station, and he was 24 years old. Central for the understanding of Jose Antonio's reasons for planning to attack the presidential palace and meeting his death, it is necessary to delve into Echeverria's life, beliefs, upbringing, political convictions, and the political context of the time, in order to properly assess the motives behind his actions and his student life of activism.

Jose Antonio Echeverria was born in the city of Cardenas, in the province of Matanzas, at three in the afternoon on Saturday the 16<sup>th</sup> of July, 1932. He was the son of Antonio Echeverria Gonzales and Concepcion Bianchi Trista. At the time of his birth the family was largely dedicated to commerce, product of his father's employment at Jose Antonio's grandfather's business. Jose Antonio's grandfather from his fathers side was a native of Burgos, Spain and moved to Cardenas in the second half of the 19<sup>th</sup> century. He married Juana Olalla Gonzales Estupinan, a Cuban woman from Cardenas. Jose Antonio's mother's side of the family, it is commented, had an active role in the struggle for Cuban independence from Spain, a revolutionary trait to which Jose Antonio is said to make reference to on several occasions, as well as a connection to the red army via an uncle who participated in wars on behalf of the communist cause.

By the time of his birth, Cuba, as well as the world, was experiencing the full effects of the great depression. At the time international trade, personal income, tax

revenues, and profits all took a sharp downturn internationally. Cuba was hard hit considering its dependence on agriculture and the drop in crop prices during this time. In 1933, 60% of the population was living at sub marginal levels, with incomes no greater than 300 pesos a year. Many small business owners and farmers could not get out of debt and lost their houses and lands. Thousands of others could not pay their rents and became destitute, and *barrios de indigentes* became more widespread. Student activism reached an all time high fighting the corruption and dictatorships that sprouted from this misery.

In this general atmosphere Jose Antonio's youth was spent. Being a good student as well as athlete, he was able to excel at many of his endeavors. By the end of, what is equivalent to his high school career, Jose Antonio's political leanings and leadership skills were beginning to take shape. A new intensity within the student population was emerging during this time, continuing the tradition of the student movements of 1930's Cuba, Jose Antonio became part of this growing number of disgruntled youths. While being chosen as his commencement's speaker, a role which requires presence, leadership, as well as oratory, that by this time Jose Antonio already clearly possessed, Jose Antonio's political activities had already been well under way. He formed part of the association of students which participated in demonstrations against the Carlos Prio Socarras government while not even 18 years of age.

After the 1952 military coup by Batista, student organizations of the time turned their attention away from the corruption of the now deposed president Socarras, and concentrated their efforts on the unconstitutional nature of Batista's rise to power. Batista was a violent man who repressed dissent in a way that forced student organizations to become increasingly militant.

“By the end of 1955, the leaders of the FEU realized that the efforts of nonpartisan organizations to reconcile government and opposition were futile. They proposed the creation of an insurrectionary movement to lead the struggle for freedom...the students formed their own clandestine organization- the Directorio Revolucionario... In a secret meeting at the University of Havana on February 24, 1956, Echevarria, as head of the Directorio, announced its creation.”

The students themselves began to assume a leadership role in opposing Batista, becoming increasingly violent as the regime grew more brutal in its repression. Echevarria filled what has been described as a vacuum in leadership during these tumultuous times,

The students were willing to follow a leader, but one of their own ranks. Echeverria thus emerged as the representative of Marti's and Chibas' ideals. He, more than anyone else, commanded the admiration of the students and, as time went by, of the Cuban people.

The political thought of Echeverria is reflected in the nature of these organizations he helped form and was a part of.

“Out of interviews with former Directorio activists, the following portrait emerges. The student leaders were admirers of Eduardo Chibas and Jose Marti, sharing the latter's vision of an idealized *patria*: a socially united, racially harmonious, and economically independent country. They were democrats, strongly nationalistic, and anticommunist.

Furthermore,

“The students advocated economic reforms: agricultural diversification, industrialization, and

agrarian reform. They opposed administrative corruption and other evils of Cuba's public life, and wanted to see the 1940 Constitution fully reestablished and free elections held.

The Directorio established contact with armed groups they felt pursued these very same ends and had these same ideals. More notable among these groups was Fidel Castro's 26 of July movement.

...Fidel Castro, had been training an expeditionary force in Mexico and planned to land in Cuba at the end of 1956. Early that year, Echeverria led a student delegation to Mexico, where he signed an agreement with Castro known as "La carta de Mexico". The students pledged a series of diversionary riots in Havana to coincide with Castro's landing on the other end of the island.

That is to say, in essence, his political formation was shaped in reaction to the corruption and deceit of Cuban politics, as well as in cooperation with like minded individuals who sought to free Cubans of their political, social, and economic chains.

Moreover, beyond his actions, many of Echeverria's own words testify to his strong nationalistic, democratic, anti-dictatorial, and anti-imperialist ideals. Jose Antonio held authentic democratic beliefs, "We all know that the Cuban people will not accept another man's governance or orders without first having given their sovereign consent. Such is a democracy....There exists no other way to have legitimate right to govern." With this legitimate right ignored, the governor turns dictator and earns the harsh criticism of Jose Antonio no matter where they may govern, "The dictator...other than assassinate liberty and free men: hands over national values and prevents the oppressed peoples from thriving in their national economic and political democracies, serving

instead the worst domestic as well as foreign interests.”

Central to Jose Antonio Echeverria’s thought is a fervent nationalism which expresses solidarity with all peoples who have had their lands, economies and chances at democracy ransacked and taken from them. He asserts that,

the lands of North Mexico were stolen, Cuba is intervened into via the Platt Amendment, the independence of the Puerto Rican people is abducted, there is intervention in Nicaragua and Sandino falls assassinated, there is intervention in Santo Domingo and as a remnant is left that embodied undermining of liberty named Rafael Leonidas Trujillo...And from this political intervention is born a sphere of influence loyally defended by new guardians, defenders of foreign industries which exploit and destroy the national wealth.

Moreover, Jose Antonio sought to do everything in his power to right these wrongs on his island nation with the grace of God. He felt his heart was true in his endeavors and believed that God would bless him. In his political testament he notes, “We have faith that the purity of our intentions will bring the favor of God in order to achieve the order of justice in our homeland”

Jose Antonio strongly believed in sovereignty, democracy, and liberty. His island nation endured dictatorship, after corrupt government, after dictatorship and corrupt government, and Jose Antonio formed his political convictions in reaction to this and acted on them by committing to his nations struggle for sovereignty, democracy, and liberty. Fervently opposing the status quo in word as well as action, Echeverria, though aware of the dangers of his endeavor, pushed forward with the grace of God and gave his life for an ideal.