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Havana — Challenge to duel

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The following is a memorandum covering an incident which took place during I believe the first year of my stay in Havana as the Ambassador. It must have been in 1941. A reference to my papers will determine the exact time that this conversation took place.

I had as one of the things which President Roosevelt and Mr. Hull asked me to do in Cuba the duty of endeavoring to get paid by the Cuban government to Stone and Webster a bill amounting to around I believe 7 or 8 million dollars, it may have been a little more, which was the amount which had been unpaid by the government for many years for work done by Stone and Webster on the capital and on a road the whole length of the island constructed by them. The failure of the Cuban government to pay this ~~amount~~ balance had brought Stone and Webster into bankruptcy. I will in another memorandum cover the conversations I had with President Batista on this matter and with members of the Cuban government, including members of Congress at his request. At the insistence of President Batista the leaders of the government party in both the Senate and House of Representatives had agreed to bring a bill authorizing the payment of this amount to Stone and Webster in complete settlement of the claim to a final hearing and vote. One of the understandings which we had with regard to this matter was that neither Stone nor Webster nor anyone connected with the claim would pay any amount of money to anybody to bring about the settlement. This was not very pleasing to some of the members of Congress, who wished to get a considerable amount out of the passage of this bill. The President had told them that the bill would have to be passed in order to lay the basis for other things which Cuba wished to arrange with us. These unworthy members of the Congress fully realized that the bill would have to be voted, the justice in the matter was so clear. On the other hand, they could not quite forget their endeavors in order to get something out of it.

One morning I was informed by one of my secretaries that there were several persons whose names he mentioned who wished to see me. I recall the names as those

of persons well known but I did not recall having met or known them. I asked that they be brought into my office and after a few courteous words one of them said, "We are here on behalf of Senator X. He feels that he has been offended by remarks which you have made concerning him in connection with this bill which is before the Congress regarding the Stone and Webster claim. It is understood that you have said that the Senator is venal and has been demanding money for his vote. The Senator feels that his honor has to be vindicated and we are here as his seconds to convey his challenge for a duel to take place in the immediate future." I was amused and surprised. These two gentlemen seemed to take the matter very seriously. I knew that duels were still being fought in Cuba but that they were generally an arranged affair and in those days nobody came out of them very seriously hurt. I am not usually a very quick witted person and there are many who say that I do not have a sense of humor. I know that I am not quick witted but I do know that I do not take myself too seriously and I hope that I have at lease some sense of humor. In any event, the serious mien of these gentlemen and the serious way in which they took this whole ridiculous matter did arouse what sense of humor I had.

I said to these two gentlemen that I had made no remarks about Senator X. I did not recall ever having met the Senator. I had heard a good deal about him. I had read a good deal about him in the papers from time since I was in Cuba. I knew that this bill was in the congress under consideration by it. What the Senator's views on the matter of the bill were I did not know and I was not concerned therein. He had his own responsibilities towards his country. If the Senator felt offended by anything which he had been told that I had said, and which I wished to repeat I had not said, I was nevertheless prepared to fight a duel with him. I said that I did not know much about dueling, I had read a good deal about it, I understood, however, that in case of someone being challenged to a duel that it was his privilege to chose the weapons. They could therefore inform the Senator

I accepted the challenge and that my weapon was the Diario de la Marina, which was the principal daily newspaper of Havana. I said that as the challenged party I understood I had the first shot. I was therefore prepared to write an article for the Diario de la Marina. The ~~general~~ Senator could follow the next day with an article in reply. As it was to be a duel in the press, I supposed it would be better to arrange with the seconds which I would designate the number of articles which the Senator and I would write. I said that they could convey my message to the ~~general~~ Senator and I would, if they came back to see me, be very glad to inform them who my seconds were and with whom they could discuss the matter.

I have seldom seen a look of consternation on the face of people as I saw on the faces of these two men. The answer was about as unexpected as anything that I could have said. As a matter of fact, I was a little surprised at myself. I usually do not think so quickly. I realized that the whole matter was ridiculous and that the best way to treat it was as such and that the best way to get rid of the Senator was to make him an object of ridicule. I knew that any information in the press with regard to his challenging me to a duel and that I had proposed the press as the weapon would hold the Senator up to ridicule over the whole island and would destroy him politically. The two men left not knowing what to say. I told them that I would expect their call. Naturally, I did not hear from them again.

I decided to make no mention of the matter at all except to one friend in the government, who was very much interested in the passage of the bill. I did not wish to subject this man to ridicule unless he himself pursued the matter. I doubt whether the friend to whom I mentioned the matter ever mentioned it, but within a few days it became common knowledge in Havana of the call of these two men on me and that they had challenged me on behalf of Senator X to a duel. I am afraid it did the Senator a good deal of harm. It became a favorite story among the people in the clubs and in the bars. I do not think it helped the passage of the bill in the

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Senate when it came up in due course, but I did have a curiosity to note whether the Senator voted for the bill and I recall that he voted for it.

I have often recalled this incident as the years have gone by and have wished that I could have shown the same presence of mind in dealing with similar situations which arose. The incident served me in good stead, for it emphasized to me that ridicule is one of the most effective weapons that one can use when the circumstances are such that ridicule can properly be employed. The more important a public official or an individual is and the better established his reputation, the more dangerous it is when he subjects himself to the possibility of being placed in a ridiculous position.