

Orlando Sentinel

OPINION

July 18, 2005

The old man and the political sea

by U.S. Rep. Jim McGovern, Special to the Sentinel

When Ernest Hemingway died of a self-inflicted gunshot wound in July 1961, it was three months after the Bay of Pigs invasion. Relations between the United States and Cuba were at the lowest point of the past 46 years. The only strand of civility between the two countries was provided by the legacy of one of America's most famous literary figures.

In a quiet arrangement, President John F. Kennedy and Fidel Castro allowed Hemingway's widow, Mary Hemingway, to return that summer to their home outside of Havana to collect some personal belongings, papers and several manuscripts that became Hemingway's posthumous novels.

Now, nearly half a century later, Hemingway's spirit once again is serving as a critical bridge. While the debate rages over the United States' policy toward Cuba, a project that would allow a group of Americans to assist in the preservation of Hemingway's home, his 9,000-book library and his personal belongings is moving forward.

Hemingway's legacy -- and its deep roots in both our cultures -- is once again prevailing.

In that summer 44 years ago, Mary turned over Hemingway's beloved Finca Vigia, the villa that had been his home since 1939, to the Cuban people. Since then, the Cubans have operated the Finca as a museum. The house, located on a hilltop 12 miles outside of Havana, is meticulously kept as he left it. Visitors can see his library on the shelves, his record collection, his African hunting trophies on the walls and his clothes hanging in the closet. His famous fishing boat, Pilar, is kept in the yard.

No other Hemingway house contains all of his original belongings. In no other house is his spirit so evident. Here he wrote some of his greatest novels, including *For Whom the Bell Tolls* and *The Old Man and the Sea*.

Four years ago, I received a phone call from Jenny Phillips, the granddaughter of Hemingway's legendary editor, Max Perkins. Jenny had just returned from Cuba and had visited Finca Vigia. She asked me to join an effort to assist the Cubans in preserving this literary shrine.

The Cubans, who have cared for the Hemingway house and its contents over the years, have done an extraordinary job. Two women in particular, Dr. Marta Arjona Perez, the president of the Council on National Patrimony, and Gladys Rodriguez, museum specialist and curator of the Finca for 17 years, have lovingly maintained and preserved the house and its contents. Hemingway lovers and scholars owe these Cubans an enormous debt of gratitude.

After our initial visit, Jenny Phillips and I, and many others, offered our assistance to the Cubans to help in their efforts to preserve the house and its contents. The most pressing challenge now is to restore the house, which, because of age and tropical weather, is urgently in need of preservation. The National Trust for Historic Preservation recently listed the Finca Vigia on its 11 Most Endangered Places list.

Cuban officials are already working hard to fortify the house, which will be a costly endeavor. We asked the Bush administration to expand our current license to allow us to support -- with private funds -- the rehabilitation of Finca Vigia.

Initially, our request was turned down. The project was caught in the Bush administration's policy to impose stricter sanctions on Cuba. But, with help from the National Trust, we made our case to the policy makers at the State Department. We have now received permission to do a preliminary engineering study.

There are some in Florida's congressional delegation who have objected to our project and the licensing of our work. They argue that we are somehow giving a gift to Castro. But this isn't about Castro, and it isn't about our policy toward Cuba.

This is about our responsibility to preserve an important part of our shared culture with the Cuban people. It is about respecting history and cultural heritage. We cannot put this project off to another day -- time is working against us.

Hemingway can once again serve to unite Americans and Cubans. We must not allow politics to get in the way.

U.S. Rep. Jim McGovern is a Massachusetts Democrat.