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## "The Cold War: Living Under Its Shadow" featuring guest Raul Ramos y Sanchez

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Armando F Sanchez Production

## The Cold War: Living Under Its Shadow

Interviewer: Armando F Sanchez

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### Raul Ramos y Sanchez

Guest

*Cuban-born Raul Ramos y Sanchez grew up in Miami's cultural kaleidoscope before becoming a long-time resident of the U.S. Midwest. After a successful career in advertising that included founding an ad agency with offices in Ohio and California, Ramos turned to more personally significant work. This began with developing a documentary for public television, *Two Americas: The Legacy of our Hemisphere* and also creating [www.Myimmigrationstory.com](http://www.Myimmigrationstory.com) — an online forum for the U.S. immigrant community.*

*Ramos began his debut novel *America Libre* in 2004 with the input of scholars from Latin America, Spain, and the United States. The novel was released by Grand Central Publishing (formerly Warner Books) on July 29, 2009. *House Divided*, the sequel to *America Libre* was released on January 28, 2011. *Pancho Land*, the final installment of the *Class H Trilogy* was released as a Kindle edition on November 19, 2012, with a print and other digital editions to follow in 2013. Ramos' work as a novelist has garnered numerous awards and recognition.*

**Armando F Sanchez:** Ladies and gentlemen, thank you for being with us today there is a new series that I recently started, “Cold War Living Under Its Shadow”, and the stories that individuals have about their personal experiences being part of the Cold War.

All of us were part of the Cold War, but we were impacted on a different level. So today I'm very honored to have someone that I call a friend, a guest, plus someone who is an author, a writer, and a very sensitive human being.

I found that for the many shows we've done and all the talking we've done in the background. Raul Ramos y Sanchez. He is an author of the *Class H Trilogy*, *America Libre*, *House Divided*, and *Pancho Land*. I am very honored to have all three books in my collection.

**Raul Ramos y Sanchez:** Thank you for that.

**Sanchez:** Raul, Thank you for sharing your personal story. Let me give you a little bit of providing a little bit of his background. You left Havana, Cuba when you were six years old and your mom you know brought you to the U.S. You went to New York, and then you went to Florida. That's as far as I'm gonna go because the rest of the story is totally yours right smack, pre-Cuban Missile Crisis, Bay of Pigs April 17 to the 20th in 1961. So you were caught in that also as well as you were growing up so let's take you back first and foremost. Why did your mom leave Cuba?

**Ramos y Sanchez:** Well, my dad was involved in the resistance and there were a lot of different resistance movements at that time. There it had consolidated. My dad was associated with one in Havana. It was primarily students but the others were involved in it and he was doing things that my mom thought were very dangerous and so she was afraid for herself, for me and so she decided to leave and she eventually wound up divorcing my father. but At that time she left and we went to New York City. I was the age of six.

That's when I started the first grade in New York. When summer came that year my mom decided that I should go back and see my father and her family as well. So I went back to Cuba by myself on a plane. I was picked up by my relatives there and so I spent that summer in Havana and then came back to the states. By that time my mom had moved to Miami, and so we wound up doing the same thing for the next five years from 1956 through 1961. It was a pretty unique perspective because those years spanned the time before the success of the Castro revolution and then afterward. That happened on New Year's of 1959. So I was there in the summer of 1960. I was not there when all the turmoil was taking place when the trucks rolled into Havana, I was not there for that, but I was there immediately afterward and of course a lot of my mom's relatives, as well as my dad, and so they were happy with the outcome, unlike a lot of Cuban exiles who came immediately after Castro took over. They had their reasons for wanting to leave and I certainly respect and understand those. My family did not.

My mom kept sending me back (to Cuba) for the next couple of years until finally in 1961 when things got really really hot during the Cold War. My father decided I was not going to go back (to the U.S.) and so my mother went back to Cuba) and got me out. That was the last time in November of 1961 that I was ever in Cuba until 2013 when I went back for the first time in 52 years. But the Cold War piece of this is what this show is about, and I think I had the unique opportunity to witness the Cold War from both sides the U.S. side and from the side of a nation that was aligned with the Soviet Union and, you know, the Eastern Bloc. I got to see that perspective both before and after.

**Sanchez:** Go more in-depth in that particular statement of yours. Take me back to one of your summer periods that you were there. Did you end up in Havana, and just live two months sort of like a happy-go-lucky kid walking around the city, or were there already tensions, political tensions, that you saw or you sensed even as a child that you sort of had to keep adapting to?

**Ramos y Sanchez:** Yeah, you know that's a great question Armando because I remember there was a time when I was with my father. This was before the revolution and my father had a business that was ideal for helping the cause of the revolution. He and his brother-in-law, my mom's brother, had a tire business and they traveled all over the island selling tires, exchanging tires. They would go throughout the mountains providing tires. They would be carrying them in this big truck loaded down the tires underneath the tires were supplies or whatever was needed in the mountains it might be ammunition, it might be medicine, it might be food and he was part of an underground ferry system that would take supplies back and forth across the island. That was what I learned about this later at the time I was never told what was going on but I do remember one particular incident where my dad and I were in his truck. It was just the two of us and he saw a roadblock up ahead and all of a sudden he pulled that truck off the road. We were going like 50-miles an hour down a dirt path because my father obviously did not want to get caught in that roadblock. I remember bouncing in the truck and my head hitting the roof and I was wondering "dad, why are we doing this?" It turned out we didn't want to get the truck inspected so we must have been carrying something. He was really worried about them searching the truck for something.

**Sanchez:** Did this happen at other times as well? Did you find other experiences like that where you sort of walked into things and you thought you know, "I shouldn't be here?"

**Sanchez y Ramos:** That was the most, that was the one that comes to mind. Most of the time I was kept pretty much in the dark about what was going on and it was only later after the Revolution succeeded that I was told what was going on the whole time. My mom knew nothing of this. I doubt she would have sent me back if she knew how harrowing this stuff was that I was getting involved in, even peripherally, because I don't think my dad would ever put me in danger of anything like that. This just happened to be one day when I was there and I experienced it firsthand.

**Sanchez:** So you were living the Cold War in a whole different way or with possible gun-running of the episode?

**Sanchez y Ramos:** Yes, that part was something that I was not aware of but after the revolution that is when I had the experience of seeing both sides of the Cold War, and of course you know and in Miami, my neighborhood was had Cuban exile and it had Anglo-Americans who had heard or knew horror stories. I heard that these people are communists and they're out to take over the world. All of the things that you expect to hear, and then I would go back to Cuba and I'd see my family, and you know, they're saying terrible things about the United States. They would say that they're greedy and they want to take over the world. I'd also hear that the U.S. is the imperialist octopus and all

these other terrible things and I'm thinking “no, that's not who I live with. This is not my friends or people I know nor my neighbors. So I realize that in the Cold War, in that kind of environment, people exaggerate.

They look for the worst and then they always believe that they're the good guys. So that was probably the biggest takeaway for me in experiencing that on both sides was that you know, both sides have decent good people that think they're doing the right thing and the other sides are the bad guys. It was a thing that stuck with me ever since. I think it's influenced a lot of the work that I've done and even my attitude towards the world in general.

**Sanchez:** Sort of moving forward with an interpretation that you don't take things at first face value. You sort of try to look at it from different points of view.

**Sanchez y Ramos:** Absolutely, I mean, you know it's in the interest of those in power to gain support. It's also very useful for somebody who is a dictator to have somebody to blame for their problems on. Right, it's a thing so I think that leaders use nationalism. They use fear. They use hatred to enhance their power and you know that's nothing new. You know many leaders throughout history have done that of every ideology, in every continent, all over the world. It's not a new story. I just lived it firsthand.

**Sanchez:** A point of interest, I caught in something you said. There was a point when your father said, “no, I want you to stay here” and your mom went back to Havana to get you out?

**Sanchez y Ramos:** Yes.

**Sanchez:** How did she do that?

**Sanchez y Ramos:** That's exactly right. Well, that was a great deal of subterfuge as well involved in that because in that my dad knew about this tension (political) that was growing, he did not want me to go back to the states again. He felt like if I left I would never go back. Well, he was right. But when my mom got a wind of that, then she goes back to Cuba and then puts on this big show. She said, “oh no, I'm embracing the revolution. I'm here repatriating and so forth and so on.” So in the meantime, she was working immediately to try and get me out. So what she arranged with the help of her father was that we bought round-trip tickets to Madrid because flights going anywhere out of the country at that time were at a premium. So my grandfather slipped a little money to somebody to get us a seat. It turned out that Madrid was the only place where they had a seat available. It was very expensive too because we're going clear across the ocean (Atlantic) and so we bought the tickets round trip. You had to buy round-trip tickets.

**Sanchez:** Supposedly, you were coming back (to Cuba)?

**Sanchez y Ramos:** And then, we got off the plane when we made a stop in Bermuda. So my mom got off the plane and told the people there, that at the time it was still a British colony and my mom told them that we wanted to go back to the United States. She informed them that we were American residents and that we wanted to go back!

The Brits didn't know what to do with this, so they sent us to Bimini and then finally wound up in Jamaica all in one night. We stayed in a hotel until we could get the whole thing arranged. Then we were finally able to come back to the states after about a month. We were in Jamaica while officials were making sure that we were whom we said we were, and that we were able to enter the country again. So I spent that time in Jamaica and I missed out on some school but finally was able to get back.

**Sanchez:** What were you thinking all this time?

**Sanchez y Ramos:** I was thinking that I was glad to get out that time because, in the Cuban school that my dad put me in, it was known that I was “americanito”(Spanish for little American). They (my school peers) treated me as if I was an American. I spoke Spanish just fine but because of the animosity towards the United States at that time I was pretty much in a fight almost every day in school. You know how it can be. Somebody was starting up a fight with me almost every day and so it was a hard time. You know, it was difficult. I probably suffered more for being American in Cuba than I ever suffered being Cuban here in the states. Not that I haven't had my share of difficulties but it was a tough time. It was a very tough time. So I was very relieved many years later, which was almost 50-years

later when I got in touch with my family in Cuba that they were open to my coming back. In fact, it's been wonderful reconnecting with my relatives again because the Cold War is over in Cuba.

I don't think there's anybody there (Cuba) that wants to go back to that. They have very much put that behind them. They embrace the Cubans that are coming back and I saw that, I've seen that firsthand. My wife has come back with me. She's from Ohio and she's been welcomed. My family loves her. In fact, they've told me "don't come back without her" (laughter). And even my siblings were born here, my mom remarried and she had two children, and even one of them (siblings) has gone back and she's been embraced, loved, and just adored. So it's so wonderful to see the Cold War end for our family.

That's behind us but at the time the Cold War was very real on both sides. Now, while I was experiencing this, you know the animosity towards Americans in Cuba, I went to a mass rally and people were yelling "Cuba si! Yankees no!". I see Yankees no and there was, you know, they had demeaning chants. I think at the time um they would they you know was just very ugly and then the feeling towards Americans, and so you know, I experienced that and then I would go back to Miami and there we were having duck and cover drills at school. We actually had a map that they showed us in school where they would drop the atomic bomb on Miami to create possible damage or population loss and like our house was at ground zero.

So I was and now realized that now I've got the other side of this whole Cold War thing which is what most American born or alive during that time experience which was the fear. The fear of nuclear war. I can remember we lived in a boarding house one night and a police siren, you know, in the night going by. I thought it was an air raid alarm and I went through the house knocking on everybody's doors waking around shouting "there's an air raid! There's an air raid!".

I was having this, you know, nightmare that you know, that we were getting bombed. I can remember walking outside of our house and seeing the lines. I was a real military plane buff, so they were C-119 "flying boxcars". I remember them vividly flying just one after another, after another, and after another if only for 10-minutes. They seemed to be flying overhead heading south towards Homestead Air Force Base (Florida) where they were gathering for the potential invasion there. So you know it was a very sobering experience to see that. When you see the manifestations of war happening that closely that you know it was very sobering. Then I'm going to flip back to Cuba again. My father was a captain in a militia company in Cuba, there were militiamen sitting on the street corners at night. They are sitting on street corners with machine guns in their lap expecting an invasion. So I go back and I see that my father's militia company would train. I was kind of like a mascot. They would take me along and I was with them, why, they even let me shoot a Springfield rifle, an M1 carbine, and a Czech submachine gun. I got the fire weapons with the Cuban militia. I even had a little uniform with a beret and a little green thing I mean, so it was an experience of being on both sides of this conflict which seemed inevitable at that time. I'm sure everybody alive then no felt like it was a very real possibility that we were gonna have World War III.

I remember somebody saying that if there's a World War IV, it's gonna be with clubs because there's not gonna be a whole lot left after World War III. So we all grew up with that. You know, it was like somebody said fallout was in our baby formula. Practically you know that we grew up with the idea of atomic attack and in those days I saw it as very real.

**Sanchez:** How did it impact you as you grew up? Those experiences; how did it impact you in your way of thinking and your writing?

**Sanchez y Ramos:** It made me very understanding of the conflict. That conflict is always between sides that assume that they're the good guys and the other guys are the bad guys. Thus it's always made me want to hear the other side's point of view and get to know because there's probably some common ground if we're willing to listen and it's easy to demonize very easy to demonize, and very easy to fall into the trap of hatred and animosity. It takes a lot more courage to listen. It takes a lot more courage to ask and look for the humanity on the other side because I saw it. I lived it. I saw my family on one side of this Cold War.

I saw my friends and neighbors on the other and there were no bad guys, there were no bad guys, there were just people that had been led into a lot of conflicts. I think that that's the takeaway for me which is, that there's always a way out of every problem if you're willing to resolve it and think it through. But if you let yourself be guided by

slogans, if you let yourself be guided by demonization or hatred, then you know then the conflict becomes inevitable but it isn't. That is what I have taken away from that, the future.

**Sanchez:** So the future is not set in stone? So it's still to be built given the right conditions to be open to looking at the new options and try to find some middle ground?

**Sanchez y Ramos:** Yep, it's there, if you're willing to look for it.

**Sanchez:** This is a very difficult question when I asked myself and I haven't come to any substantial answer but I thought I'd ask. What do you think would have happened in your life had the Cold War not existed?

**Sanchez Y Ramos:** Well, it's hard to answer that because I've lived it. I can't imagine what it would be like without it. It's such an integral part of who I am. I think it isn't just me. I have to believe that the Cold War is as significant to the baby boom generation as say the depression or even World War II was to our parent's generation. It is such a powerful fundamental thing. For example, Vietnam became a big issue because of the draft and because of the war resistance movement, if we don't have a Cold War. If we don't have the use of small nations as proxies as we had in Vietnam we don't have the Vietnam War, and we have a whole loss of generational upheaval which I don't think would have ever happened. So again there's another Cold War relic that we had to live with and we had to deal with. So that's why I think, I appreciate your series in exploring the impact of the Cold War because I don't think it's emphasized enough what an impact it's had on all our lives and how it shaped us.

**Sanchez:** I'm concerned that people think that, as you mentioned, I'll take Vietnam, people think "that was back then" even though it was part of the series of the evolution of things and policies that were evolving out of the Cold War and something so big and so worldwide for so many years 1957 to 1991 that we can't get rid of this. It's in our DNA. I think, especially the baby boomers, we can't get rid of it. On the contrary, we better start going back and embracing it and realize where we are today based on it, you know, one way or another.

**Sanchez y Ramos:** So, well I mean Cuban American culture would not be here, it would not exist, if not for the Cold War. In fact, that Castro chose to align himself with the Eastern bloc there would be no exiles in Miami, there would be no Ted Cruz, there would be no Marco Rubio, and there would be no Bob Menendez. Here are three Cuban-American senators that we have that probably would never have been here had it not been for the Cold War. You know so it again it's American politics in ways which you know we really can't even begin to grasp but it's there. I mean, it's a big influence. If I could, oh, and even going back to before that, the McCarthy Era. I think was also part of the Cold War, all the ostracism of artists, writers, and creative people that took place because of the Cold War scare. The McCarthy, you know, were witch hunts trying to ferret out communists. Again, that has a deep impact on our culture as well.

**Sanchez:** I think you are bringing it to the surface. I have thought of it that way. The word "communism" was attached to a lot of things whether people didn't know what it was. As long as somebody heard it you bring that to the surface with McCarthyism. People heard the word and all of a sudden started running from it but yet what is it? Who is it? Well, you know people started pointing at each other because no one understood what it was. You brought that to the surface. I have a little joke in this dark moment of this history. I've always said you know if Castro had been allowed to pitch baseball for the Washington Senators (*correction from Seattle*) baseball team none of this may have ever happened. Why didn't somebody say "you know what, you're not a great pitcher but we're going to let you join the team". It would have solved so many things. You know you've been missing so it's my own personal. I think it's funny.

**Sanchez y Ramos:** I have a story I tell a very good friend of mine. He's from Indiana. He has been a long-time friend. He came to visit me. At the time, I was playing music and I was down in Dallas. He came down to visit me on vacation from Ohio and so while I was playing music, I had a day job at an artist mall. So while he came to visit me and had lunch, he wandered upstairs and met this young artist who had a little shop, an artist shop, on the second floor. It turns out, that just after that meeting they married, and then they had two kids. So I told his daughters that if not for Fidel Castro, you two wouldn't exist because I would have never come to the United States, your dad would have never come to Dallas and met your mom and so you can thank you're here because of Castro. So you know the connections are pretty powerful. So yeah I always loved that story.

**Sanchez:** I hope we learned our lessons of not ever bringing together a circumstance of apocalypse based on decisions, as it did in the missile crisis in Cuba and also the Bay of Pigs! That was another fiasco to show that policy is not always clear on what decision-making should be made. So you bring in so many issues and side issues and you know that we have to think. We have to think about the dangers of the future it's not something that the Cold War passed and now we're off to a wonderful world. We have to learn from it! So, well, I can't thank you enough for being like, taking time from your writing and your new books that are coming out I have a glimmer of what they are but no mention of it until that secret is released from you what it is so right, I want you to come back and you know always feel welcome to talk about your book and thank you, thank you, for sort of keeping me in the backstage loop on what's going on. You keep up your wonderful work.

**Sanchez y Ramos:** I appreciate it, Armando. I think this is a great project and I'm very happy to take part in it with you.

**Sanchez:** Thank you very much, ladies and gentlemen, we've been talking to Raul Ramos y Sanchez author. Please look him up. You will find some fantastic work, literary work on the idea but now we have another level to understand Raul and also our Cuban neighbors and our Cuban families because we all are related to each other somehow. You know, we've all mixed together. We all have our music, our culture we have more in common than we think. We do so. Let's not put that aside. Let's embrace it as well, but I would thank you again for being on our program. I look forward to having you again, very shortly.

**Sanchez y Ramos:** Thank you Armando.