A Note from the Editor: Mariel—20 Years On

An aspect of the Elian Gonzalez case noted by only a few observers is how much it widened Miami's ethnic divide. A majority of Americans favored reuniting Elian with his father. Ninety-two percent of blacks and 76 percent of non-Hispanic whites told pollsters Elian deserved to be with his father even if that meant return to Cuba. Eighty-three percent of Cuban Americans said he should remain in the U.S., as did 55 percent of other Hispanics. Miami civic activist Dan Ricker observed, "There is a 10-mile fissure in this community and it's getting wider." Florida International University professor Antonio Jorge noted that efforts to promote racial and ethnic cooperation have failed: "The Elian case is direct evidence that we don't understand each other. It will affect the quality of life in this community for years to come."

The loss of Miami's sense of community is just one of the consequences of the 1980 Mariel Boatlift, which, along with succeeding waves of Haitian and Nicaraguan immigration, led to the fragmentation of South Florida. Native Miamians fled north as "acculturation in reverse" took place, with Cubans and other immigrant groups reproducing their institutions in what had once been the American Riviera, long home to a large population of retirees and veterans, joined by tourists during the sunny winters.

For those who may have forgotten, or are not acquainted with, the chain of events that helped trigger the transformation of Miami, the following outline of events may be instructive.

On April 1, 1980, a bus driver, José Antonio Rodriguez Gallegos, drove his minibus through the gates of the Peruvian embassy in Havana, and asked for political asylum. After a Cuban guard was killed, Fidel Castro withdrew police protection from the embassy and over 10,000 Cubans from across the island stormed the embassy grounds, demanding asylum.

Castro then opened the port of Mariel, declaring that anyone wishing to leave Cuba could do so. He invited exiles in the U.S. to come pick up their relatives. The first boats arrived at Key West on April 20, in what became known as the "Freedom Flotilla."

The Carter Administration, fearful of alienating Cuban-American voters, refused to control the exodus.

On May 5, 1980, President Carter welcomed those leaving Cuba with "an open heart and open arms." The following day, Carter declared a state of emergency in Florida and sent U.S. marshals and marines to South Florida to confront the flow.

On June 17, Carter asked Congress to appropriate $385 million for Cuban refugee programs and on June 20, the President granted a special six-month "entrant" status to newly arrived Cubans and Haitians, permitting them to work and qualify for Aid to Families with Dependent Children (AFDC), Supplemental Security Income (SSI), Medicaid, and other assistance programs.

MARIEL BY THE NUMBERS

125,266 refugees in 5 months by way of 2,011 vessels.

26 people died (many on overloaded boats; 14 on May 17 when one boat sank near the coast of Cuba.)

336 people were indicted for aiding illegal immigration (after the U.S. decided to stop the flow in May; later dismissed).

At the peak of boatlift, 2,800 arrived daily. The most to arrive in one day: 6,000 on June 3rd.

CUBAN IMMIGRATION TO THE U.S.

Before 1950	16,406	1975-1979	33,256
1950-1959	50,956	1980-1981	125,313
1960-1964	174,275	1982-1984	23,163
1965-1969	173,287	1985-1986	16,963
1970-1974	109,731	1987-1990	33,837

Sources: 1990 US Census; Origins and Destinies by Silvia Pedraza and Ruben Rumbaut. (—*Miami Herald*, 4-18-2000)

Florida officials, including Miami Mayor Maurice Ferre, urged that the flow of refugees be diverted elsewhere, preferably to other Latin American countries, such as Peru and Costa Rica, but in the end nothing was done to discourage them from settling in South Florida. Jack Watson, Carter's Assistant for Intergovernmental Affairs, explained the decision to admit the illegal Cubans: "We decided that it would be counter-productive to enforce the laws."

Cuba closed Mariel harbor to U.S.-bound emi-grants

on September 26, 1980. Over the course of 159 days, some 125,000 new refugees arrived in the U.S.

It soon became clear that few of the *Marielitos* were fleeing persecution because of their political or religious views, their social class or their race. Many were common criminals and asocials who had heard of, or even seen, the prosperity of the Cubans already living in the U.S. (In the late 1970s, Castro allowed some Cuban Americans to visit Cuba.) Said Enrique Torres, a Havana auto mechanic: "Seeing all those watches and good clothing—it blew people's minds."

By mid-September of 1980, the tide of Caribbean immigrants had put its mark on Miami: a crime wave swept Little Havana; robberies increased 775 percent over 1979; there were 284 percent more car thefts; 191 percent more burglaries; 110 percent more assaults. As the Cuban-born head of a City of Miami social service agency admitted during a 1983 interview, "The quality of Cuban refugees who arrived in the seventies is very different from those who came in 1980. About a third of the 125,000 *Marielitos* are trash—delinquents, homosexuals. Their effects on Miami have been terrible."

Abandoned by official Washington, Miami's natives were forced to flee. The "Mariel Experience" has become institutionalized. Immigration laws are not enforced. The interests and wishes of American citizens are not respected. The notion that immigrants should assimilate to American values has been replaced by the demand that Americans adapt to uninvited newcomers. What happened to Miami is now being repeated in other communities across the country, from Siler City, North Carolina, and Wassau, Wisconsin to Minneapolis, Minnesota. Illegal immigrants and "refugees" have been allowed to arrive in undigestible numbers and practically take over several states in the American Southwest and Pacific coast.

Immigration will shape the U.S. in the 21st century. The great challenge is to see that "America" is not reduced to a mere geographic expression for a territory inhabited by conflicting peoples, who had long before lost any real sense of nationality.

WAYNE LUTTON, Ph.D., Editor