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The Mariel Boatlift of 1980: Consequences of a Politicized Immigration Policy

by Félix Masud-Piloto

As a response to the Cuban Revolution, and influenced by political tensions of the Cold War, in 1959, the United States Government created a policy that has given legal and illegal Cuban immigrants special treatment, benefits and political asylum upon arrival in the United States. That policy is in sharp contrast to the strict regulations and almost automatic rejection faced by immigrants from all other Latin American countries. In practice, the U.S. special immigration policy for Cubans exemplifies the contradictions and complexity of political and economic issues that have guided United States immigration policy since the end of the Second World War.

As a result of its rigid ideological and highly politicized framework, United States immigration policy toward Cuba has at times resulted in unusual episodes with deep and long lasting implications for U.S. foreign policy. One of those episodes, the Mariel boatlift of 1980, or *freedom flotilla*, as it was popularly known, resulted in the immigration to the United States of more than 125,000 Cubans, making it the largest uncontrolled migration in U.S. history.

The Mariel boatlift was preceded by a series of events and incidents in Cuba and the U.S. that led to the fast escalation of a relatively small domestic incident into a major international crisis. A series of embassy invasions in Havana and hijackings of Cuban planes and vessels, the decline of the Cuban economy, and pressures for emigration from Cubans disaffected with the Revolution, contributed to the tensions that brought the multiple crises to a head in the spring of 1980.

**Embassy Takeovers and the Right to Political Asylum**

On April 1, 1980, six Cubans in a bus crashed through the gate of the Peruvian embassy in Havana amid a hail of gunfire in which one Cuban guard was killed. The gatecrashers solicited and received political asylum from the Peruvian government. Cuba responded by increasing the number of guards and barricades at the embassy gate and demanding that the gatecrashers be surrendered and tried for the death of Pedro Ortiz Cabrera, the Cuban soldier killed during the incident.1

The incident at the Peruvian embassy was not isolated or new. For months, Cubans trying to leave the country had been breaking into Latin American embassies in Havana. In March 1980, Peruvian Ambassador Edgardo de Hasbich y Palacio was recalled to Lima after sending away twelve Cubans who had sought asylum in his embassy. Up until the April 1 incident, twenty-five asylum seekers had forced their way into the Peruvian embassy, fifteen into the Venezuelan embassy, and one into the Argentine embassy.2 The Cuban government did not recognize the political asylum rights of those people, because none of those who entered the embassies through the use of force could prove political persecution, and thus did not meet the basic requirement for diplomatic asylum.3

The Peruvian government refused repeated requests by Cuban authorities to surrender the gatecrashers. Cuba then responded by withdrawing all guards and barricades from the embassy compound. In addition, Cuban state-run radio announced that anyone who wanted to leave the country should go to the Peruvian embassy. Neither the Cuban nor Peruvian government was prepared for the spontaneous response to the radio announcement. Within seventy-two hours more than 10,000 people had crowded into the embassy grounds.4

The Cuban government explained its position and provided details about the guards' withdrawal on April 4 in a series of articles in Granma, believed to have been written by Castro himself. The articles alleged that the vast majority of those who rushed to the embassy after the radio announcements were "scum, criminals, lumpen, parasites, and antisocial elements" and that "none of them were subject to political persecution nor were they in need of..."
CASTRO CLAIMED THEN THAT IF THE UNITED STATES EXTENDED ITS OPEN IMMIGRATION POLICY TOWARD CUBA TO OTHER POOR LATIN AMERICAN COUNTRIES, THEY WOULD EMPTY OUT OVERNIGHT.

the sacred right of diplomatic asylum." Even so, Cuba's policy would be as follows:

1. Cuba is not opposed to having all those who so desire to travel legally to Venezuela and Peru as long as they obtain authorization from those countries.

2. Nor does it oppose having them travel to other countries with the authorization of the corresponding government.

3. Those who forced their way into the embassies will not be allowed to leave.

4. Those who entered the Peruvian embassy after the guards were removed are not considered guilty of forced entry and are, therefore, absolutely free to return to their homes and go in and out of the embassy as often as they want. The Cuban authorities will not take measures against them. They can go to Peru or any country which gives them a visa. That is up to them and the country that wants to receive them.

As far as the Cuban government was concerned, the Peruvian embassy affair could be easily solved as soon as Peru or any other country or countries agreed to receive the asylum seekers. To classify all those who wished to leave Cuba as "scum" and "antisocial" was unfair and inaccurate. Cuba's claim, however, that the main motivation for the crowd at the Peruvian embassy was economic and not political was certainly accurate, and would soon be accepted by the U.S. government.

People wanted to leave Cuba for many reasons. Chief among them were: (a) family reunification; when the Cuban airlift was suspended in 1973, tens of thousands were waiting to join their families in the United States and had been unable to do so since; (b) weariness with the sacrifices the revolution required, and desire for a less regimented life in the United States; (c) consumerism, long gone from Cuba's revolutionary austerity, but brought back for a short time during the 1979 dialogue, when Cuban exiles visited the island bringing expensive gifts and success stories about life in the United States; and (d) political dissidence. Many had been disaffected with the government for years and patiently awaited the opportunity to leave.

These explanations did not convince observers and commentators outside Cuba, who almost invariably chose to interpret the events in strictly political terms. To them, the "Havana Ten Thousand," was a clear repudiation of Castro and the revolution. Cubans in the United States read the embassy incident as the first signs of "open rebellion" against Castro and the "beginning of the end" for the revolutionary government. Exile communities in Miami, New York City, Union City, and Washington, D.C., staged demonstrations, rallies, and money and food drives in solidarity with the ten thousand at the Peruvian embassy.

In an editorial titled "The Havana Ten Thousand," the New York Times interpreted the embassy affair as a "verdict on Castroism" and urged the United States to use it for anti-Castro propaganda in the Caribbean. "In their own way, the only feasible way, the Havana Ten Thousand are rendering a verdict on Castroism.... American diplomacy ought to be resourceful to see that this verdict is absorbed throughout the Caribbean, a region searching for new forms of governments." The Miami Herald also focused on the repudiation thesis: "Thousands of Cubans, repressed by more than 21 years of Castro's Communist rule and desperate for a chance to live in freedom, went to the embassy." While the rhetoric of freedom and democracy filled the front pages, the situation inside the Peruvian embassy kept worsening, and Castro personally guaranteed the safety of all those who went home until exit visas could be arranged. To the surprise of those who had interpreted the embassy affair as a statement against Communist repression and Castro's dictatorship, several thousand people in the embassy accepted the offer. About 3,000 people received temporary passes to go home, 747 decided to not return to the embassy; another 3,187 received permanent passes to stay home and passports and authorization to leave the country.

The unusual arrangement between Castro the "persecutor" and the 10,000 "persecuted" in the embassy prompted some serious reevaluations. The United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees said that the problem was not in his jurisdiction because "scammers" were not refugees, they were just people wanting to emigrate. Third World Magazine journalist Luis
Rodriguez dos Santos underlined the contrast between those trying to leave Cuba and those trying to escape right-wing military dictatorships in Latin America. "The thousands of Latin Americans who have had to take shelter in embassies to escape the chamber-of-horrors persecutions of Pinochet, Videla and the Uruguayan generals must have smiled at seeing these 'refugees' leave the embassy at night, to sleep calmly in their homes while awaiting exit documents."

Even William R. Long, managing editor of El Miami Herald, argued that while the Havana ten thousand would have gone anywhere, Peru was not exactly where they wanted to go. Most wanted to come to the United States:

Peru may be free of the Communist yoke, but it's no land of opportunity. It is a miserable poor country, where millions live in squalor and hunger... .18 percent of the work force is unemployed, and 47 percent is underemployed... .72 of every 1,000 Peruvian babies less than a year old died, compared to 37 per 1,000 in Cuba... . Life is just as hard in Peru, in different but no less vital ways. If they had a chance to get to the United States, 10,000 Peruvians and more would be just as desperate to go as the Havana ten thousand.

It is ironic that Long's article inadvertently repeated Castro's own observations at the time of the Camarioca boatlift fifteen years earlier. Castro claimed then that if the United States extended its own immigration policy toward Cuba to other poor Latin American countries, they would empty out overnight. As far as Castro was concerned, the United States still practiced an open-door immigration policy with regard to Cuba. All he had to do was find a way to set it in motion. No other Latin American government had that option.

Almost a month before the Peruvian embassy incident, in a speech to the Federation of Cuban Women's third congress, Castro raised the possibility of a second Camarioca by publicly criticizing the United States for encouraging illegal departures from Cuba by way of hijacking boats to Florida. The Cuban government felt that while it had responded to U.S. wishes with regard to skyjackings, the United States had not responded to them in kind for maritime hijacking or other illegal departures from Cuba. Castro stated:

We hope that they [the United States] will adopt measures so they will not encourage the illegal departures from the country because we might also have to take our own measures. We did it once... We were forced to take measures in this regard once. We have also warned them of this. We once had to open the Camarioca port... . We feel it is proof of the lack of maturity of the United States Government to again create similar situations.

Castro's public warning was only the latest in a series of indications of his desire to resume normal migration to the United States. In addition, the Cuban government had privately discussed the possibilities of reopening Camarioca months before the embassy incident. Both Central Intelligence Agency and the State Department were well-informed about Cuba's plans as early as January 1980, three months before the embassy incident. The evidence clearly showed that if the opportunity presented itself, Castro would not hesitate to launch another massive migration to the United States.

The rush of more than 10,000 asylum-seeking Cubans into the Peruvian embassy was, if nothing else, an embarrassment to Castro. Castro, however, had turned bad situations for the better in the past and sought to do it again. After all, conditions were generally in his favor. The embassy incident did not represent a serious challenge to his power, and he had proven his good faith in negotiations with the Cuban exile community by releasing political prisoners and allowing exile visits during 1978 and 1979. Most importantly, the U.S. immigration policy toward Cuba had always operated at the crisis level, and precedents for a boatlift and airlift had been established almost fifteen years earlier.

THE BOATLIFT BEGINS

Napoleón Vilaboa, a Bay of Pigs veteran and Committee-of-75 member, was visiting Cuba at the time of the Peruvian embassy incident. Upon his return to Miami, Vilaboa and a group of fellow exiles decided that perhaps they could persuade the Cuban government to allow them to transport the "Havana ten thousand" to Florida. They organized a flotilla of forty-two privately owned boats and set out for Cuba loaded with medicines and food for the would-be refugees. To their surprise, the Cuban government agreed to open the Port of Mariel, not only to those in the Peruvian embassy, but to anyone whose relatives in the states came to Mariel to claim them.

The Cuban government's official announcement of the new boatlift sent shock waves throughout Cuba, Cuban exile communities, and Washington. Just a day before the announcement, April 19, 1980, a massive demonstration of more than a million people marched in front of the Peruvian embassy in Havana to show support for Castro and the revolution. Thousands of Cuban exiles rushed to Key West, Florida, to rent or buy every available vessel and head for Cuba to claim their relatives. In Washington, President Carter pondered the situation with some apprehension but finally reacted with a phrase borrowed from his predecessors: the United States would continually "provide an open heart and open arms for the tens of thousands of refugees seeking freedom from Communist domination."

Carter's "open heart and open arms" remarks were interpreted as the signal to proceed with the boatlift, and within hours hundreds of boats jammed Mariel Harbor. More than 6,000 Cubans arrived in Key West during the first week of the boatlift, and throughout the month of May, daily arrivals averaged 3,000 persons. The president had inadvertently committed a serious blunder, since his initial reaction to the boatlift had been that it was illegal, and anyone who participated in it would be subject to prosecution. For the moment, confusion ruled and the boatlift continued.

Blame for the confusion should not be assigned wholly to President Carter. After all, Eisenhower and Johnson had reacted the same way to similar Cuban refugee crises during their administrations. Nevertheless, the situation had changed since the Eisenhower and Johnson eras. Under the Refugee Act of March 1980, passed only five weeks before Mariel, the United States had placed a yearly quota of 19,500 refugees from Cuba. In addition, individual case reviews were required before refugee status was granted. The law defined refugees as people who were "unable and unwilling" to return to their homeland because of political, racial, religious, or other persecution.

Technically and legally, the Cubans were
The prospect of another massive Cuban migration to Florida alarmed state and federal officials and created a dilemma for them. For months Haitians coming into the state had been denied refugee status. If the federal government followed tradition and granted refugee status to the Cubans, it would seemingly have to do the same for the estimated 30,000 illegal Haitians in the state. Refugees status meant that all those eligible would qualify for federal aid. Thus, the status question could mean millions or billions of dollars, depending on the number of Mariel entrants, in state and federal spending. While Florida officials demanded federal action, the administration waivered and the boats kept coming.  

In an attempt to stem the tide of Cubans or at least to make the boatlift more orderly, the administration on May 14 made an offer to the Cuban government and reiterated the illegality of the boatlift to those participating in it:  

We are prepared to start an airlift or a sealift immediately as soon as President Castro accepts this offer. Our government is chartering two large, seaworthy ships, which will go to Key West to stand by, ready to go to Cuba. To ensure a legal and orderly process, all people will have to be screened before departure from Cuba. . . . The Coast Guard is now communicating with vessels illegally en route to or from Cuba and those already in Mariel Harbor to tell them to return to the United States without taking Cubans on board. . . . We will do everything possible to stop these illegal trips to Cuba.  

The administration’s proposal was almost immediately rejected. Boats piloted by Cuban exiles continued bringing “illegals” to Key West by the thousands, risking boat impoundment as well as a thousand-dollar fine per passenger upon arrival. Nearly 9,000 Cubans arrived in Key West in the first two days following the administration’s announcement. Castro responded with “the march of the fighting people,” in which more than 5 million persons (more than half Cuba’s population) participated. There were also pro-Cuba support marches in Costa Rica, Peru, Mexico, and Panama.

Fidel Castro was determined to turn the Peruvian embassy incident and subsequent boatlift into a political victory for him through demonstrations of support and to embarrass President Carter through defiance. On May Day, before a crowd of one million, and with a number of Latin American heads of state in attendance, Castro defiantly told Carter that Mariel Harbor would remain open: “We are vigorously abiding by our slogan. “Anybody who wishes to go to any country where he is received, good riddance.” He had cleverly turned the “escape from communism” line against its principal author. In addition, Castro told the United States that Cuba was willing to talk, not only about refugees but also about the U.S. economic embargo against Cuba, the naval base at Guantanamo, and U.S. spy flights over Cuba. In other words, if the United States wanted an orderly immigration, it would have to discuss other longstanding issues with Cuba. In the meantime, Cuba controlled the migration of Cubans to the United States.  

Faced with defiance by the Cuban exiles and intransigence from Castro, the federal government was forced to cope with the Cuban influx the way it had in the past. On May 6, President Carter declared a state of emergency in Florida, and a tent city went up in the Orange Bowl Stadium in Miami to accommodate thousands of homeless Cubans. Another tent city was located under Miami’s Interstate 95, and tens of thousands of refugees were flown to isolated military bases. Fort Chaffee, Arkansas, Eglin Air Force Base, Florida, Fort Indiesown Gap, Pennsylvania, and Fort McCoy, Wisconsin, became temporary home for thousands of Cubans waiting to be claimed by family, hoping for sponsors, or detained because of their criminal record in Cuba.  

The longer Cubans stayed in the processing centers, the more frustrated they became. They had come to the United States in the “freedom flotilla,” but thousands were detained for months, and some were imprisoned for years for crimes committed in Cuba against Castro’s government. Confused and frustrated about their plight, the detainees sometimes rioted, demanding their immediate release.

Nightly television news reports and daily newspaper accounts of violent confrontations between the Cubans and the National Guard, the escape of “known criminals” from the camps, and the destruction and burning of federal property by the newly arrived refugees triggered a new wave of resentment and apprehension against them. A Gallup poll revealed that 59 percent of Americans believed the influx of Cubans was bad for the United States, while only 19 percent thought it was good.

By early June 1980, the Mariel boatlift had turned into a major crisis for South Florida and the Carter administration. More than 80,000 Cubans had arrived illegally in Key West, and the end of the boatlift was nowhere in sight. In the meantime, the federal government grappled with the status question: Were the Cubans motivated by economic or political reasons? The Carter administration resisted granting refugee status to the Cubans by arguing that the new arrivals’ motivations for leaving Cuba were more economic than political. “In general, their fear of persecution was derived from their own act of leaving Cuba, not necessarily that they had been persecuted by the government before leaving. Refugee status would reward illegal entry and set dangerous precedents for future migration; the Cubans were no more deserving of refugee status than the Haitians.

The status question was temporarily settled on June 20 when the administration announced the creation of a new classification: “Cuban-Haitian entrant.” Under this classification, the new entrants would be allowed to stay in the United States and could adjust their status to that of “permanent resident alien” after two years. Most importantly, the entrants would be eligible for medical services, supplemental income, and emergency assistance benefits, and state and local government would be reimbursed for 75 percent of the program’s costs.

The Cuban-Haitian classification defused the crisis for the Carter administration but failed to solve the long-term problems associated with a multiple refugee influx. In the short run, state and local governments were appeased with reimbursements, and a “dangerous precedent” for future immigrations was avoided. More significantly, the new classification broke with the traditional special treatment Cubans had received from the U.S. Government since 1959.

Before Mariel, Cubans wishing to immigrate to the United States enjoyed a special status in the eyes of
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After 1980, the Cuban migration to the U.S. returned to its usual high and low flow, dictated by political and economic crises in Cuba. Thus those wanting to emigrate had few options: 1) apply for legal emigration to the U.S. by going through a long and torturous process that often ended in failure; 2) emigrate to a third country and apply for an entry permit to the U.S. from there, also a long and much more difficult process; or 3) do what so many had done before them, risk their lives attempting the dangerous voyage to Florida, where the lucky survivors were always welcome. That was the case until the summer of
1994, when more than 30,000 Cubans, in extremely dangerous “rafts,” made it to Florida, creating the biggest crisis in Cuban immigration since Mariel. This time, however, the U.S. and Cuban Governments negotiated and signed a comprehensive immigration agreement that although not perfect, was designed to control and regulate immigration form Cuba.

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All images were provided by Ernesto Rodriguez Chávez.

NOTES
2. Ibid.
4. The quick and sizable response to Castro’s offer made headlines throughout Cuba and the United States. See Granma, April 7, 1980, 1; Bohemia, April 12, 1980, 4-8; New York Times, April 7, 1980, 1a; Washington Post, April 7, 1980, 1.
8. For more on the exiles’ demonstrations, including pictures, see El Miami Herald, April 8, 1980, 1; April 12, 1980, 44; April 15, 1980, 13; Miami Herald, April 17, 1980, 7a.
17. Newsweek, May 5, 1980, 59. Before Viláboa’s action, the Cuban government had canceled flights from Havana to San José, Costa Rica, claiming that the flights were being used for propaganda against Cuba, and that the asylees would have to go directly to their permanent destinations, mainly the United States. For more details on Costa Rica’s role in the negotiations and the massive demonstrations held in Havana on April 19, 1980, see Jamás nos rendímos (Havana, 1980).
18. Quoted in Copeland, “The Cuban Crisis,” 26. Like the Camarioca boatlift of 1965, news of Mariel’s opening made headlines throughout Cuba and the United States. Again, the most reliable source for day-to-day details about the operation was the mass media in both Cuba and the United States. See Miami Herald, New York Times, Granma, and Bohemia for the period of April 20 to September 27, 1980.
21. For the full text of the White House statement, see Miami Herald, May 15, 1980, 18a. For more on Carter’s attempts to stop the sealift, and the Cuban exiles’ response to them, see Mario A. Rivera, “Refugee Chess: Policy by Default,” Caribbean Review 13 (Fall 1984): 4-6, 36-39.
24. For the full text of Castro’s speech and the views of other Latin American leaders who spoke at the rally, see “Con el pueblo no se juega,” Bohemia, May 9, 1980, 50-64; Una batalla por nuestra soberanía (Havana, 1980); and Granma, May 11, 1980, 1-6.
29. Ibid.