

US spurns father's appeal for return of Elian Gonzalez

Cuban child sacrificed to right-wing political agenda

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The case of Elian Gonzalez, a six-year-old Cuban child who miraculously survived two days at sea after his mother and nine others died trying to reach the Florida coast, has provided the world with a spectacle of imperialist arrogance and hypocrisy.

The boy was brought ashore Thanksgiving day by a fisherman who found him floating in an inner tube. He was then effectively abducted by right-wing Cuban exile elements, with the complicity of the US Immigration and Naturalization Service and the Clinton administration.

Washington has thus far ignored demands of the boy's father, Juan Miguel Gonzalez, and of his grandparents and other relatives for his return to Cuba. Instead, though he is officially still in the custody of the INS, young Elian was handed over to a great uncle and aunt who quickly placed the child at the disposal of the Cuban American National Foundation (CANF), the main anti-Castro exile front.

This organization, which exercises a disproportionate influence over both the Democratic and Republican parties with regard to US policy toward Cuba as well as local politics in south Florida, has been linked to acts of terrorism directed against the Caribbean island nation.

With complete indifference to the welfare of a child, who had just seen his mother and her companions die horrible deaths and faced the terror of floating by himself in the open sea, the CANF rushed to exploit the boy as a pawn in an anti-Castro propaganda campaign. Posters bearing his face were printed up by the thousands proclaiming him "another child victim of Castro."

Elian, who turned six shortly after arriving in Florida, became the center of a media circus manipulated by the right-wing exile leaders. The first pictures of the boy showed him wearing a T-shirt bearing the logo of the Cuban American National Foundation.

He was paraded before television cameras to tell the world that he wanted to stay in the US, and shown seated among piles of toys and trinkets showered upon him. His birthday was celebrated in similarly lavish style, with more than 50 guests and a huge cake. That such displays might not be in the best interests of a child who has just gone through the most traumatic experience imaginable apparently never occurred to his American relatives or their wealthy backers. Only after more than a week of parading him before the cameras did his great uncle restrict media access to the boy, saying he was doing so on the advice of psychologists and lawyers.

What any of this means to Elian is far from clear. In telephone conversations with his father in Cuba he has promised that he is returning home soon and asked that his classmates at school be told to take care of his things while he is gone.

The boy's teacher broke down in tears when interviewed by Cuban television. "When I see his empty chair," she said, "and the pressures he is being put under in the US, so small and with such a horrible and recent experience, it breaks my heart. You have to be blind, sick with hatred to use a child in this situation in your policy against the Cuban revolution."

By all accounts, the boy's father was a loving and close parent. Separated from Elian's mother, he took care of the boy five nights a week, with the child going to his mother's home on weekends. He has insisted that the mother took the child without his knowledge or permission on the tragic voyage to Florida.

Had Elian been from any other country in the world, there can be little doubt that he would have been sent back to his father in short order. US law consistently sides with a biological parent over any other relative in custody cases in the absence of proven evidence of abuse. Because Elian is Cuban, however, he has been caught in a web of political intrigue spun by Washington and the exile organizations. In the latest maneuver, lawyers have filed an application for asylum on Elian's behalf, claiming that he has reason to fear retaliation if returned to his homeland. While ridiculous on its face, the application is aimed at stalling any move to return the boy for many more months.

While the right-wing Cuban organizations in Miami have insinuated that Elian's father is demanding the return of his son only because of pressure from Cuban President Fidel Castro, it is clear that inducements of a different sort are being offered by his distant relatives in Miami to prevent him from going back to his home.

According to a report published in the *Washington Post*, exile figures have stated that they are prepared to raise up to \$2 million to demonstrate that the shipwrecked child can enjoy an opulent lifestyle unattainable by his counterparts in Cuba.

Meanwhile, Elian's father reported that when he spoke to him on the boy's birthday, he could hear an adult voice in the background instructing the child to tell his father that he wants to stay in Miami to become a pilot for Brothers to the Rescue. This outfit has been used by the counterrevolutionary exile leadership to stage provocations against Cuba in an attempt to promote a US military intervention.

The tug-of-war over the Cuban six-year-old has given rise to some of the biggest demonstrations in Cuba's history. More than 1 million people took to the streets from Havana to Santiago demanding Elian's return and shouting anti-US slogans.

The American government and the media have attempted to dismiss these outpourings as mere stage-managed events orchestrated by the Castro government. While no doubt the Castro regime is attempting to

use the incident to further its own maneuvers with Washington, the genuine outrage felt by masses of Cubans over the Elian affair is deeply rooted.

What is the real argument being made by those who insist that the child should be kept in Miami and torn from his family? Behind all the fulminations about dictatorial practices in Cuba and his right to "grow up in freedom," their bottom line is that in America he can get rich, while in Cuba the social transformations wrought by the 1959 revolution have closed that avenue for the present. The clear implication is that lack of the wherewithal to provide what is known as "the American way of life" is itself grounds to brand a parent unfit to raise a child.

This argument reduces all Cubans to a status of less than human. To follow its logic, the masses of Latin America and all the former colonial countries have no right to ask for the return of their children should they, by a stroke of luck, be kidnapped and transported to the North American promised land.

There is a smug and sinister conception underlying the claims of those in Miami who say they are only doing what is best for the child. It is self-evident, they maintain, that growing up with access to money in the US is preferable to living with limited resources in an impoverished country, no matter that a child is deprived of the only family he has ever known.

If "welfare of the child" is really the concern of the Cuban American National Foundation, however, the question is raised, why stop with Elian? There are countless hundreds of thousands of children all over Latin America who are far more in need of such a rescue. Why not bring the abandoned children from the streets of Haiti, the Dominican Republic, Mexico, Bolivia and Brazil to Miami and set them up in style as well?

The real aim of the exile groups in Miami is to exploit the tragedy of Elian Gonzalez to further their own political influence and pursue their ultimate goal of regaining control of Cuba's wealth and resources.

They have attempted to make their case both with threats—sending demonstrators into the streets denouncing President Clinton as a coward for acknowledging that the father has some rights in this controversy—and other forms of persuasion. Jorge Mas Santos, the president of the Cuban American National Foundation, approached Clinton at a Democratic fundraising dinner in Coral Gables, Florida, handing him a letter from Elian's relatives asking for a personal audience in which the six-year-old could tell the US president that he wants to stay in Miami. Clinton previously won both political support and campaign funding from the CANF by tailoring his line on Cuba to its right-wing agenda.

The tragedy of Elian Gonzalez finds its source primarily in the continuation of this rabid anti-Cuban policy by the US government. On the one hand, the US maintains an economic embargo against the island and attempts to exact retribution against all of Washington's economic rivals who dare to seek profits on the island. The impact on the Cuban people has been economic privation and shortages, drastically exacerbated in the wake of the Soviet Union's collapse. Social hardships generate economic refugees from Cuba, just as they do from the rest of Latin America.

On the other hand, the US maintains a unique immigration policy with relation to the country under what is known as the Cuban Adjustment Act. This grants legal resident status to any Cuban national who manages to set foot on American soil.

The policy has given rise to grotesque distinctions between what are

popularly referred to as "wet-foot" and "dry-foot" Cuban immigrants.

Those who are caught in US waters before reaching land are repatriated to Cuba under an agreement forged between Washington and Havana in 1994-95, following the last major exodus of Cuban refugees. Cuban patrol boats monitor craft leaving the island and, failing to turn them back, radio ahead to the US Coast Guard to intercept them. Havana has pledged as part of the agreement not to retaliate against those who are repatriated. For its part, Washington has agreed to an expansion of legal visas for Cubans seeking to leave for the US to 20,000 a year.

The policy of granting residence to any Cuban managing to reach land has given rise to a profitable and growing trade in smuggling people off the island. Cubans in Miami with small boats charging between \$8,000 and \$12,000 per person work in league with cohorts on the island in arranging illegal crossings. The profit motive dictates packing the small craft with as many human beings as possible, frequently leading to shipwrecks.

No such policy, of course, exists in relation to the far greater numbers of Mexicans, Central Americans and other Latin American undocumented immigrants seeking to flee poverty and oppression across the heavily fortified US southern border. Whether caught in the waters of the Rio Grande or in the deserts of the southwest, they are sent back to their countries with no recourse.

The case of Elian could sink talks scheduled for December 13 in Havana between the US and Cuba on the migration question. The breakdown of the current arrangement between Washington and Havana could lead to yet another crisis of "rafters" heading for the Florida coast.

Relations between the two countries were further undermined by the acquittal in a federal court in Puerto Rico of a group of exiles charged with plotting to assassinate Fidel Castro at a Latin American summit conference on the Venezuelan island of Margarita in 1997. The five individuals, who were linked to the Cuban American National Foundation, were caught by the US Coast Guard off the shores of Puerto Rico in a boat loaded with weapons, ammunition and other military supplies. One of the group confessed that they were on their way to the summit with the objective of killing the Cuban leader.



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