

Outrage and hypocrisy from right wing, media

# Rescue of Elian Gonzalez intensifies political crisis in US

**Patrick Martin**  
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The apoplectic reaction of congressional Republicans and sections of the US media to the return of Elian Gonzalez to his Cuban father has great political significance. It demonstrates that the deep divisions within the American ruling elite, which erupted in 1998-99 in the attempted impeachment coup against Clinton, have, if anything, become even more intense and bitter.

The Saturday morning Immigration and Naturalization Service (INS) police raid, which lasted three minutes and resulted in no injuries and minimal damage, enforced longstanding government and court orders to remove Elian Gonzalez from the house of his distant relatives in Miami and return him to the custody of his father, Juan Miguel Gonzalez.

The action took place after five months of stalling by the Miami relatives, and came nine days after Lazaro Gonzalez, Elian's great-uncle, refused an appeal to release the boy delivered by Attorney General Janet Reno in person. Lazaro Gonzalez declared at the time: "They will have to pry Elian out of my arms. Our position is we will not turn over the child—anywhere."

As for the suggestion that an armed raid was unwarranted because there was no danger of violent resistance, such claims are in conflict with known facts. Armed security men for the rightist Cuban-American National Foundation (CANF) were regularly patrolling outside the house, intermingled with the crowd of supporters. One such CANF gunman, Mario Blas Miranda, 48, a licensed private investigator and president of Wellington and Knight Security, was on duty when the INS agents went in and had to be subdued. The CANF has been linked to a series of terrorist attacks on Cuban targets, including the bombing of Cuban airliners in which hundreds of innocent people have been killed.

Both the Miami relatives and their supporters in the Cuban exile community repeatedly threatened to maintain their control of Elian Gonzalez by force. Cuban-Americans who expressed sympathy for the father were the targets of death threats and in some cases assaulted on the street. Less than 48 hours before the raid, Marisleysis Gonzalez, the 21-year-old daughter of Lazaro, warned a member of the Justice Department's Community Relations Service staff: "You think we just have cameras in the house? If people try to come in, they could be hurt."

Far from seeking a violent confrontation with the Miami relatives, the Clinton administration and Attorney General Reno had repeatedly capitulated to their demands and took no action as one deadline after another expired for handing Elian Gonzalez over to his father. The INS determined January 10 that Juan Miguel Gonzalez had the sole right to speak for his son, but waited more than three months to enforce this decision. The more that Clinton and Reno temporized, the more emboldened the Miami relatives became.

The Elian Gonzalez case became the focal point for a hysterical right-wing campaign in Miami's Little Havana, which combined

anticommunism, obsessive hatred of Cuban President Fidel Castro, and Catholic religious dogma. The mayors of Miami and Dade County declared they would not enforce the law against the relatives who were keeping Elian from his father. Right-wing judges in the 11th Circuit Court of Appeals intervened last week, issuing a bizarre ruling suggesting that the INS should take seriously the asylum appeal to which the six-year-old, manipulated by his anti-Castro relatives, put his name.

The result of the raid was largely welcomed by public opinion in the United States, which has been wholeheartedly on the side of reuniting Elian with his father. Polls taken immediately afterwards showed majorities of as much as two to one endorsing the use of force and blaming the Miami relatives for the standoff. Even a poll of readers of the *Miami Herald's* Internet edition showed a sizeable majority in support of the action. The protests in Little Havana were themselves relatively muted.

But in official Washington, and in much of the national media, the reaction to the INS operation was one of hysterical outrage. Congressional Republicans announced plans to hold hearings on Reno's decision to send in the police, with House Majority Whip Tom DeLay declaring he was "sickened" and that "the United States has for the first time raided a private home without a court order."

DeLay has apparently forgotten the Palmer Raids, the McCarthy witchhunts, the extermination campaign waged by the FBI against the Black Panthers, the MOVE bombing in Philadelphia, and countless other atrocities carried out by federal and local authorities in the United States against left-wing, working class and minority groups targeted for state repression.

By comparison with such atrocities, Saturday morning's INS action was both bloodless and, from the standpoint of its immediate results, benign. Moreover, DeLay's claim was false. Justice Department officials later produced copies of the warrant issued by a federal magistrate on Friday evening, which gave authority to the INS agents to enter the house, by force if necessary, to secure the return of Elian Gonzalez to his father.

Senate Majority Leader Trent Lott of Mississippi said, "The use of this type of force clearly was not justified," calling the raid "un-American" and more like "something that only happens in Fidel Castro's Cuba." Senator Bob Smith of New Hampshire, who last year quit the Republican Party because it was not extreme enough in its pursuit of right-wing policies, denounced the raid as "a violent abuse of power."

Neither senator, nor any of their colleagues, Republican or Democrat, has protested the real abuses of power by the INS against immigrant workers from Latin America, Asia, Africa and the Middle East. On the contrary, under the Clinton administration and the Republican Congress, the Border Patrol and INS have been doubled in size, detention prisons for immigrants built throughout the country, and the US-Mexico border

turned into a barrier equivalent to the Berlin Wall. Every day undocumented workers are deported, jailed, shot or otherwise abused, with enthusiastic support from both big business parties.

Perhaps the most ludicrous intervention came from New York Mayor Rudolph Giuliani, the likely Republican candidate for US Senate in New York state against Hillary Clinton. He was repeatedly interviewed on the media referring to the INS agents as “storm troopers,” and in one appearance declared: “Think of how lucky you are to have the kind of police department you have in New York City, how restrained it is, the way in which they handle crowds.” This from the mayor who has routinely ordered police suppression of the right to demonstrate—most notably in Harlem last year—and who is responsible for covering up such atrocities as the murders of Amadou Diallo and Patrick Dorismond, young immigrant workers killed by police because of their skin color and ancestry.

There was considerable bipartisan support for the condemnation of the INS action in Miami. The Florida state political establishment, including Republican Governor Jeb Bush, Republican Senator Connie Mack, and Democratic Senator Bob Graham, all attacked the raid, claiming that the Justice Department should have continued negotiations with the Miami relatives. None of these officials had ever urged the Miami relatives to obey the law and return Elian Gonzalez to his father.

Both the Republican and Democratic presidential nominees criticized the raid. Texas Governor George W. Bush said, “The chilling picture of a little boy being removed from his home at gunpoint defies the values of America and is not an image a freedom-loving nation wants to show the world.” Vice President Al Gore, who made an extraordinary public break with his own administration over the issue last month, reiterated his position: “I believe this issue should have been handled through a family court and with the family coming together.”

Gore's position is especially telling. Instead of appealing to the two-thirds majority which supports the rights of Juan Miguel Gonzalez to be reunited with his son, he is seeking to compete with Bush in appealing to the Cuban-American rightists and their cothinkers nationally, who make up a relatively small minority. This demonstrates once again how both major parties have shifted to the right, and the gulf between the official political structure and the sentiments of tens of millions of working people.

As in the 1998-1999 impeachment investigation, the television networks and major national daily newspapers are playing a key role in supporting the position of the extreme right and giving it political credibility. Television pundits on Sunday morning talk shows, from the conservative George Will to the liberal Cokie Roberts, virtually foamed at the mouth over the “brutality” of the raid on the home of Lazaro Gonzalez.

CNN repeatedly displayed the photograph of an INS agent holding an automatic weapon, seeking to take Elian from the arms of Donato Dalrymple, one of the family's supporters, with Dalrymple cropped out, so that the weapon appeared aimed at the child. MSNBC anchor Brian Williams brazenly slanted his coverage of the incident, describing the Justice Department explanation as the “government excuse” for the use of force.

The *New York Times* declared in an editorial April 24: “The Justice Department acted rashly and unwisely in ordering the raid, and its decisions now require the most careful evaluation by Congress and the American people ... The Justice Department has yet to offer a good reason why it did not seek a court order instructing Lázaro González to produce Elián.”

As though the Miami relatives had not already announced that they would defy any such order, as they had previous orders from federal authorities! As it did during the impeachment campaign, the *New York Times* plays the role of liberal accomplice of the ultra-right.

Predictably, the most hysterical and inflammatory response to the rescue

of Elian Gonzalez appeared on the editorial page of the *Wall Street Journal*, which echoed and embellished the wildest claims of the Miami relatives, such as the suggestion that the photograph of Elian reunited with his father was doctored, and the claim that Elian is being drugged and brainwashed by Cuban government agents (presumably working out of Andrews Air Force Base!)

After echoing Giuliani in denouncing “storm trooper tactics,” the *Journal* demands a congressional investigation of the alleged mistreatment of Elian Gonzalez by the INS agents who returned him to his father. “Congress should establish what drugs he may have been given while in *U.S. government custody* [their emphasis]—before his beaming photo with his father,” the editorial declares.

Next to the editorial appears a column by former Reagan speechwriter Peggy Noonan, which embraces the religious claptrap about Elian's miraculous rescue by dolphins—“God's creatures had been commanded to protect one of God's children”—thus bringing to mind that Reagan carried out major policy initiatives on the basis of recommendations from his wife Nancy's astrologer.

Noonan spells out the full-blown right-wing paranoia about the Clinton administration, noting, “The Starr report tells us of what the president said to Monica Lewinsky about their telephone sex: that there was reason to believe that they were being monitored by a foreign intelligence service. Naturally the service would have taped the calls to use in the blackmail of the president. Maybe it was Mr. Castro's intelligence service, or that of a Castro friend.”

This claim about Clinton was initially dismissed by his right-wing opponents, in large measure because it was widely understood that the intelligence service referred to was that of Israel. Now the issue is raised by both the *Journal* and Noonan to suggest that the Clinton administration is secretly the tool of Fidel Castro!

As we have noted previously, the right-wing hatred of Clinton would seem inexplicable, given that his government has carried out the most reactionary social policy of any Democratic Party administration in the 20th century, including the abolition of welfare and the slashing of much of the rest of federally financed social services. It has balanced the federal budget at the expense of the poor, hiked military spending and presided over the biggest rise in the stock exchange in American history.

Yet despite this record, a large section of the political and media elite seems convinced that Clinton is a murderer, a pawn of foreign powers, even a closet “socialist.” The statements emanating from the congressional Republicans verge on incitement to violence against Clinton, Reno and other administration officials. They would seem more characteristic of a country on the eve of civil war than one in which political differences are supposedly settled at the ballot box.

It is barely more than a year since the raging conflict in official Washington brought the United States to within a few votes in the Senate of the ouster of an elected government by means of backroom conspiracy and quasi-judicial coup. The right-wing campaign to drive the Clinton administration out of office failed, not because of any resistance from the Democratic Party and the White House, but because of the overwhelming opposition of the American people.

The same line-up reappears in the Elian Gonzalez case. The right-wing pushes for a definite outcome, against the feeble and even counterproductive efforts of the Clinton administration, while the broad mass of the population instinctively opposes the policies of the ultra-right, which would deprive Juan Miguel Gonzalez of his elementary human rights because he is a Cuban citizen.

Elian Gonzalez has been reunited with his father, although the family still faces the threat of court action based on the appeal brought by the Miami relatives, whose outcome remains uncertain. The underlying political tensions revealed in this case will continue to intensify, and must, sooner or later, find open expression, in the eruption of major social and

class conflicts in the United States.



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