

Washington's 40-year vendetta

Elían's case highlights US assault on Cuba

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For the present, Elían Gonzalez is reunited with his father and waiting in the secluded environment of the Wye River Plantation for a federal appeals court in Atlanta to consider a specious legal bid from distant relatives in Miami to procure political asylum for the six-year-old child. The frenzied news coverage of Elían's fate has, for now, subsided.

The right-wing exile Mafia organized in the Cuban American National Foundation (CANF) has vowed a protracted legal battle to keep Elían in this country, and though it now appears likely the boy will eventually return with his family to Cuba, this outcome is by no means guaranteed.

Throughout the five months during which Elían's Miami relatives and their handlers in the CANF maintained custody of the boy, they justified their refusal to return him to his family and their defiance of the Justice Department on the grounds that they were upholding the boy's right to enjoy the "freedom" of the US, rather than be sent back to the "tyranny" of his homeland.

This contrasting of the benefits of the "American way of life" to the supposed subjugation and misery of the Cuban people is virtually undisputed in the media's analysis of the case. Even those who express opposition to the gangsterism of the Miami exile groups and uphold the father's right to be reunited with his son, either explicitly or tacitly adapt themselves to the official demonization of Cuba. The problem with the Miami relatives and their backers, goes this refrain, is that they "hate Castro more than they love Elían."

What is absent from the facile debate over whether the child would be better off in Cuba or Florida is any attempt to analyze how the present Cuban situation came to be, and what role the US has played in creating a crueler life for millions of children like Elían who live in the Caribbean island nation.

The drama of Elían Gonzalez manifests the tragic consequences for one Cuban family of a US government policy that stands as one of the most shameful chapters in the history of America's relations with the rest of the globe. Ever since the revolution of 1959 overthrew the US-backed police state of Fulgencio Batista, Washington has waged unrelenting aggression, both military and economic, against the Cuban people, carrying out invasions, assassinations, terrorism against civilians and systematic economic sabotage in an attempt to restore the neocolonial domination of the island which it exercised during the first half of the twentieth century.

Having waged a struggle to free themselves from Spanish colonialism, the Cuban people saw the US intervene militarily in 1898 to pick up the pieces, imposing the so-called Platt Amendment, which gave Washington the "right" to intervene militarily whenever it saw fit. US marines carried out uninterrupted operations in the country between 1917 and 1923, suppressing strikes and protecting US investments, which grew to dominate sugar production, banking, the railroads and the utilities.

Castro came to power at the head of a nationalist guerrilla movement in 1959, culminating a protracted civil war in which 20,000 Cubans, most of them urban workers, professionals and students, died at the hands of the dictatorship. For the new regime, satisfying pent-up social demands,

particularly those of the masses of landless peasants, inevitably meant infringing on the property of US corporations which dominated agricultural production.

No sooner were the first agrarian reform measures announced, than the US government, headed by Eisenhower, drafted plans for the overthrow of the new regime. Recently declassified CIA documents make clear that American aggression against the island began before Castro aligned himself with the Stalinist bureaucracy in the Soviet Union, which he came to view as a counterweight to Washington.

By the summer of 1959, plans for covert operations were drawn up, and by the fall of that year they were implemented. Much of the first effort was directed at sabotaging the country's economic production, burning sugar cane fields and sugar mills through aerial bombardment. The CIA helped organize, arm and finance terrorist bands that waged a savage campaign on the island, directed particularly against the new regime's literacy campaign, murdering both teachers and students in the rural areas where education had never before been offered to the peasant population.

One of the most deadly acts of terrorism against Cuba was the March, 1960 bombing of the French ship *La Coubre*, which was anchored in Havana harbor. The ship had brought arms and ammunition, items which Washington had refused to sell to the new regime. The sabotage attack claimed over 100 lives and left hundreds more wounded. The bombs were timed to go off in succession, ensuring that rescue workers responding to the first blast would be killed by the second.

In a plan initiated under the Eisenhower administration and eventually carried out under John F. Kennedy, the CIA prepared an invasion force of 1,500 men, the so-called Assault Brigade 2506, training the counterrevolutionary army at clandestine military camps in the US, Puerto Rico and Guatemala, and supplying it with extensive American military hardware. The Bay of Pigs invasion became one of the greatest fiascoes in US military and diplomatic history, as the CIA's mercenary force was soundly and quickly defeated. It was not, however, without its costs to the Cuban people, with 176 killed and more than 300 wounded, many of them civilians.

In the aftermath of the invasion, the US Joint Chiefs of Staff prepared a secret document developing extensive plans predicated on the assumption that there was no popular base of support in either the US or Cuba for an attempt to engineer the overthrow of the Castro regime. Bringing down the nationalist government, they said in the March 1962 document, "will require a decision by the United States to develop a Cuban 'provocation' as justification for positive US military action."

Among the measures proposed by the Pentagon brass were: staging phony attacks on the US base at Guantanamo, or blowing up a US ship and blaming Cuba (described in the document as "a 'Remember the Maine' incident").

While recognizing the Bay of Pigs as a debacle, the Kennedy administration and its successors persisted in waging a covert terrorist war against Cuba that has continued to this day. Under code names such as the

"Cuba Project" and "Operation Mongoose," the CIA and the Pentagon have sought to bring about Castro's downfall both through outright assassination—the Cuban government has uncovered 637 separate attempts on Castro's life—and by inflicting as much suffering as possible on the Cuban people.

The CIA in its dirty war against Cuba pioneered hijackings and attacks on civilian aircraft, the classic *modus operandi* of modern terrorism. The most notorious of these actions was staged in October 1976, when anti-Castro Cubans working under the direction of the CIA had a bomb placed aboard a Cubana Airlines plane. All 73 passengers died, including the entire Cuban fencing team, who were returning from a victorious competition in a Central American championship. The victims also included 11 Guyanese students en route Cuba to be trained in medicine.

Two veteran terrorist operatives of the CIA, Orlando Bosch Avila and Luis Posada Carriles, were subsequently arrested and jailed in Venezuela for the crime. In 1985, Posada Carriles was spirited out of Venezuela and given a new assignment in El Salvador, coordinating weapons deliveries to the Nicaraguan counterrevolutionaries as part of the Iran-Contra operation headed up by Lt. Col. Oliver North. Pardoned by a corrupt court, the other terrorist bomber, Bosch, was brought back to a comfortable retirement in the US.

Among the most recent terrorist attacks has been a string of bombings of Havana hotels, stretching from 1992 to 1997. Cuban authorities have traced the planning of these attacks, aimed at sabotaging Cuban tourism, the most important source of foreign exchange for the embattled country, back to the Cuban American National Foundation. The CANF, with its intensive lobbying and generous contributions to both the Democratic and Republican parties, has enjoyed a virtual *carte blanche* from Washington to direct terrorist operations against Cuba.

The Cuban government has presented substantial evidence that terrorist actions against the country have also included covert biological warfare, claiming the lives of hundreds of people, with the greatest toll among children and pregnant women.

Notwithstanding the record of US crimes against Cuba, media commentators, including those who have criticized the Clinton administration for its attempts to placate the Cuban exile fascists in the Elian Gonzalez affair, attribute Cuba's present predicament to the supposed failure of Castro's "Marxism." Among the cruder versions of this thesis was a column authored by Thomas Friedman of the *New York Times* in the immediate aftermath of the Immigration and Naturalization Service (INS) raid to free Elian from the Miami exiles. "What ails Cuba's economy is Fidel Castro's failed Marxism," he wrote. "But the US embargo obscures that, giving him a foreign bogeyman to blame for Cuba's travails and enabling him to argue that Cuba is under siege from America, therefore Cubans have to remain mobilized and he, Castro, has to keep a tight rein."

According to this apologist for Washington's foreign policy, the embargo is a mere illusion, providing Castro with a cover for his repression of the Cuban people. In reality, given the 40-year-long US economic blockade of the island, it is remarkable that Cuba has been able to survive, particularly in the decade since the collapse of the Soviet Union.

Outright prohibitions on US trade with Cuba imposed in the immediate aftermath of the country's nationalizations of American corporate interests have been maintained since 1960. The natural market for Cuban goods, both from the standpoint of geography and the weight of US consumer dollars in the world economy, has been completely shut off to the Caribbean country.

With the end of Soviet subsidies, Cuba has been forced to seek trade with Western Europe, incurring the crushing burden of transportation costs to distant markets. In an attempt to cut off even this lifeline, Washington imposed the Torricelli amendment and the Helms-Burton act

in the 1990s, directed at intimidating foreign companies from carrying out any dealings with Cuba.

Notwithstanding Friedman's snide commentary, the embargo's effects are very real, having a particularly onerous impact on Cuban children's access to both food and medicine. In a 1997 report, the American Association for World Health (AAWH) stated: "A humanitarian catastrophe has been averted only because the Cuban government has maintained a high level of budgetary support for a health-care system designed to deliver primary and preventive health care to all of its citizens. Cuba still has an infant mortality rate half that of the city of Washington, D.C. Even so, the US embargo of food and the *de facto* embargo on medical supplies have wreaked havoc with the island's model primary health care system."

According to the report, more than 300 essential medicines and critical medical supplies are unavailable in Cuba because of the embargo, including AIDS medications. Lack of parts and equipment have also forced the shutdown of more than 40 percent of the country's water chlorination facilities, leading to an increase in water-borne diseases such as typhoid fever and intestinal infections, as well as viral hepatitis. The AAWH also said that Washington's embargo is responsible for inadequate prevention, diagnosis and treatment of breast cancer, as well as reduced access to medications related to pregnancy, labor and delivery.

There is no doubt that the same right-wing cabal in Miami that claimed to be defending the well-being and freedom of Elian will exert every effort to maintain the blockade, ensuring that countless Cuban children just like Elian are denied adequate food and medicine.

Combined with the attempt to strangle the country economically is a cynical immigration policy designed to encourage voyages like that which claimed the lives of Elian Gonzalez's mother and 10 others when they tried to cross the Florida Straits in her boyfriend's small boat. By guaranteeing legal status to any Cuban—in contradistinction to all other nationalities—who manages to set foot on US soil, the policy has fostered a deadly business of smuggling of human beings for profit.

Washington has justified its 40-year vendetta against Cuba as a defense of democracy. "We believe that our policy is a correct one—economic sanctions and other kinds of instruments to isolate a renegade regime, an undemocratic regime," said Peter Romero, the acting assistant secretary of state for Latin America last month.

Such claims cannot withstand even a cursory review of US foreign policy in Latin America, as well as the rest of the world. Throughout the twentieth century Washington has propped up one right-wing military dictatorship after another in Latin America in order to suppress the strivings of the continent's workers and oppressed and defend the profit interests of US-based banks and corporations.

While ritualistically indicting Cuba for human rights violations and "terrorism," Washington has armed, financed and "advised" regimes from Guatemala to Chile that have massacred thousands and even hundreds of thousands of their own citizens. Indeed, Washington's embargo against Cuba—ostensibly in defense of democracy—was preceded by the CIA-engineered overthrow of an elected government in Guatemala (1954) and followed by Pinochet's American-backed coup in Chile (1973).

American crimes against Cuba do not efface the very real political failings of Castro's regime. Castroism has proved unable to provide a viable alternative to the domination of American imperialism and the corrupt national bourgeoisie of Latin America. It does not now and never has represented the Marxist program of socialist internationalism. In its historical origins, social roots and politics, it is a petty-bourgeois nationalist movement, which attempted to lean on the Stalinist bureaucracy, while suppressing and opposing any independent movement of the working class, either in Cuba or the rest of the continent.

Yet any objective analysis of the past four decades makes clear that the poverty and repression that have befallen the peoples of Latin America

have their roots not in Castroite "subversion," but rather in the drive by US capital to defend its economic and strategic interests in the region, to the detriment of the masses of workers and poor peasants. To the extent that the 1959 revolution in Cuba fostered even the hope of throwing off the weight of Yankee imperialism and putting an end to the despotic regimes that it spawned throughout the continent, it had, in Washington's eyes, to be crushed.

The Elian Gonzalez case is, in the end, one chapter in this long and ignominious history. Whatever the fate of the little boy who was rescued from certain tragedy at sea, the future of millions of children just like him in Cuba and throughout Latin America can be secured only by means of a united struggle of the workers and oppressed in both North and South America to advance a socialist alternative to imperialist oppression, exploitation and poverty throughout the hemisphere.



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