

# The return of Elian Gonzalez—the end of a shameful episode

Shannon Jones  
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After more than seven months in the United States, six-year-old Elian Gonzalez has returned home to Cuba with his father. On June 28 the US Supreme Court removed the final legal obstacle to the boy's departure when it refused to hear an eleventh-hour appeal from Elian's Miami relatives.

The final days of the Elian Gonzalez affair underscored the isolation of the anti-Castro exile forces, led by the Cuban American National Foundation (CANF), which have been cultivated for decades by successive US administrations, and which have exercised a virtual veto power over US policy toward Cuba. Elian's departure left the right-wing Cuban exiles in a state of demoralization. Only a small number turned out to protest and the streets were generally quiet, a marked contrast to the scene last April when agents for the Immigration and Naturalization Service removed Elian from the custody of the Miami relatives.

The day before the Supreme Court decision Republican leaders in the House of Representatives agreed to legislation that would ease the US trade embargo against Cuba, permitting the sale of food and medical supplies. President Bill Clinton has indicated he will sign the measure.

On the eve of Elian's departure the Miami relatives and their CANF backers once again demonstrated that their avowed concern for Elian was entirely subordinated to their anti-Castro agenda. They turned down an offer by Elian's father Juan Miguel Gonzalez to allow them to visit with the boy if they withdrew their appeal—considered by virtually all legal authorities to be futile—to the Supreme Court.

Before departing, Juan Miguel issued a brief statement thanking the American people for their support during his long ordeal. Since the start of the

Elian Gonzalez affair, public opinion polls have shown that the vast majority of Americans opposed the Miami relatives' actions—which amounted to the abduction of the child—and supported the efforts of Juan Miguel Gonzalez to regain custody of his son. This sentiment—in support of the basic democratic right of a father to be united with his child—stood in sharp contrast to the bulk of the US media and political establishment, which went out of their way to patronize the fascist-minded elements in the exile community.

As Elian prepared to return to Cuba, the *New York Times*, in an remarkable demonstration of double-think, published an editorial supporting Juan Miguel's right to custody while reiterating its opposition to the INS raid that removed the boy from the clutches of the Miami relatives and the CANF. The *Times* did not attempt to explain how Elian could have been reunited with his father without the use of force, under conditions in which the Miami relatives and their backers, encouraged by the Miami political establishment, had pledged to resist any attempt to enforce court orders and government rulings upholding Juan Miguel's parental rights.

During a June 28 press conference, President Clinton took the occasion of Elian's return to launch into a harangue against the Castro regime. Clinton pounded the podium as he denounced the “killing of US citizens,” recalling the downing by Cuba of two aircraft flown by right-wing exiles based in the US, who had provocatively violated Cuban airspace as part of their efforts to destabilize the Castro regime.

When asked by a reporter if he supported the return of Elian and his father to Cuba, Clinton replied that in principle he believed in the sanctity of the family, but gave a nod to the Cuban exiles by declaring, “Well, if he and his father decided they wanted to stay here, it

would be fine with me.” He went on to suggest that the episode was a vindication of the US political system: “We upheld here what I think is a quite important principle, as well as what is clearly the law of the United States.”

In fact, the case of Elian Gonzalez illustrated once again the tenuous character of democratic rights in the United States. It was clear from the outset that the Miami relatives had no legal claim to custody of the boy. US law as well as international law upheld the father's right to custody. The claim of Elian's great uncle Lazaro Gonzalez boiled down to the assertion that Juan Miguel, by virtue of the fact that he lived in a “communist” country, forfeited his parental rights.

However, the White House refused for months to enforce a ruling by the Immigration and Naturalization Service (INS) that Juan Miguel was the sole spokesman for Elian. Its cringing before the right-wingers in Little Havana encouraged them to mount an incipient rebellion, culminating in declarations from the mayors of Miami city and county that they would refuse to abide by the decisions of the federal government or cooperate in any federal effort to rescue the child from his captors.

The courts, the media and the political establishment indulged every maneuver attempted by the anti-Castroite exiles to prevent Juan Miguel from obtaining custody. Elian was shamelessly exploited and manipulated by his Miami relatives and their supporters, at one point appearing in a video in which he denounced his father. Presidential candidates George W. Bush and Vice President Al Gore both expressed their opposition to returning Elian to Juan Miguel. Gore took the remarkable step of publicly opposing the policy of his own administration in order to align himself with the right-wing forces in Miami.

In mid-April, a three-judge panel of the 11th Circuit Court of Appeals ruled in favor of a motion submitted by the Miami relatives barring Elian from leaving the US, on the grounds that there was possible merit in the demand that the INS consider an asylum petition which the Miami relatives had drawn up and gotten the boy to sign.

That ruling came a week after Attorney General Reno made a humiliating pilgrimage to Miami's Little Havana to plead with Lazaro Gonzalez to agree to hand over the child. The Miami relatives spurned her

entreaties, announcing after the meeting that the child could be removed only “by force.”

At this point, with the credibility of the federal government on the line, the Clinton administration reluctantly moved to return Elian to his father. The INS raid that finally freed Elian lasted three minutes and involved no casualties. It was nonetheless denounced by the entire Republican political establishment and wide sections of the press in bloodcurdling terms as a violation of human rights.

Like the Monica Lewinsky affair, the case of Elian Gonzalez revealed the extraordinary influence of extreme right-wing forces over the American political establishment and media. It was, moreover, a further demonstration of the disconnect between official Washington and the vast majority of the population, who, in both the Clinton impeachment and the Elian Gonzalez controversy, instinctively opposed the attempt by rightists to subvert elementary democratic principles.

Like the impeachment conspiracy, the Elian Gonzalez affair has underscored the corroded state of American democracy, and the inability of either of the big business parties, or any of the official state institutions, to conduct a serious struggle in defense of democratic rights. The main social force that retains a genuine commitment to democratic rights—the broad masses of working people—must rely on its own strength to defeat the attacks on its basic rights, by undertaking the construction of its own mass political party.



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