CLOSING THE OPEN DOOR:
U.S. REFUGEE POLICIES DURING THE 1980 CUBAN EXODUS

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ABSTRACT

This thesis examines international and national factors in the U.S. policy-making process during the 1980 Cuban refugee crisis known as the Mariel Boatlift. The four stages which this study identifies in the American reaction to the mass migration in spring and summer of 1980 are represented in its structure. While the Carter administration at first tried to find a consistent policy toward the influx of Cubans and aimed at internationalizing the crisis, it was torn between upholding the law for orderly immigration and providing "open arms" to people fleeing communist oppression. By examining newspaper coverage and public opinion polls on this event, I found that it was not until a change in public opinion facilitated a tougher stance toward the illegal boatlift that the U.S. government took decisive steps to stop the mass influx. Concerns about the tense job market, welfare state expenses, racial tensions, and the stigma that this refugee wave acquired because of a noticeable number of criminals, homosexuals, and the mentally ill among the new arrivals contributed to a rising anti-Cuban attitude among the American population. These domestic concerns trumped Cold War foreign policy goals such as containment of Communism and Carter's emphasis on human rights and morality in diplomatic relations. The dynamics of the Mariel Boatlift changed public and legislative opinion towards immigration from Cuba and eventually paved the way for the demise of the Cubans' special Cold War refugee status.
After twenty years of relatively unrestricted immigration, the United States turned its back on the Cuban people within ten weeks.
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LIST OF ABBREVIATIONS

AFDC - Aid to Families with Dependent Children
CETA - Comprehensive Employment Training Act
CIA - Central Intelligence Agency
FBI - Federal Bureau of Intelligence
FEMA - Federal Emergency Measure Agency
GNP - Gross National Product
INS - Immigration and Naturalization Service
OAS - Organization of American States
SSI - Supplementary Security Income
UN - United Nations
CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION

On April 20, 1980, Fidel Castro’s decision to open the port of Mariel for emigration unleashed a mass escape from the Caribbean island. Already-emigrated Cubans who wanted to claim their relatives and bring them to the United States were allowed to come to Cuba only for this purpose. Cuban-Americans rushed to South Florida, procured every available vessel, and started the event that became known as the Mariel Boatlift. Manned with unskilled navigators, ill-equipped, and faced with high winds and big waves, a number of boats either sank or were rescued by the American Coast Guard and towed back to Key West. Via the boatlift, more than 125,000 Cubans entered the United States without visas by September 1980.1

Caught unprepared by Castro’s liberal initiative, the Carter administration tried in vain to regulate the influx of refugees. Trapped by Cold War ideological necessities, devotion to humanitarian principles, and a refugee policy that did not meet the demands of the situation, Carter initially tolerated the boatlift. Following the example set by the Eisenhower and Johnson administrations’ reactions to similar Cuban refugee crises in the late 1950s and 1960s, this policy signified the special Cold War status that Cuban

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immigrants still enjoyed in 1980. Foreign policy considerations dictated that almost everyone coming from a communist country to the United States should be accepted as a political refugee. However, the mass immigration during the five months of the Mariel Boatlift marked a turning point in American refugee policy. The dramatic events of those months demonstrated that the United States was legally and economically ill-prepared to deal with the large numbers of refugees—roughly 125,000 Cubans and an additional 20,000 to 30,000 Haitian “boat people”—entering the country. The absence of a specific refugee crisis policy led to uncontrolled immigration that puzzled the American government and the public alike.²

In this thesis, I will argue that the lack of clearly-defined laws controlling mass immigration from Cuba, the negative image of the “Marielitos”³ stimulated by the media, and the refugees’ dependence on the American welfare system created an increasingly hostile attitude toward Cuban exiles of the 1980 boatlift among the American population. This change in attitude contributed to the premature demise of the special refugee status that Cubans enjoyed during the Cold War.

Historians’ hesitation to embrace topics of recent history is evident in the paucity of secondary literature dealing with the Mariel Boatlift. Only a few historians have focused their research efforts on the 1980 refugee crisis. Some of these studies, such as the works of Felix Roberto Masud-Piloto and María Christina García, examine Cuban


³ The term “Marielito” was created by American newspapers. Masud-Piloto underscores its negative connotation by pointing out that this label implied that the Cubans arriving with the Mariel Boatlift were either criminals or social misfits. Masud-Piloto, From Welcomed Exiles to Illegal Immigrants, p. 94.
immigration from 1959 to the 1990s, placing the boatlift within the history of Cuban exile politics.\textsuperscript{4} I intend to shift focus from the Cuban to the American perspective by examining the U.S. response to the crisis. In particular, I will position the boatlift within two connected contexts: Carter’s attempt to define a humanitarian foreign policy imbedded within a Cold War framework and the simultaneous domestic conflicts over the Cubans’ social and economic impact. A broad literature exists on refugees and the manipulation of mass escape as tools to reach foreign policy goals, as well as on the legal and humanitarian challenges that refugees pose. These works often explore the refugee problem in the context of U.S. immigration history or attempt to include the American case in a global analysis of the legal and humanitarian implications of mass escape.

However, the impact that the mass escape of 1980 had on American politics, the resulting change in popular perception of Cuban immigrants in the United States, and the reverse effect of public opinion on U.S. refugee policies has yet to be researched. This study sets out to illustrate the interconnection of the domestic and international spheres of refugee policies through the example of the Mariel Boatlift.\textsuperscript{5}

\textsuperscript{4} While Garcia’s \textit{Havana USA: Cuban Exiles and Cuban Americans in South Florida, 1959-1994} (Berkley: University of California Press, 1996) focuses on the immigrants’ adjustment experience, the preservation of their own cultural roots, and the development of Cuban exile politics, Masud-Piloto’s \textit{From Welcomed Exiles to Illegal Immigrants: Cuban Migration to the U.S., 1959-1995} takes a closer look at Carter’s governmental actions. He argues that the Mariel exodus was the result of twenty years of immigration politics played by both sides; it was played by Washington to drain the skilled labor force from the island, and it was played by Fidel Castro whenever he felt the need to relieve social pressure in his country.

Locating my study at the intersection of diplomatic relations, domestic policies, and public opinion, I will analyze the U.S. response to the Mariel Boatlift via an examination of three different types of sources: document collections from the Jimmy Carter Library, Congressional records, and selected highly influential newspapers. I will look at articles and opinion polls from a geographically diverse selection of American newspapers—The New York Times, The Chicago Tribune, The Miami Herald, and The Los Angeles Times—to assess the national and local effects of the 1980 immigration wave and identify important portions of the public debate that influenced American perceptions of the Cuban refugees. These newspapers, combined with governmental documents from the Congressional Index demonstrating the legislature’s occupation with problems associated with the 1980 Cuban immigration wave, will reveal the American perspective on the event. Congress held several hearings on structural as well as financial support of the immigration, education, and health care of Cuban exiles in the counties that absorbed the majority of them: Dade County, Florida, and several counties in New Jersey and New York. With the support of these sources, I will demonstrate that national concerns trumped foreign policies; that is, the domestic costs posed by admitting the Cubans—both economic and social—were more influential in the decision-making process on refugee policy than either Carter’s humanitarianism or the foreign policy demands of the Cold War.

CHAPTER 2

POLICY GOALS AT ODDS WITH DEEDS:
LAW ENFORCEMENT VERSUS “OPEN ARMS”

In 1980, the Carter administration faced both domestic and foreign policy crises. Entering office in the late 1970s, Jimmy Carter wanted to restore public trust in the presidency during a time of public outrage about the American involvement in Vietnam and national scandals such as the Watergate affair. Furthermore, he attempted to alter American Cold War diplomacy of the Nixon and Ford years. He talked of replacing “balance of power politics” with “world order politics,” addressing “common problems of food, energy, environment, and trade,” and promoting human rights.  

But the international problems Carter encountered did not fully allow him to abandon Realpolitik. In 1979, the rising level of violence and revolt against the oppressive President Anastacio Somoza Debayle in Nicaragua forced Carter to break with his human rights principles in order to uphold the Nicaraguan political system. Later that year, the Soviet Union launched a military operation in Afghanistan. Declaring that this Soviet action represented “the greatest threat to peace since the Second World

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War,” Carter responded harshly to it with an arms embargo on grain sales to the Soviet Union, the boycott of the 1980 Moscow Olympics, withdrawal of the SALT II treaty from consideration by the Senate, and announcement of the Carter Doctrine for defense of the Persian Gulf. This marked the low point of Soviet-American relations during Carter’s presidency. The Soviet move into Afghanistan also brought about Sino-American quasi-military cooperation, in which the United States sold military equipment to China despite the latter’s appalling disregard for human rights and its communist government. But none of these problems posed as great a challenge to Carter as the Iran hostage crisis. When President Carter allowed the exiled Shah Reza Pahlavi to enter the United States in late 1979, Iranian students overran the American embassy in Teheran and took all employees and American citizens hostage. Negotiations and rescue attempts to free the hostages preoccupied Carter for the remaining 444 days of his presidency. His infirmity peaked on April 25, 1980—four days after the first boats filled with Cuban refugees arrived in Key West—when Carter announced that a rescue attempt had failed and that eight U.S. soldiers died when aircraft collided during a refueling stop in the Iranian desert.7

Domestic affairs were also in turmoil in 1980. Carter entered office in the midst of an economic crisis that ended the boom of the American post-war economy. Historian Bruce J. Schulman characterizes this period: “A new term, stagflation, entered the lexicon, signifying a virtually inconceivable combination of galloping inflation with anemic growth and tenacious unemployment.” The status quo of the economy during Carter’s

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term was characterized by the American pessimism of the late 1970s, created by a crisis in the welfare state financing and double-digit inflation. Additionally, an oil supply shortage shocked the American population. Carter’s cures for these problems were deregulation, energy conservation, minimum wage increases, and national health insurance; remedies that were crosscutting “his basic objectives to restrain inflation and prevent recession.” His administration gradually turned from neo-Keynesian policies towards monetarism and “supply-side thinking.” America experienced a rapid three-year economic recovery under Carter, but in 1980, the economy slipped into a serious recession. In February 1980, inflation reached 18 percent, the bond market broke down, and interest rates skyrocketed to 20 percent. Governmental actions taken to meet this crisis—steep spending cuts, a ten-cent-per-gallon gasoline conservation fee and price controls—aimed to impose federal and private fiscal discipline. Carter also turned to the American population, asking for a temporary stop of consumer good purchases with borrowed money. His request yielded, during the second quarter of 1980, the steepest drop in GNP in American history. The federal budget fell into debt and confronted Carter with a bigger deficit than was present when he had entered office.8

It was in this multifaceted context of international and domestic events that the Mariel Boatlift occurred. Carter’s reaction to that additional foreign and national policy

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8 Bruce J. Schulman. “Slouching toward the Supply Side: Jimmy Carter and the New American Political Economy,” in Fink and Graham, eds. The Carter Presidency: Policy Choices in the Post-New Deal Era. p. 53. See also Schulman. “Slouching toward the Supply Side,” p. 54, 61- 62. Even though President Carter received much blame by historians for the miserable economic situation during his presidency, recent scholarship has pointed out that national as well as international developments—such as the end of the post-war economy boom, the internationalization of the U.S. economy in the 1970s, and the internationally ongoing economic crisis during that time—set the stage for the American problems. In this context Carter tried to implement the first post-New Deal coalition Democratic economic policies, mastering the transition by answering the international economic crisis with “a new conservative orthodoxy in American political economy.” Throughout the Western political systems, the welfare state underwent a crisis that called for “fiscal conservatism and retrenchment of social programs ... [as] the order of the day.” Ibid, p. 62-63.
problem hardened the overall public impression of a flip-flopping government with ambiguous policies. This political ineptitude, at least in regard to foreign policy, partly derived from the power struggles among Carter’s diplomatic advisers, especially between Secretary of State Cyrus Vance and National Security Adviser Zbigniew Brzezinski. But this rivalry ended when Vance resigned after the failed rescue attempt of hostages in Iran at the end of April 1980. Brzezinski and newly appointed Secretary of State Edward Muskie supposedly cooperated better during the rest of the presidency.9

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With the end of the American-Soviet rapprochement, the accompanying normalization of relations between Cuba and the United States also foundered. Historians have toyed with the idea that the Mariel Boatlift was part of Castro’s payback to the United States in this context. Intelligence reports warned the U.S. government as early as January 1980 that the growing dissatisfaction of the Cuban population over food shortages, inadequate public services, and lack of housing had turned into “open displays of frustration—crime, vandalism, illegal departures, and even isolated antigovernment activity and sabotage.” The Cuban government answered this civil disobedience with identification checks and mass arrests in Havana. Yet, the CIA also pointed out the possibility that Castro might repeat a mass emigration—from 1960 to 1962 nearly 200,000 were allowed to leave—to release domestic pressure. Another incident occurred in September 1965, when Castro opened the port of Camarioca and allowed Cubans with

relatives in the United States to emigrate. His announcement generated a migration of smaller proportion than that of 1980—2,866 Cubans arrived in Florida by boat. A U.S.-Cuban immigration agreement following this event permitted more than 300,000 Cubans to emigrate from 1966 to 1971. In March 1980, Castro confirmed the CIA’s suspicion in a public speech criticizing the United States for encouraging illegal departures from Cuba and threatening to take his own “measures.” *Granma*, the daily newspaper of the Cuban Communist Party Central Committee, reported on April 14, 1980: “Camarioca was, and can certainly again be … if the Yankees insist on provoking it … the undefeatable proof [of] our generous immigration policy.” Even after these explicit signals, it remained the State Department’s position that an exodus was not imminent and it omitted to take any steps *in proviso.*

The Cuban refugee crisis of 1980 began when ten thousand Cubans demanded the right to emigrate at the Peruvian Embassy in Havana in the spring. An international effort tried to find these people refuge in countries such as Peru, Spain, Costa Rica, Brazil, Ecuador, Argentina, Sweden, and Belgium. The United States offered to accept 3,500 refugees under the emergency authority of the Refugee Act of 1980, which President Carter had signed on March 17.

The previous Immigration and Nationality Act, passed in 1952, recognized preferably those persons coming from communist countries as refugees, thus worsening the prospects of such groups as the thousands of Haitians arriving in the United States in

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the 1970s. Of the 20,000 people previously scheduled to be admitted from Latin America in the fiscal year 1980, 19,500 were to come from Cuba, none from Haiti. Fleeing the oppressive right-wing government of Samoza, an estimated number of 20,000 to 30,000 Haitians lived in the United States by spring of 1980. But the Haitians did not qualify as refugees from the American perspective. “[U.S.] foreign policy dictated that Haitian governments, no matter how vicious, be considered allies in the fight against Cuban communism.” Based on the friendly American-Haitian relations, the U.S. government considered the Haitians to be economic immigrants, did not grant them political refugee status, and even denied them asylum, which was also traditionally reserved for people fleeing communist regimes. But church leaders and the Congressional Black Caucus, which set up a task force on the Haitian refugees, suspected that, because they were black, racism and not politics alone was a reason for the Haitians’ difficulties.12

When improper immigration hearing procedures resulted in deportation orders and prison detention for the refugees in 1976, civil rights and church groups filed a class action suit on behalf of the Haitians. After several stages of court battles and unsuccessful negotiations with the Immigration and Naturalization Service (INS), the National Council of Churches won a temporary suspension of the deportation proceedings in court in July 1979. In early July 1980, the United States District Court in Florida criticized the unconstitutional treatment of Haitians and ordered the INS to process their cases properly. But the political and legislative developments of the Mariel Boatlift would overhaul this court decision.13

12 Zucker and Zucker. Desperate Crossings, p. 34. See also Masud-Piloto. From Welcomed Exiles to Illegal Immigrants, p. 84; Reimers. Still the Golden Door, p. 189-193.
The Refugee Act of 1980 was a legislative project of the White House and Congress to respond to the massive refugee migrations that developed in the 1970s, such as the Vietnamese. It amended the Immigration and Nationality Act “to provide a permanent and systematic procedure for … admission” and it also amended the Migration and Refugee Assistance Act of 1962 “to provide comprehensive and uniform provisions for the effective resettlement and absorption of those refugees.” Under the Refugee Act, the Cubans would lose their special Cold War status. The act not only eliminated ideological and geographic restrictions, but it also defined the term “refugee”—consistent with UN policy—as any person who was persecuted “on account of race, religion, nationality, membership in a particular social group, or political opinion,” thus putting an end to the preference of refugees from communist countries. In cases where personal persecution could not be claimed, the President could call upon the emergency provisions of Section 207 (e) of the act. But American participation in any emergency refugee situation under these auspices had to be justified before the Committees on the Judiciary of the Senate and the House of Representatives with either humanitarian concerns or national interest. As an essential part of its human rights policy, the White House saw the act as “a major legislative victory of the Administration” and Carter’s adviser Stuart Eizenstat lauded the Refugee Act as “flexible enough to accommodate unforeseen emergencies and changing international situations.” Therefore, the State Department felt well equipped even by default when it ignored the CIA warnings about the Cuban situation.\footnote{Congress, \textit{Refugee Act of 1980}, Sec. 101; Congress, \textit{Refugee Act of 1980}, Sec. 201; Eizenstat, White, and Goldstein to Carter, 3/17/1980, “3/17/80,” Box 175, Office of Staff Secretary, Handwriting File, JCL. See also “Cuba Halts All Refugee Flights to Costa Rica,” (AP) \textit{The Los Angeles Times} [hereafter referred}
But the act's apparent flexibility began to overstretch when Fidel Castro stopped
the orderly refugee flights to Costa Rica on April 19, 1980. Even though Costa Rica
agreed to Cuba's demand that all emigrants be flown directly to their ultimate destination
and was willing to accept the 10,000 crowded into the Peruvian Embassy compound, the
Cuban government did not cooperate. Instead, Castro opened the port of Mariel on April
20 and made an exclusive offer to Cuban-Americans to come to Cuba and claim their
relatives. Most of the refugees who were brought to Key West were illegal immigrants,
some of them without so much as a contact person waiting for them in the United
States.\(^{15}\)

Under the changed circumstances, the United States reconsidered its policy
toward Cuban refugees. The search for the best political and legislative reaction to this
diplomatic, national, and humanitarian problem would leave the Cubans in legal limbo
for three months. During this process, U.S. refugee policy-making unfolded in four
stages. First, the administration condemned the boatlift and tried to stop the illegal
immigration in late April. Second, Carter's declaration of his "open arms" policy
towards Cuban refugees on May 5 left the impression that the administration accepted the
unlawful flotilla. In the third stage, the President tried to gain control over the refugee
flow through a Five-Point Plan that he presented to the American public on May 14.

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\(^{15}\) "Cuba Halts All Refugee Flights to Costa Rica," (AP) \textit{LA Times}, April 19, 1980, 1, Part I p. 6; Janet
John M. Crewdson. "Cubans Arrive in Key West; U.S. to Penalize the Flotilla," \textit{NY Times}, April 24, 1980,
p. A1. The United Nations offered to support Costa Rica with $2 million of funds by the High Commission
on Refugees, although "the Cubans [did] not technically qualify as refugees." Don Shannon. "Costa Rica
Offers Asylum to all 10,000 Cubans," \textit{LA Times}, April 21, 1980, 1, Part I p. 5.
When this attempt faltered due to Fidel Castro’s refusal to cooperate, the administration searched for alternative legislation that led to the creation of a “Cuban-Haitian Entrant” status in the fourth and final stage of the policy search in July 1980. Cold War diplomacy, historical animosities between Cuba and the United States, American public opinion, national economic considerations, and 1980 election campaign concerns influenced these four stages.

The first reaction—and the first stage of policies—was in response to the first boats filled with refugees arriving in Key West on April 21, 1980. After two days of silence, the Carter administration sought to keep the crisis an international one by requesting that Cuba halt the boatlift and resume airlifts to countries in the hemisphere. Initially, the American government sharply criticized private initiatives to bring Cuban refugees to Key West, pointing out that the captains of vessels transporting refugees were committing a felony punishable with fines up to $2,000 per refugee or five years in prison. State Department spokesman Thomas Reston explained: “Although we are deeply sympathetic with those in this country who want to expedite the departure from Cuba of those who are seeking freedom from Castro’s regime, we cannot condone this particular procedure.” Reston also related the government’s position to the Refugee Act of 1980, stating that the president did not have the power “to bring in refugees without Congressional approval.” At first, the White House contemplated four options: 1) to welcome the Cubans; 2) to discourage the flow; 3) to enforce laws strictly; or 4) to pick up Cubans in international waters and transport them to a third country. Even though the first option would have greatly improved American international credibility in the East-West conflict by upholding Carter’s beliefs concerning human rights and by
embarrassing Castro, it would have been very costly in resettlement and against the intention of the Refugee Act. Thus, the administration settled for a half-in half-out combination of options two and three by discouraging the refugee flow through halfhearted law enforcement, maximizing international pressure on Castro, and motivating the Cuban-American population to comply with the American policy. Meanwhile, the arriving Cubans would be eligible for asylum, but only as part of the 3,500 refugees the United States had agreed to accept in the context of the international effort. These refugees would be allowed to stay in America for sixty days, when a final decision about their status would be made.\footnote{“U.S. Demands End of Cuban Boat Rescues,” \textit{LA Times}, April 23, 1980, p. 1. See also White House Meeting Agenda April 22, 1980, 4/21/1980, Box 1, “Cuban-Haitian Refugees, 1979-80,” Armando Rendon’s Files, JCL; Clift to Vance et alius, 4/25/1980, “Cuban/U.S. Issue [Briefing Book] [4/8/80-5/22/80],” Box 17, Esteban Torres’ Files, JCL; John M. Crewdson, “Cubans Arrive in Key West; U.S. to Penalize the Flotilla,” \textit{NY Times}, April 24, 1980, p. A1.}

Although most of the Mariel boat people fled their country due to economic reasons, the administration transitionally accepted the Cubans as political refugees, a status it did not grant to thousands of Haitian boat people. This double standard resulted from the twenty-year long history of Cuban immigration to the United States following Castro’s assumption of power in 1959. During the Camarioca crisis of 1965, President Lyndon B. Johnson signed into law immigration bill H.R. 2580, which abolished strict national quotas for immigration. At a ceremony at the feet of the Statue of Liberty on this occasion, Johnson said: “I declare this afternoon to the people of Cuba that those who seek refuge here in America will find it … Our tradition as an asylum for the oppressed is going to be upheld.” Pleading the American self-image of a country of immigrants, the United States in fact drained the political and economical elite as well as
skilled labor—societal groups most likely to afford a new start in another country and able to sustain themselves—from the neighboring island. This strategy aimed at undermining Castro’s socialist revolution and destabilizing the communist government of Cuba as part of the Cold War containment of Communism. American officials began to criticize this continuing conflation of anti-communism and immigration from Cuba as outdated when the number of newcomers grew well above 3,500 at the end of April 1980. Steve Hornblitt, aide to Walter E. Fauntroy, the District of Columbia’s delegate in Congress, told The Los Angeles Times that the government’s refugee policy “is a de facto continuation of the old Cold War policy. There’s no way to justify that.” Administration sources remarked that the current refugee policy would lead to major social and economic problems. To prevent an aggravation of the situation in “a period of recession and budgetary austerity” the government vaguely announced in the press that it would “choke off” the refugee wave.17

The Carter administration’s hesitancy to take a decisive stance during the first days of the Cuban boatlift might have cost the United States the opportunity swiftly to stop the illegal immigration. While federal agencies tried to establish order, implementation at the local level failed. Newspapers reported that boat owners ignored governmental warnings about fines and boat seizures. The Miami Herald reported broad determination among the Latino population in Florida to reunite with their relatives. José Perez, a 33-year-old Cuban exile and boat captain, told the newspaper: “What do you expect of the U.S. government? They haven’t done anything about their own hostages in

Iran. We can’t wait for them to take care of ours in Cuba.” The Cuban community in Miami strongly opposed any administrative action to stop the boatlift. To avoid social unrest in Florida, the U.S. government tried to lobby for support among refugee leaders, but non-confidence prevailed regarding the governments’ ability to negotiate with Castro on an orderly immigration.¹⁸

It quickly became evident that Castro was in control of the exodus. *The New York Times* headlined on April 25: “Castro Turns the Tables: As Fleet of Boats Carries Cuban Refugees to U.S., Havana’s Problem Appears to Fall in Carter’s Lap.” For the first time during the Carter administration, the Cuban leader refused to negotiate with U.S. government emissaries Robert A. Pastor, a member of the National Security Council, and Peter Tarnoff, special assistant to the Secretary of State, who were sent secretly to Havana shortly after the boatlift began. Pastor took Castro’s refusal as a sign of embarrassment over the growing crisis: “The boatlift had not been a rational decision based on grievances with the United States ... It was a reaction to a terrible embarrassment—first, when 10,000 rather than 75 Cubans fled to the Peruvian Embassy, then the Costa Rican reaction, and finally the US taunts.” By the end of April, diplomats in Havana believed that “Mr. Castro is using the United States as an escape valve for dissidents and for the unemployed, relieving some of the pressures on Cuba’s economy.” In order to further discredit Castro’s regime, these diplomats advised Washington that an “imaginative approach that sought to accommodate, rather than stop, the flood” would

better serve the American international image. The administration was oblivious to any intended connection between the Cuban exodus and U.S. policy toward Cuba. Carter even aggravated Cuban-American relations on May 4, 1980 by halting legal immigration from Cuba, which affected roughly 10,000 Cubans scheduled to leave the island through “normal channels” within the following five months. He also closed down the U.S. Interest Section in Havana, the American visa office in Cuba.\footnote{Jo Thomas. “Castro Turns the Tables: As Fleet of Baots Carries Cuban Refugees to U.S., Havana’s Problem Appears to Fall in Carter’s Lap,” \textit{NY Times}, April 25, 1980, p. A1; Robert A. Pastor quoted in Larzelere. \textit{The 1980 Cuban Boatlift}, p. 254-255. See also Larzelere. \textit{The 1980 Cuban Boatlift}, p. 252-254; Guillermo Martinez and Richard Morin. “Legal Cuban Immigration Halted,” \textit{MH}, May 5, 1980, p. 1A; “U.S. Shuts Immigration, Visa Office in Havana,” \textit{The Chicago Tribune} [hereafter referred to as CT], May 5, 1980, Section 1 p.1.}

Castro’s lack of cooperation transformed the situation from an international crisis to an American national emergency. The Carter administration slowly realized the Cuban intentions behind the boatlift. The Cuban leader was turning his embarrassment into a triumph by dumping the responsibility for thousands of refugees onto the United States. This situation developed diametrically to Camarioca in September 1965. In contrast to Carter, President Johnson controlled the influx and discouraged illegal immigration by showing his readiness to admit more Cubans into the country. This crisis occurred when Congress had just passed H.R. 2580, amending the Immigration Act of 1952 by “abolishing the harsh national quota system in favor of a seven-category preference system.” Moreover, the Johnson administration succeeded in negotiating with Castro and established regular “freedom flights” that brought relatives of Cuban émigrés from an airport outside of Havana to the United States twice daily with few interruptions until 1973. In 1980, with changed refugee legislation and a number of failures on his foreign policy record, Carter was unable to assure the Cuban exiles that the United States
would get their relatives. Because law enforcement failed in the face of strong Cuban-American interests, the situation necessitated taking steps to make illegal immigration to the United States less attractive. Government circles announced that the incoming Cubans were losing their “political” status and would be treated as undocumented aliens instead of as refugees. The fiscal consequences were grave, instantly stripping the Cubans of most welfare benefits and stopping reimbursement to the state for expenses of resettlement programs. Immediately, Florida stopped giving checks (ranging from $118 for individuals to $143 for families) to Cubans upon arrival, which those who had arrived earlier had received under the provisions of the Refugee Act. Now, they were only eligible for the food stamp program and Comprehensive Employment Training (CETA) programs. For Dade County this new situation “could mean the loss of millions of dollars of federal aid” given through the Cuban Refugee Assistance Program.20

In contrast to official concern, the press and the public reacted more emotionally to the political and human aspects of the boatlift. “They Vote by Boat,” read the headline of an editorial in The Los Angeles Times. American newspapers portrayed the exodus as a “major blow” to Castro: “The Peruvian Embassy outburst continues a series of recent setbacks that have plagued Castro in his efforts to establish Cuba as a model for developing nations.” This Cold War rhetoric in The Los Angeles Times shows that the communist threat and the containment thereof still played an important role in hemispheric policies of the early 1980s. After the period of the American-Soviet détente in the 1970s had ended, American propaganda aimed again at the difference between the

two political systems, trying to underscore the inferiorities of Communism. Newspapers readily embraced the stories from the new arrivals from Cuba. Reporting on economic hardships and exploitation Cubans had to endure under Castro’s rule, they illustrated the joy with which Cubans chewed gum or ate apples for the first time in their lives after entering the United States. *The Miami Herald*, in particular, displayed a very welcoming attitude towards the refugees and enhanced the favorable atmosphere in Dade County. During the first week of the exodus, whole newspaper pages were dedicated to pictures of heartwarming family reunions and eyewitness stories about the adventurous sea crossing to Key West. *The Miami Herald* created a “saga” around a dangerous passage through hardships and danger, which, in the end, rewarded the refugees with freedom, liberty, and democracy. April 23’s headline read: “Only Imagination Limits Cuban Exodus.” In addition, the paper published tips for the trip from Key West to Mariel. Initially, the public reaction was sympathetic to this immigration wave as long as it seemed limited. In Florida, people donated money, food, and clothes for the new arrivals and provided shelter to minors who came to the United States without any relatives. The Cuban-American community of South Florida was particularly overwhelmed by the prospect of reuniting families. Since it was impossible for Cuban-Americans to go back to Cuba as long as Castro was in power, bringing their relatives to the United States was the only possibility to see them again.21

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The romanticized attitude which newspapers and the public displayed toward the boatlift “saga” shifted rapidly nationwide when reports on Cubans arriving with criminal records were first published on April 30—only ten days after the initiation of the refugee crisis. In Dade County, Florida, interrogations of two hundred “high-risk” refugees—defined as male under the age of 40 without relatives in the United States—revealed that more than fifty percent of them held criminal records in Cuba. Representative Elizabeth Holtzman, chairwoman of the House Immigration and Refugees Subcommittee, was one of the first to voice the suspicion “that Castro is emptying out his prisons.” Another disturbing rumor arose that same day when it was reported that mentally ill persons were being sent to Key West. Cuban authorities forced the “freedom flotilla”—boat owners, Cuban exiles, and professional captains—to ferry to America total strangers, who had neither relatives nor contact persons in the United States. The reports of an influx of criminals were confirmed by the FBI the same day. The irritated mayor of Miami, Maurice A. Ferre, not only appealed to President Carter for federal emergency relief, but also urged better screening procedures in order to be “more vigorous in culling out the anti-social elements that nobody’s going to want in any of our communities.” The Los Angeles Times reported the public’s immediate response:

One caller from Hollywood, Fla., protested to a Miami radio station: “I am totally against this wild immigration of the Cubans and the Haitians. I think they should have to follow the regular immigration rules, so we don’t get jailbirds and diseased people and all the garbage from around the world. We don’t need this here. We have enough people. We have enough unemployed already.”

This opinion—even though admittedly located at the extreme end of the spectrum—illustrates annoyance and fear among the American population. Perplexed about the

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Cuban-American ignorance towards federal law, Americans criticized the ongoing illegal boatlift efforts in South Florida and protested against illegal immigration in front of the federal building in downtown Miami. Faced with large numbers of refugees and fast-rising costs, a growing anti-Cuban sentiment developed among the American population by the third week of the Mariel boatlift. Many Americans felt threatened by the reportedly high percentages of criminals and mentally ill among the refugees. Stigmatized by the press, the “Marielitos” experienced less support and tolerance from the American population than had earlier generations of Cuban exiles.23

The national press picked up the increasing public dissatisfaction with Carter’s crisis management and spurred additional criticism. The Miami Herald, critical toward the administration policies but generally sympathetic towards the Cuban-American population in South Florida, changed its choice of words: the “freedom flotilla” became the “outlaw flotilla.” Its editorialists also demanded that only Cubans with relatives in the United States should be allowed to stay in America, while other refugees should be distributed to the countries that had offered to accept parts of the Havana 10,000. Stating that Washington was anxious to “[dance] to Cuba’s tune” instead of anticipating its initiative, The Los Angeles Times found Carter’s foreign policy performance in the Caribbean unsatisfying. Failure and signs of weakness in a challenge posed by a communist country hurt the American image abroad and decreased Carter’s chances for

reelection. Even though Washington explicitly protested against the illegal flotilla almost on a daily basis, the boats kept coming into Key West.\textsuperscript{24}

Carter’s political opposition made use of the situation for its own ends. Republican presidential hopeful George H. W. Bush publicly criticized the President: “What is shocking to me is that the Carter Administration—the so-called inventor of human rights—is doing absolutely nothing to help (the Cuban refugees) and is, in effect ... spanking those who seek freedom.” Pointing out the lack of any coherent policy toward the Cuban exodus, Bush hoped to gain on President Carter in foreign policy issues during his campaign. Regarding the multitude of diplomatic problems, such as the Soviets’ military action in Afghanistan and the Iran hostage crisis, that the administration faced during the spring of 1980, foreign relations were a weak point in Carter’s presidential record. Carter’s opponent within the Democratic Party, Senator Edward Kennedy, also exploited this weakness to display the president’s incompetence. He conducted a congressional hearing on the boatlift in mid-May, suggesting that “the Administration’s policy was out of control and that [it was] discriminating against the Haitians.” Playing the racial discrimination card, Kennedy probably wanted to expand his appeal to the African-American members of the Democratic Party in hopes of winning the presidential nomination.\textsuperscript{25}


After two weeks of working against the boatlift, U.S. policy entered a second stage. President Carter suddenly changed his policy by declaring “an open heart and open arms to refugees seeking freedom from Communist domination and from economic deprivation, brought about by Fidel Castro and his government” in a speech before the League of Women Voters on May 5, 1980. This “Statue of Liberty” position was neither the result of consultations with his staff nor with Congress. Later, the White House denounced interpretations of Carter’s statement as an approval of the illegal boatlift. On the contrary, the administration claimed what Carter had meant was that the United States remained open to immigration according to the law. Even though Carter’s statement had clarified the U.S. position on the boatlift, its revocation put the administration “back in the twilight zone” once again and added to the confusion caused by the administrations halfhearted law enforcement. In a hearing before the House Subcommittee on Immigration, Refugees, and International Law on May 13, 1980, the testimony of David Parrot, the agent for the seized ship Dr. Daniels, confirmed the contradictions in the line of command: “They [representatives of the State Department] said, ‘It is illegal to bring illegal, nonvisaed aliens.’ … And the off-the-record, or off-the-curb kind of statement is: ‘We don’t anticipate any problem at the moment; I can only advise you that there are no fines or seizures taking place.’” Aware of policy ambiguities and still in denial about the direct links to U.S.-Cuban diplomacy and domestic implications of the crisis, the administration thought it could force Castro to cooperate by maximizing international and domestic pressure in Cuba. A strong notion to perceive this dilemma in its original international context remained among Carter’s advisers. Pastor maintained that “there is
no reason that the international community should find itself at the mercy of dictators, who at thier [sic] whim, expel large numbers of their population.” Basically, Carter’s human rights philosophy opened him up to the wishes of the politically strong Cuban-American community in South Florida that the boatlift be allowed to continue, while he was caught between budgetary concerns and lobbying groups at the federal level, and social tensions at the local level. The big question became: how much more immigration from Cuba could the country endure?²⁶

As the situation in Key West worsened—the total number of refugees nearing 18,000 on May 6, 1980—President Carter declared a state of emergency in Florida. Governor Robert Graham reported shortages of food, water, and space in the refugee centers. By declaring an emergency, the President could provide badly needed money—$10 million in all—in the shortest amount of time possible. In addition, the emergency declaration passed responsibility from the refugee office in the State Department to the Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA). This change indicated a turn in the political perception of the crisis: rather than seeing it as a diplomatic problem, the Cuban exodus was regarded more and more as a domestic crisis.²⁷


At the same time, Washington had not given up hope for an international solution. Fifteen Latin American and European nations met in San José, Costa Rica, on May 7, 1980, to work out procedures for addressing the Cuban exodus. The American delegation hoped to secure commitments from Latin American countries to resettle the Cuban immigrants arriving in South Florida. But not one Central American country participated in San José. The absence of a Mexican representative was especially upsetting for the United States because Mexico was politically the strongest Latin American nation which was on good terms with Cuba at that time. In regard to the European countries, the Americans expected financial support since it seemed unlikely that Europe would take any Cubans. In the end, none of the delegation appointed in San José to negotiate with Castro about an orderly immigration—a delegation including Britain, the United States, and Costa Rica—had friendly relations with Cuba. This meeting was preceded by an offer from Castro that he would negotiate on the boatlift if the United States made concessions regarding its embargo on Cuba, its naval base at Guantanamo Bay, and its surveillance flights over the island—points that had been on Castro’s “wish list” for years. According to The Chicago Tribune, President Carter ruled out talks with Castro “under any circumstances” as long as Castro used his citizens as “pawns or bargaining chips to achieve some sort of diplomatic goal.” Castro’s policy put Carter in a difficult position: the White House reluctantly realized that Castro was oblivious to any attempts to internationalize the crisis and that, in fact, the mass migration was a tool in the Cuban-American antagonism.28

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28 “Carter Won’t Bargain Over Cuban Refugees: Citizen ‘Pawns’ in Castro strategy,” CT, May 9, 1980, Section 1 p. 1. See also Eizenstat, Watson, and Brzezinski to Carter, 5/13/1980, “5/15/80,” Box 186, Office of Staff Secretary, Handwriting File, JCL.
National considerations slowly took over the political debate. Financial aspects of the mass immigration became an increasingly important issue. By early May, about 24,000 Cubans had arrived in Florida. Frank Loy, Deputy Coordinator of Refugee Programs, estimated that resettlement of such a huge group would cost $1,000 to $3,000 per refugee. At that time, Washington officials anticipated approximately 100,000 Cubans coming to the United States. “I cannot see the cost of the Cuban refugee resettlement running less than $100 million a year,” Loy concluded. This supplemental financial burden in a time of double-digit inflation and increasing unemployment caused concern in Congress. The spectrum of opinions ranged from opposing the boatlift to stretching the Refugee Act in order to include the Cubans. Senator Strom Thurmond and other conservatives adopted the former stance, prepared to stop the boatlift immediately, send back the Cubans, and encounter strongly possible social unrest among the Cuban-American population. The reaction of these members of Congress was more critical of Carter’s “open arms,” possibly because they felt more obliged to their constituents’ needs than to the government’s foreign policy and human rights concerns. Meanwhile, all members of the House Judiciary Committee shared the latter view to a large extent. Chairman Peter Rodino advised the White House that “whether or not the Cubans fit within this [Refugee Act of 1980] legislation was a policy question and not a legal question.” This statement made by a principal actor in the refugee admission process illustrates not only the range of opinion on the Capitol Hill, but it also shows how much legal elbow room the Carter administration had to manage the crisis.  

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Yet, this legislative freedom of choice was severely narrowed by resulting social, economic, and racial problems. A survey on Cuban and Haitian refugees conducted by *The Miami Herald* among the Miami population in the beginning of May 1980 showed that the mass influx not only created fear of rising crime rates and higher unemployment within the community, it also revealed “potentially dangerous disagreement among Dade’s non-Latin white, Latin and black population.” While sixty-six percent of the Latin population believed that the Cuban refugees would have a positive impact on Dade County, sixty-eight percent of the non-Latin white population and fifty-seven percent of the black population stated that the Cubans would have a largely negative effect. These figures show the strong anti-Cuban sentiment among the non-Latin white population and deep divisions along ethnic lines. Overall, figures for negative economic and social consequences caused by the incoming Cubans were especially high for the non-Latin white population. Seventy percent of the non-Latin white population believed that the influx was disadvantageous for the local economy, and eighty-five percent were concerned that there would be crowded schools and other educational problems. Lack of jobs was feared by eighty-six percent of the non-Latin white population; this figure was surpassed by eighty-eight percent of the black population fearing Cuban competition for low-paid work. At the same time, those polled supported the refugees’ political claims. Asked if the immigration wave helped people to escape communism, seventy-four percent of the non-Latin whites agreed, with sixty-seven percent of black people and an overwhelming ninety-three percent of Latin-Americans also in agreement.

The largest proportional disagreement in this poll could be seen in the answers to a question about the government’s performance during the boatlift. Seventy-eight
percent of the non-Latin white and eighty percent of the black population stated that the administration’s efforts to stop illegal immigration were not strong enough, while only thirty-seven percent of the Latin population shared this impression (the same percentage thought that the governmental efforts were “about right”). This poll illustrates that the governmental actions—or lack thereof—met with a growing degree of disagreement with the black and the non-Latin white population. Latin-Americans seem to have widely agreed with the administration’s cautious balancing act between guarding America’s international credibility and responding to the evolving national crisis.30

The flip-flopping between putting an end to the boatlift and declaring “open arms” triggered a series of editorials appealing to the Cuban-American community to put a halt to the boatlift. The Miami Herald reasoned that the exiles were “playing into Castro’s hands” and that the Cuban president had manipulated them emotionally. There was broad understanding for the initial excitement among Cuban-Americans at the prospect of being reunited with their Cuban relatives. On the other hand, when Castro started to empty his prisons and mental institutions, editorialists asked the exiles to self-impose a moratorium on the illegal boatlift.

At this point, the empathy of the American press and the American population ended. Public opinion turned not only against Cuban refugees, but also against Carter, who failed to effectively stop the “ragtag flotilla.” One Miami Herald editor’s assessment read: “President Carter finally has

30 Richard Morin. “Dade Fears Refugee Wave, Poll Shows,” MH, May 11, 1980, p. 1A, 20A. This poll was conducted by an independent marketing research firm among 644 Dade residents. The margin of error for the combined results lays at 5 percent in 95 percent of samples this size, i.e. they vary by 5 percent from what would have resulted by calling number listed in Dade County, while the results for each ethnic groups may vary by 7 percent.
acknowledged that his open-arms policy toward Cuban refugees has left him looking less like a humanitarian than like an ineffectual scarecrow.”

CHAPTER 3

CARTER’S CRISIS MANAGEMENT:

FIVE-POINT PLAN AND “CUBAN-HAITIAN ENTRANT” STATUS

On May 14, 1980, U.S. refugee policy toward Cuba entered a new stage when President Carter presented the public with a Five-Point Plan to regain control over the Cuban large-scale immigration. First, the United States would start an airlift and a sealift for “screened and qualified people to come to [the] country and for no other escapees from Cuba.” Four categories of qualified people were created: political prisoners, Cubans who already had relatives living in the United States, the refugees at the Peruvian embassy, and those who had sought refuge at the American interest section in Havana. These measures would allow for screening of persons willing to emigrate at the American interest section in Havana, even before they boarded a boat or plane. *The New York Times* quoted President Carter declaring his newfound determination to bring the crisis under control: “We will not permit our country to be used as a dumping ground for criminals who represent a danger to our society, and we will begin exclusion proceedings against these people at once.” Second, on May 15, the government opened a “family registration center” in Miami where Cuban-Americans could list their close family members, who would then qualify for immigration. Third, Carter announced that the
Coast Guard would enforce the law regarding criminal prosecution of the boaters, and fourth, any refugees with criminal records would be subject to deportation as soon as Castro was willing to cooperate. Lastly, the president expressed his hope to solve the crisis with the help of the international cooperation established at the San José conference.\

The Five-Point Plan was a *de facto* rejection of the Refugee Act of 1980. Officially, the United States finally abandoned the act on May 20, 1980. It was decided that the Cubans were to be treated as applicants for asylum, which would require a case-by-case review of each asylum seeker and so give them the same status as the Haitians. Persons who were granted asylum, *The Miami Herald* learned from “well-placed” government sources, were not eligible “for the same language and job training and medical and family welfare benefits as refugees.” Designed to handle refugee migration through third countries before allowing refugees into the United States, the Refugee Act proved inadequate for the “freedom flotilla.” In the House hearings of May 13, U.S. Coordinator for Refugee Affairs Victor Palmieri revealed that the administration considered the Refugee Act of 1980 inappropriate for the situation and, furthermore, posited that neither criminal laws nor customs and immigration laws ultimately offered an adequate response to the boatlift. Additionally, the U.S. government avoided consultations with Congress on all imminent matters related to the Cubans, such as the number of refugees to be accepted and the projected costs for resettlement, and it bypassed paying $500 per person to volunteer agencies as the Refugee Act required. In

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addition, *The Miami Herald* observed that State Department officials mentioned the possibility of sending some 7,000 of the refugees to third nations, a clear break in U.S. refugee policies, since this was “the first time the United States has ever tried to send refugees elsewhere after they arrive on U.S. shores.”

Thus, there were several reasons for sidestepping the Refugee Act of 1980. First, its legal inability to handle illegal immigration undermined the act. Second, “the significant fiscal consequences associated with the ‘refugee’ designation were a concern to the President.” The Carter administration had already been criticized for its response to America’s severe economic problems and, because 1980 was an election year, the President needed to adopt a stronger response to Ronald Reagan’s “fiscal conservatism” by avoiding supplemental federal spending. Third, the bias of granting the Cubans refugee status while denying it to the Haitian boat people would have led to harsh criticism by the black community. The African-American community’s opinion was more prominent on Capitol Hill than that of Cuban-Americans, because it constituted the larger U.S. population group, and thus had a larger electoral effect, and was better organized through its representation by the Black Caucus in Congress. In its press

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release, however, the government stated that fear of attracting even more immigrants from the Caribbean area was the sole reason for not invoking refugee status.34

The racial implications of the legal status question in the Mariel boatlift had been clear to everyone involved on the government level from the very beginning. A case of racial violence against an African-American man in Miami, and its consequences confirmed the delicacy of immigration legislation. Four white policemen were accused of killing black insurance salesman Arthur McDuffie in December 1979 after they chased him on his motorcycle. While the prosecution claimed that McDuffie’s death was caused by the policemen’s beating after he fell off his motorcycle, the defence argued that McDuffie died of the injuries he received in the accident. The subsequent trial and acquittal of the defendants in this case incited a series of race riots in Miami starting on May 17, 1980. The riots pushed the Cuban exodus from the cover page of The Miami Herald, but local tensions were quickly connected to the refugee crisis. The Gallup Opinion Index conducted a survey on the main causes of the “Miami racial troubles” observed from May 30 until June 2, 1980. Nationally, the trial and acquittal of the policemen were the number one reason mentioned by thirty-four percent of the people asked. Eighteen percent cited general racial problems as a possible cause; however, with twelve percent the economic pressure brought about by Cubans was the third most-named reason for the Miami riots. And another ten percent felt that letting Cubans into the

United States might have caused the violent outbreak. But what this survey revealed, above all, was the potential of the Cuban influx to cause civic upheaval. 35

In terms of foreign policy, the Five-Point Plan was a significant step toward saving America’s international credibility by dictating the new terms of the Cuban immigration. Castro’s refusal to cooperate, however, was the most crucial obstacle for an orderly immigration process. President Carter denounced the Cuban leader’s behavior as “inhumane” and blamed him for the chaos:

Tens of thousands of Cubans are fleeing the repression of the Castro regime under chaotic and perilous conditions. Castro himself has refused to permit them a safe and orderly passage to the United States and to other countries who [sic] are also willing to receive them. Repeated international efforts to resolve this crisis have been rejected or ignored by the Cuban Government. At least seven people have died on high seas. The responsibility for those deaths and the threat of further loss of life rest on the shoulders of Fidel Castro... 36

In mid-May, Castro rejected the proposed airlift that Carter had offered in his Five-Point Plan and maintained the boatlift. 37

The media and Carter’s political opposition accused the government of sitting out the situation. Upon encountering these reproaches, the administration justified the late change to a tougher and more exclusive policy with the unstable social climate in Florida: “A week ago we couldn’t have proposed this without provoking civil unrest,” claimed Presidential Assistant Jack Watson in The Miami Herald. U.S. Refugee Coordinator


Victor Palmieri explained in an interview with *The Miami Herald* on June 26, 1980, that law-enforcement officials in Florida had warned the administration against shutting down the boatlift: “A group of people at every level were advising the President that you could not move against the grain of this uprising, against the Miami Cuban-American community, until there had been enough cooling so that you would not produce a riot.” Multiple factors had contributed to Carter’s hesitancy to stop the boatlift: Castro’s refusal to negotiate, the strong emotional involvement of the Cuban-American community leading to civil disobedience in the form of the boatlift, the government’s hope to internationalize the refugee crisis, and an unprepared federal enforcement network. The latest events of April and May, in particular Castro’s move to mix criminals among the Cubans in Mariel, brought about the change in public opinion—even among Cuban-Americans who now realized that the Cuban dictator had played with their emotions—that the U.S. government felt it needed to implement a tougher policy.

In regard to the “wild” boatlift, however, the measures of the Five-Point Plan did not have an immediate effect. Coast Guard Captain Alex Larzelere evaluated the situation accordingly: “Once the US boats had arrived in Mariel, they could not realistically be stopped from returning to Florida with loads of refugees.” The stream of southbound boats, though, slowed down for a few days. While the Five-Point Plan was an *ad hoc* regulation of the refugee influx, it left many diplomatic and domestic problems

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unanswered, such as the legal status question, a long-term refugee policy, the number of Cubans to be admitted, and the cost of the resettlement program.\(^{40}\)

One of the major problems local authorities and federal agencies faced in Florida was housing homeless refugees. This was also the issue that made the refugees visible in the eye of the American public. Tent cities were built in the Orange Bowl Stadium and under Interstate 95 in Miami. Eglin Air Force Base in Florida and Fort Chaffee Army Reserve base in Arkansas were turned into processing centers that would serve as a home for thousands of immigrants for months. Cubans were also flown to other military bases, including Fort Indiantown Gap, Pennsylvania, and Fort McCoy, Wisconsin. There they waited "to be claimed by family, hoped for sponsors," or were detained for years. Screenings at these processing centers produced even more disturbing news about the immigrants: some of the Cubans arrived with diseases such as tuberculosis, herpes, syphilis, and gonorrhea. And the bad news would not abate: on May 8 the press reported that three suspects accused of being Cuban secret agents were detained in Eglin, while fifty-one suspected criminals were sent to the federal prison at Talladega, Alabama. At the same time, first connections between the venereal diseases and possible homosexual tendencies among the refugees were publicly made. American homophobia had led to the general exclusion of homosexuals from immigration. This issue was especially problematic, because one of the easiest ways for Cubans to obtain permission to leave their country was claiming either homosexuality or prostitution. But an extensive

discussion of the true extent and denial of the immigration of homosexuals would call for further research which cannot be presented in this context. 41

Reports assuring that the general health of the arriving Cubans “posed no health threat” to America helped little to change the overall negative perception of the “Marielitos.” The national press kept its critical attitude toward Carter’s performance even after his Five-Point Plan initiative took effect. In fact, the press coverage, more so on the West coast than in Florida, spurred the rising anti-Cuban sentiment among the American public. While U.S. newspapers were reporting on the positive affects of the boatlift during its first weeks, they eventually turned to horrendous stories and single incidents that scared Americans. Mayor Jack Freeze of Fort Smith near Fort Chaffee, Arkansas, where 50,000 refugees from South Vietnam temporarily lived in 1975, was quoted in The Los Angeles Times: “The first planeloads of Vietnamese that arrived were aristocrats...They brought gold with them to the country. The stories we’ve seen in the press have led us to think that these people (Cubans) are undesirable types.”  The Key West business community went public with their concerns about the negative effect that “horrendous headlines” could have on tourism in that area. City Commissioner Richard Heyman said in The Los Angeles Times: “You hear that we have leprosy in the streets, that refugees are rioting, that soldiers are here with tanks. The press coverage the city of Key West is getting is absolutely killing our tourism.” Against all odds, the Cubans still

had some support among the American population. Reminding the public of the
economic boom that Dade County in particular experienced after the Cuban influx of the
1960s, newspaper writers tried to mediate between scared Miami residents and the new
arrivals. An economist said in *The Miami Herald* that the mass immigration in that area
would have a “rather light impact,” and that the South Floridian economy would continue
to grow throughout the 1980s.42

The burden of care, the refugee impact on the job market, and the tax money spent
on the accommodation of the Cubans further heightened public opposition. A Gallup
Poll that *The Miami Herald* published in the end of May stated that fifty-six percent of
Americans nationwide believed that Cubans should not be permitted to stay in the United
States, whereas only thirty-five percent thought that they should. The findings by
geographical regions show that the South ranked second in opposing refugee settlement
by fifty-eight percent (only the Midwest rated one percentage point higher) combined
with the lowest approval percentage—twenty-nine percent. Considering that this figure
also includes samples from Cuban-Americans, the degree of rejection towards Cuban
refugees in the South becomes even more significant. In a second question, the poll
showed that sixty-six percent of those questioned thought immigration should be halted
until the unemployment rate—which was then at 7.8 percent—dropped. Low paid
workers particularly feared for their jobs; seventy-eight percent of people earning under
$5,000 and the same percentage of employees earning between $5,000 and $9,999

“Key West Merchants See 'Horrendous Headlines' on Exiles as Tourism Threat,” *LA Times*, May 15, 1980,
Part I p. 13. See also Masud-Piloto. *From Welcomed Exiles to Illegal Immigrants*, p. 94-95; Carlos J.
preferred to halt immigration, while only fifty-two percent of persons with an income over $25,000 uttered this preference. This perceived job threat regarding low-paid work was justified. Contrary to earlier waves of Cuban immigration, most of the “Marielitos” were low-skilled or unskilled workers who would compete with Americans for jobs once they received permission to work.43

On May 31, Carter made a rather unpopular move. In a meeting with newspaper editors at the White House, he announced that all Cubans would be allowed to stay in the United States, thus ending speculation on their resettlement in other countries. On that same day The Miami Herald headlined in big letters “Economy Takes Steep Dive,” reporting that “The index of leading economic indicators, a gauge of future economic trends, plunged 4.8 percent in April ... the steepest drop since the index’ creation in 1948.” This economic situation exacerbated the tensions between the American public and the new arrivals. Miami Mayor Maurice A. Ferre said: “The hate by white Americans against the Cubans is tremendous, almost at frenzy.” While recognizing that former generations of Cuban immigrants had contributed to Florida’s economic development, the prospect of dealing with Castro’s “anti-socials” gave the Floridians little reason for optimism: “The Cuban element we’re getting now,” Colette Pericht, a resident of Miami Lakes, explained while protesting the building of another tent city at a abandoned Nike missile site, “is not what we were getting in the 1960s. I’m very

angry—very, very angry—that my federal government would take our hard-earned money and give it to Haitians and Cubans."44

Even though the rejection of the Refugee Act seemed fiscally effective on the national level, it created unrest with the people in South Florida, who were in favor of more federal spending to relieve the state. Floridian relief agencies blamed the Carter administration for delaying and blocking the relocation process by denying the Cubans refugee status—or not deciding on their status at all. The results of the slowed processing could be seen at Fort Chaffee, where by May 28, 1980, only 973 of 19,048 refugees had completed processing and only eighty-two of those had been released. Tired of the delays caused by bureaucratic procedures as well as the lack of sponsors and the crowded living conditions, the encamped rioted on May 24 in Camp Liberty on the Eglin Air Force Base, one of the Floridian processing centers. Fort Chaffee was the second site of refugee riots and demonstrations. Two hundred-fifty angry Cubans escaped the camp on May 26. On June 1, 1,000 in the encampment rioted again. Attacked by state troopers, the refugees answered by rock-throwing and fire-setting when they left the camp. The upheaval led to a strong public reaction. The Miami Herald reported that residents of the nearby town Jenny Lind picketed the fort, demanding more armed guards, and that owners defended their shops with armed patrols ready to “shoot any Cubans escaping into their town.”45

The riots also threatened to create a backlash from the group that the refugees were most dependent upon: members of Congress. General consensus on Capitol Hill was that there was not sufficient time for a permanent solution to the inadequate refugee legislation and that a tailored interim method needed to be found. Also, members of Congress called for a reimbursement of affected communities, a cap to the number of refugees admitted, and the deportation of individuals to prove the administration’s determination to enforce the law. Moreover, Congressional resentment to accommodate only the Cuban-American community surfaced. Senator Lawton Chiles of Florida was concerned that the violence and riots fueled Americans’ anger over the job threat, while Representative Mickey Leland, representing the Congressional Black Caucus, urged equal treatment for Cubans and Haitians. Presidential Assistant Frank Moore reported that “many members [of Congress] say that there has been more negative reaction [among the American population] to this issue than any other in the administration.” Furthermore, this evaluation of public opinion could possibly induce the loss of Congressional support for Carter’s crisis management. The fact that concern about the reaction at the grassroots level played such an important role in Congressional considerations also supported the notion that side-stepping the Refugee Act was the best choice to create a coherent policy regarding the Cubans. By circumventing consultations and party politics in Congress, Carter avoided additional complications in the decision-making process. In general, Moore’s inquiry confirmed the small

probability that Congress would support legislation for allowing Cuban refugees to uphold their special Cold War status.46

In early June, the first results of Carter’s tougher stance on the Cuban boatlift became apparent. Eventually, the federal enforcement network started to implement the blockade that President Carter had ordered and arrested boat captains, crew members, and Cuban-Americans for assisting Cubans who tried to enter the country illegally. The Miami Herald prematurely announced the end of the boatlift in its June 6 issue. Since the beginning of the “ragtag flotilla” on April 20, 1980, more than 110,000 refugees had arrived on American shores. The paper added up the balance of the Cuban exodus: a total of 1,750 boats had entered Key West, 36 vessels sank, 30 people died, roughly 53,500 Cubans were resettled, 655 were imprisoned, and 27,500 refugees had served time in Cuba. However, a trickle of boats kept coming in over the summer and the sealift did not stop completely until September 1980, when Castro closed Mariel to American boats. During the first days of June, in particular, the vessels were increasingly filled with Castro’s newly-released prisoners. The White House announced on June 7, 1980, that the United States was seeking to send back to Cuba 700 of these undesirables and 100 refugees who had broken American laws since their arrival. Hoping to “exclude”47 these 800 through diplomatic means, Carter tried to work through the United Nations (UN) and the Organization of American States (OAS). Secretary of State Edmund Muskie made the official American protest, stating that sending convicts and the mentally ill to the


47 The refugees coming straight out from Cuban prisons could not be deported in the usual way, because they were never officially admitted to the country.

Carter’s newfound determination to halt the boatlift caused frustration and protest in South Florida. The Cuban-American population prepared demonstrations and lists of kin still waiting in Mariel for President Carter’s visit in Miami on June 10, 1980. Miami sought governmental aid to deal with the challenges of the mass influx as well as with social tensions after the race riots of May. But the hoped-for federal support was not offered during Carter’s visit. “The primary initiative must come from this community. It cannot come from Washington,” Carter said in The Miami Herald. Again, Carter had avoided responsibility. At this stage, it seems that Carter had completely lost national support. The American public was concerned over the immigrants’ impact on the job market and the costs connected to their accommodation, especially in Florida. Members of Congress shared the concerns of their constituents after Carter announced that the Cubans were allowed to stay in the United States, thus ruling out the possibility of sending them to third countries. While members of the Cuban-American population appreciated this decision, they felt betrayed when Carter enforced measures to end the boatlift. However, the Five-Point Plan and the decision to let the Cubans stay was a
strong expression of Carter’s human rights policy with the aim “to reduce worldwide
governmental violations of the integrity of the person and, to enhance civil and political
liberties ... and to promote basic economic and social rights.”

* * *

A month after the abandonment of the Refugee Act, President Carter decided in
the fourth and last policy stage to favor a policy treating Cubans and Haitians equally.
On June 20, 1980, the government finally announced a transitional solution to the legal
status question. In place of the “refugee” classification, the administration created a new
temporary parole status called “Cuban-Haitian Entrants (status pending)” and submitted
appropriate legislation to Congress on July 31, 1980. This status was applied to all
undocumented Cubans who had arrived between April 19 and June 19, 1980, as well as
all undocumented Haitians who arrived and were processed before June 19, 1980. In
October, President Carter extended this time constraint to October 10, 1980, thus
applying the new policy to 19,023 more Cubans. Under this status, the refugees were
allowed to stay in the United States and “receive limited federal benefits” for six months,
during which time their status should be clarified and, eventually, they would be given
citizenship. The motivation for the “Cuban-Haitian Entrant” status was to cover the
approximately 16,000 Haitians who had come to the United States before the Refugee
Act took effect, and to eliminate any incentive for future illegal immigration with the
time period restrictions. The government made clear that this special legislation was a

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Session Finds Few Answers,” MH, June 10, 1980, p. 1A. See also Presidential Directive/NSC-30,
50 These benefits included “Medicaid, welfare payments and other emergency assistance.” Lee May. “6-
one-time exception. Refugee Coordinator Victor Palmieri reasoned at the time that both
groups of refugees entered the United States as "illegal aliens;" therefore, they could not
be treated like those who had arrived in previous refugee waves. Meanwhile, the press
reported that on the local level, people would have preferred refugee status for the new
arrivals. In that case, the federal government would pay all costs created through
screening and resettling of the Cubans and the immigrants would receive greater benefits.
Instead, under the "Cuban-Haitian Entrant" legislation, the federal government
reimbursed the states only partly for the costs incurred by processing the refugees. The
public outcry that this policy triggered in Florida was reflected clearly in one Miami
Herald editorial:

... The asylum option requires that Congress appropriate funds for these purposes.
If Congress balks, local taxpayers will have to pick up the tab... It creates
precisely the situation that Fidel Castro hopes to create: backlash against Cubans
fleeing his regime. Added to the resentment and fear already generated by the
mental defectives and convicts Castro has mixed among the Cubans awaiting
transport from Mariel, it threatens to turn Castro's failures into an American
domestic political crisis. Let the President and Congress bear one fact clearly in
mind: They and they alone created this problem, and they and they alone must
bear the financial responsibility of their actions. South Florida's governments
simply do not have the financial resources to pay the bills for chaos custom-
ordered by their national Government. 51

The American public was unsatisfied with Carter's solution to the refugee crisis. A New
York Times-CBS nationwide poll showed that three times as many people disapproved of
allowing Cubans to settle in the United States. Sixty-five percent of the participants also
disapproved of Carter's handling of the Mariel Boatlift. 52

52 Cuban-Haitian Fact Sheet, 6/20/1980, "Cuban/Haitian Fact Sheet 6/20/1980," Box 20, Records of the
Cuban-Haitian Task Force, RG 220, JCL. See also Press Release, 10/21/1980, "Legislation," Box 22,
Records of the Cuban-Haitian Task Force, RG 220, JCL, Larzelere, The 1980 Cuban Boatlift, p. 287; Tom
The “Cuban-Haitian Entrant” status not only left to Congress the politically complicated question of the arrivals’ final legal status, but it also rid Carter of the need for a solution before the presidential elections. Moreover, the administration hoped that the time until Congress voted on the definite status decision would create a less aggravated environment for a national debate. Congress was displeased with this outcome, since the newly passed Refugee Act of 1980 had been initiated to regulate the Attorney General’s use of parole in recent years, which had been dissatisfying to members of Congress in the case of hundreds of thousands of Vietnamese refugees and others.\(^53\)

On the other hand, under their new status, the refugees were eligible for more federal programs—Supplementary Security Income (SSI), Medicaid, Aid to Families with Dependent Children (AFDC), and emergency assistance—than they had been as asylum-seekers. But this policy was a decisive step away from the U.S. Cold War policy of providing refuge to everyone coming from a communist country. Victor Palmieri stated his and the State Department’s view on this issue:

If ... we were to declare all these Cubans refugees, we would be locking ourselves in to [sic] a posture where we will probably accepting in the future all who happen to make their way here from Cuba. It is time instead to move decisively away from the special treatment Cubans have enjoyed for 20 years and toward parity with Haitians and all other asylum seekers—meaning that we will in the future review their cases carefully and not hesitate to deny asylum to those who don’t qualify.\(^54\)


Palmieri to White, 6/12/1980, “Cuban Situation: Reports to the White House,” Box 1, Records of the Cuban-Haitian Task Force, RG 220, JCL.
The final step toward a changed immigration policy regarding Cuban refugees was taken during the last week of June. A federal immigration judge signed deportation orders against eighteen Cubans who confessed to having committed serious crimes in Cuba; it was announced there would be more deportations in the next months. Apparently, this was the first time since Castro came to power in Cuba that the United States sought deportation of Cubans seeking asylum in America.\(^5\)

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CHAPTER 4

CONCLUSION

After twenty years of relatively unrestricted immigration, the United States turned its back on the Cuban people within ten weeks. It was not the Refugee Act of 1980, however, which abolished the special status of Cuban refugees, but the dynamics of the Mariel Boatlift that led to the demise of the Cold War policy. Domestic concerns outlasted diplomacy in this foreign policy problem. The administration could have used emergency provisions of the Refugee Act of 1980—as it did to support the Havana 10,000—to welcome the large-scale influx from Mariel and embarrass Castro at the same time. But the decision against such an order seems to embody a change of attitude about American responsibility as a world power and safe haven for the oppressed.

The initial condemnation of the boatlift, which was the first of the four stages in Carter’s crisis management, shows a broad determination on the American side to prevent Castro from using emigration as a valve to release social and economic pressure. It was also consistent with the Cold War policies of containment and regime destabilization. After the U.S. administration realized that it was cornered by Castro, who controlled the exodus, Carter’s initiative to welcome the Cubans with “open arms” was an attempt to turn the catastrophe into a credibility gain for the Western system. But,
instead, it contributed to the flip-flopping image of the Carter administration. The third stage, introducing the Five-Point-Plan for an orderly immigration, aimed at gaining control of the refugee influx, restoring the trust of the American population in their government, and appeasing the Cuban-American community. Internationalization of the crisis was more and more marginalized. Instead, in a fourth stage, the creation of the “Cuban-Haitian Entrant” status became an exceptional measure to accommodate the out-of-hand situation, but it also conveyed the notion that the Cubans deserved no preferential treatment over other asylum-seekers.

Carter’s indecisiveness was rooted in the fear that the dismissal of the refugee status would be followed by civic unrest, which would damage his chances of winning the presidential election. Therefore, the government was attentive to American public opinion during its decision-making process concerning the 1980 exodus. As U.S. Coordinator for Refugee Affairs Victor Palmieri stated, the administration waited for this change in public opinion to enforce the laws against the boaters in the sealift, halt illegal immigration, and establish a new immigration status that was politically correct. But instead of easing the situation, this caution put the Cubans in legal limbo, which confused immigrants and the American population alike. Furthermore, the ongoing debate about the extent and distribution of the financial burden caused by the processing and resettlement of the new arrivals increased the rejection of the “Marielitos.” Anxieties among Americans about the Cubans’ impact on the welfare state and the job market during a period of recession were picked up by the media, which aggravated negative public response towards the mass immigration by increasingly focusing on the “undesirables”—criminals, the mentally ill and homosexuals.
In terms of domestic policies and his humanitarian principles, the “Cuban-Haitian Entrant” status was the perfect compromise for Carter. On the one hand, he avoided as much federal spending on the resettlement of the refugees as possible to spare the strained budget. On the other hand, the majority of the Cubans were allowed to stay for the time being. Moreover, President Carter tried to prevent further damage to his political record by handing the final decision on the refugees to Congress, a smart move in an election year. In terms of foreign policy, the Mariel Boatlift proved to be chaotic. The American government was completely at Castro’s mercy for the first six weeks of the exodus. Early efforts to internationalize the refugee crisis failed because of the Cuban dictator’s refusal of international negotiations or to send emigrants to any other country than the United States. The Mariel Boatlift of 1980 showed America that it was neither economically nor legally prepared to deal with a refugee wave of such a large scale. When Castro closed the port of Mariel in September 1980, approximately 125,000 Cubans had emigrated from Cuba to the United States. This event ignited a long national debate on America’s self-image as a country of immigrants and about a refugee policy able to fit the demands of mass migration in the last decades of the twentieth century.56

56 For more details about the immigration debate turn to Zucker and Zucker. Desperate Crossings.
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