

DEVELOPMENT STAGES OF THE “CUBAN EXILE COUNTRY”¹

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Since Cubans first began to flee their nation following the 1959 revolutionary takeover, the lost homeland has endured as the only constant throughout their diaspora—their common bond, the obligatory historical reference that lingers in their memory like bitter sugar on a child’s palate. Cuba is, indeed, the shared past to which the emigrés, whenever they left, wherever they settled, could always relate. Not surprisingly, the “Cuban Exile Country” continues to be linked to its place of origin. Whether Cuban Americans or Cubans residing in other nations, nearly all emigrés define themselves in terms of Cuba, their collective homeland.

Over the years, most Cuban emigrés have insisted that they are political exiles even if their actual behavior in the United States contradicts the transient connotation of that definition. Much has changed in the internal dynamics of *el exilio* since 1959 and, evidently, this long-held sense of identity has begun to relent under the weight of time. But the emergence of a Cuban American generation represents a new phenomenon; until very recently, the majority considered themselves political exiles and, as such, reluctant emigrés. Among the older generation, most still do.²

From its onset, the political genesis of the Cuban exodus nurtured many self-defining characteristics that appear to set these emigrés somewhat apart from other Latin Americans coming to the United States. Unlike true immigrants, the early Cuban emigrés were well aware that they would lose in exile the socioeconomic status most of them had enjoyed in Cuba. Whereas immigrants are usually motivated by the “pull” this proverbial “land of opportunity” exerts upon them, the initial two waves of Cuban emigrés felt “pushed” by political conditions prevailing in Cuba at the time they left.³ Truth be told, those Cubans did not come to the United States searching for the economic fortunes inherently promised by the American Dream; their exodus was a direct response to Castro’s revolution and, once they settled abroad, they adamantly rejected being classified as immigrants. By the time other Cubans with somewhat different motivations and socioeconomic backgrounds later joined them in America, that initial exodus had already given their collective experience its lasting political imprint.

Through almost four decades, Cuban exiles have tried obsessively to stay abreast of developments back in their homeland. So much so that the emigrés, particularly those in South Florida, have continued to be

1. This paper summarizes Chapter 3 of the author’s forthcoming book, *The Cuban Americans* (Greenwood Press).

2. The Cuban population in the U.S. climbed above the one million mark in 1990. Only six percent of it arrived before 1960; about a third arrived in the 1960s, 13 percent in the 1970s, and 20 percent in the 1980s. The remaining 28 percent were born in the U.S. but identify themselves as Cubans. See The Cuban American Policy Center, *A Demographic Profile of Cuban Americans* (Miami: Cuban American National Council, 1994).

3. The distinction between immigrants and refugees has been noted before. See Everett S. Lee, “A Theory of Migration,” *Demography* 3 (1966), pp. 47-57.

influenced as much by the course of events on the island as by what actually transpires in their adopted surroundings. Not only have ensuing revolutionary measures triggered the exodus of additional waves, but each successive emigration has had an impact on the orientation of those already here. Time and again actions taking place in Cuba precipitate corresponding reactions among the exiles in the United States.

Such connection is so strong that events in the island determine the stages of development of the Cuban exile experience: survival (1959-1962), transition (1962-1965), adjustment (1965-1973), economic miracle (1973-1980), diversification (1980-1990), and post-Soviet era (1990 to the present).⁴ These are not merely successive chronological periods; rather, they constitute true stages, for each has brought about a clear shift in the internal dynamics of the exile community and a new sense of collective direction.

THE SURVIVAL STAGE (1959-1962)

The Initial Exodus (1959-1961): Cubans began their Castro-era emigration the moment General Fulgencio Batista fled the island on New Year’s morning of 1959 and a “provisional” revolutionary government took over the reins of the politically-troubled nation. The first exiles were hundreds of Batista’s closest collaborators who feared reprisals from the regime that had ousted them. Soon after, they were joined in the United States by a massive exodus that originated within the nation’s business and professional establishment but quickly enough included early defectors from Castro’s own ranks. That initial exodus, therefore, embraced three distinct exile “vintages,” the largest of which was the island’s nonpolitical elite.⁵

The upper and middle classes were disproportionately represented in that initial wave. Because of political circumstances, the emigrés were mostly destitute upon arrival, but many of them were familiar with the United States, having often visited it for business or pleasure. In addition, because Cuban culture was highly Americanized, the members of this particular vintage were not complete strangers to America’s way of life: To them the United States was not *terra incognita*. Precisely because of their familiarity with the United States, they “were the least given to believe that the American government would permit the consolidation of a socialist regime in the island.”⁶

The demographic profile of the exiles who arrived between 1959 and 1962 confirms other characteristics associated with their high socioeconomic status in prerevolutionary Cuba. Most may have left empty-handed but not without considerable human capital. Their educational and professional backgrounds, in fact, placed them near the top echelons of society—in Cuba and in America as well. This initial wave was certainly the island’s “cream of the crop”—many had studied English at Havana’s private schools or had learned it at American summer camps, high schools, and colleges.

They were also older than most immigrants; hence, their cultural identity was rather defined by the time they left. The role that their identity as exiles has played on their American dynamics defies quantification; so do other defining traits displayed by this initial wave, such as pride, enterprising drive, adaptability, and a host of other psychosocial aspects that served them well in their new environment. Neither can the cultural “baggage” they brought be accurately measured by statistics. The same is true of their political idiosyncrasies. Perhaps there is something unique in the mind-set of all exiles that acts as a special in-

4. These stages of development were first published in 1996. See Miguel González-Pando, “Doing Business,” *Greater Miami: Spirit of Cuban Enterprise*, ed. Miguel González-Pando (Ft. Lauderdale: Cooperfield, 1996), pp. 40-69.

5. E. F. Kunz, “The Refugee in Flight: Kinetic Models and Forms of Displacement,” *International Migration Review* 7 (1973), p. 137.

6. Nelson Amaro and Alejandro Portes. “Una Sociología del Exilio: Situación de los Grupos Cubanos en los Estados Unidos,” *Aportes* 23 (1972) p. 10.

centive to succeed.⁷ If such be the case, the initial wave of Cuban emigrés had it in abundance. They were also heirs to an enterprising tradition honed by centuries of commercial contact with the outside world.

The Anti-Castro Struggle Among Early Exiles:

Upon their arrival in the United States, the initial wave was driven by one all-consuming objective: to return to Cuba after toppling Castro's revolutionary government. They expected that, with the support of their powerful American ally, such an objective would be accomplished within a short period of time. This expectation was not the result of wishful thinking; rather, it was a most natural assumption given the geopolitical interest Americans had historically shown in its Cuban neighbors.

Truly, the odds against the survival of the revolutionary regime seemed formidable. By the summer of 1960, guerrilla groups linked to an incipient underground network had already surfaced in the Cuban mountains. More ominously, the U.S. government had begun to recruit and train exiles for paramilitary actions against Castro. Such internal and external threats, the exiles inferred, could not be effectively countered by the nascent regime.

By early 1961, right after the inauguration of President Kennedy, the emigrés' confidence in the liberation of their homeland reached a feverish pitch, as scores of Cuban exiles were being recruited by the Central Intelligence Agency (CIA) and sent to training bases in Guatemala and other locations.⁸ This was supposed to be a covert operation, but pictures of the training camps were prominently displayed in the weekly tabloids (*periodiquitos*) published in the United States by exiles as well as in the *New York Times*. Despite President Kennedy's repeated denials, everyone was aware that a U.S.-sponsored invasion of the island would soon be launched.

The invasion fever sweeping the Cuban exile community became obsessive. A coalition of anti-Castro groups, the Consejo Revolucionario Cubano (Cuban Revolutionary Council), was brought together under the political and military control of the CIA, making the exiles nothing more than willing instruments of the United States. Although the relinquishing of authority did cause some friction among exile leaders, they were persuaded that this was an "unavoidable cost." The plans for the invasion continued at full speed.

The Need for Survival: While their attention remained focused on the liberation of Cuba, the exiles still needed to find the means to survive during what they assumed would be a temporary stay in America. Making ends meet meant accepting the first job that was offered. Since South Florida's strong unions maintained firm restrictions against the newcomers, Cubans were forced to take any jobs, even those traditionally held by Miami's African Americans.

Former Cuban entrepreneurs and professionals parked cars, washed dishes, drove taxis, waited on tables, delivered newspapers, and performed a variety of menial tasks for which they were overqualified. Unlicensed Cuban doctors and dentists, ever so careful not to be discovered by the authorities, saw patients in their own homes. Housewives who had never held a job in Cuba found employment as waitresses, maids, seamstresses, factory workers, and vegetable pickers in the fields. Thousands of exiles were able to go on the generous payroll of the CIA, which during the *Survival Stage* may have been one of Dade County's larger employers.

The challenge of survival was met with a strong sense of solidarity. Those who arrived earlier tried to ease the shock of the newly-arrived by offering them advice on how to find a job, to obtain a social security card, to enroll their children in school, to look for

7. That much has been suggested by Joel Krotkin in *Tribes: How Race, Religion and Identity Determine Success in the New Global Economy* (New York: Random, 1992).

8. Several authors have documented the Cuban exiles' anti-Castro war. See for example, Hugh Thomas, *Cuba: The Pursuit of Freedom* (New York: Harper, 1971); Juan M. Clark, *Cuba: Mito y realidad* (Miami-Caracas: Saeta Ediciones, 1990); Enrique Encinosa, *Cuba en guerra* (Miami: The Endowment for Cuban American Studies of the Cuban American Foundation, 1994).

housing, and to enlist in the federally-funded Cuban Refugee Program, where they could get free medical attention and bags of groceries.⁹ The few fortunate enough to afford a car drove their Cuban neighbors to work, to the doctor, and to supermarkets. The spirit of community that characterized the *Survival Stage* was to prevail until today, as each new wave went through a similar process upon arriving in America. Survival, indeed, became the shared rite of passage into exile.

Settling in South Florida: The initial exodus settled primarily in and around Miami. There was a precedence for that. Throughout the island’s brief history as an independent nation, South Florida’s proximity to Cuba had made it the haven of choice whenever political troubles forced Cubans into exile. Moreover, Miami’s quasi-tropical climate resembled Cuba’s.

Those who had come in the past as exiles belonged to the more politically-active segments of Cuban society—for example, the opposition to General Gerardo Machado in the early 1930s and to General Fulgencio Batista in the 1950s. But not this time. This was a different type of exodus, far greater in numbers and consisting mostly of the well-educated upper and middle classes; unlike their predecessors, they brought their families and left everything else behind.

As more and more exiles came, they tended to settle in the then-depressed areas of Miami’s southwest section, where rents were low. South Florida, a racially-segregated resort town catering mainly to winter tourists, had never witnessed such an incursion of often-destitute ethnics moving into “Anglo”¹⁰ neighborhoods; these foreigners were very different from the free-spending Latin Americans who stayed in Miami Beach’s hotels. Their sudden impact on the com-

munity was greeted with mixed emotions by the established residents, who perceived the newcomers as clannish and loud. Like most immigrants who come to America, the Cuban exiles met with some resentment.

The exiles, in fact, *were* clannish and loud. In those days, several families often pooled their resources and crammed into small apartments until each one was able to afford a place of its own. And they were also conspicuous. During the day, hundreds gathered downtown to share the latest news from Cuba and to exchange information about available jobs; at night, they visited with friends and sat on their porches seeking relief from Miami’s heat. From the very start, the emigrés showed an all-consuming desire to stay in touch with each other and to keep alive their traditional way of life. By the end of the *Survival Stage*, an embryonic exile community was already emerging within Miami.

THE TRANSITION STAGE (1962-1965)

A Period of Hopelessness: Events involving Cuba—the Bay of Pigs Invasion and the Missile Crisis—jolted *el exilio* and left it in disarray. The *Transition Stage* thus began. Deep within their psyche, the exiles felt defeated in their cause and lost in a new land. The militant anti-Castro spirit that had so far lent coherence to the exile experience began giving way to painful introspection. During this period, commercial flights between Cuba and the United States were discontinued, leaving many of the relatives of the initial exodus stranded on the island.

Hopelessness about returning to Cuba was hard to accept. The invasion fiasco and the Soviet Union’s involvement in the affairs of the Caribbean island had effectively consolidated Castro’s regime; the United States had failed the exiles, not once, but twice. To make matters worse, they were forced to

9. In December 1960, the Eisenhower Administration created the Cuban Refugee Emergency Center to coordinate the relief efforts of voluntary agencies and to oversee resettlement. Some months later, President Kennedy created the more generous Cuban Refugee Program.

10. For lack of a better term, “Anglo” and “American” are used interchangeably throughout this paper to refer to the white, non-Cuban English-speaking U.S. population. Obviously it is a misnomer, for it includes Jews, Italian-Americans and other ethnics who, although American, are not Anglo.

recognize that Castro's international image had grown to mythical proportions as a result of his victories against American "imperialism," while the Cuban exiles, abandoned by their American ally and denigrated by the world press, had suffered a lasting defeat. It was time for the emigrés, albeit reluctantly, to come to terms with the prospects of a long stay in America.

That harsh realization could well have caused the exiles to follow the same fate as other immigrant groups and disappear into America's melting pot. Instead, after a period of soul searching, they emerged more determined to prevail. Thus challenged, the exiles still needed to find a new cause consistent with their battered convictions. Given the political nature of their exodus, the reluctant emigrés felt they could regain their collective self-worth only by somehow assigning a subliminal ideological justification to their commonplace struggle in America.

The End of the War Against Castro: For all intents and purposes, the exiles' struggle to liberate Cuba by force all but ceased during the *Transition Stage*. They lacked the resources to contend with Castro's growing military power, and without U.S. support, they knew any future action carried out by Cuban freedom fighters was doomed. The suddenness with which the United States implemented its turnabout left Cuban exiles in shock. In rapid succession, the CIA cut off the support it had been providing to Cuban freedom fighters, and the U.S. government began to persecute and prosecute exiles who tried to launch independent raids against Castro's regime. It was a sad finale to a struggle for which thousands of their comrades-in-arms had given their lives and tens of thousands languished in Cuba's jails.

By December 1962, when negotiations with the Cuban government for the return of the prisoners of the Bay of Pigs Invasion concluded and President Kennedy arrived in Miami to welcome the invasion veterans as heroes, the active phase of the struggle symbolically came to an end. From then on, group

after group of militant exiles were forced to accept that theirs was a lost cause, and many of their members reluctantly reoriented their lives in exile.

Resettlement Policy of the Cuban Refugee Program: From the moment the Cuban exiles began arriving, the official intention of the American government had been to relocate the newcomers throughout the country. That policy encountered much initial resistance, because most Cubans preferred to stay in South Florida in the hope that their exile would be a short-lived one. During the *Transition Stage*, however, thousands of exiles began to resettle in other communities across the nation.

For nearly all of those who left Miami during this period, their decision involved a tacit reordering of their personal priorities; the well-being of their family would now take precedence over the struggle to liberate their homeland. Anyway, most violent anti-Castro activities had all but stopped after the 1962 Missile Crisis; and South Florida's job market was saturated. Among those leaving were thousands of Cuban professionals, particularly lawyers and educators for whom secure employment as Spanish teachers in other states seemed to offer better prospects than hard-to-secure, dead-end jobs in South Florida. They were joined by former managers of American companies that had operated in Cuba, blue-collar workers attracted by higher-paying union jobs in the north, and disillusioned freedom fighters who joined the U.S. Army in the faint hope that a twist of fate might send them to fight Castro under the American flag.

Everywhere the exiles went, they carried with them an undying anticommunist spirit. They formed small colonies in New Jersey,¹¹ New York, Chicago, Boston, Washington, D.C., and other urban centers in the northeast as well as in dozens of cities of the Midwest and as far west as California.

Emergence of Little Havana: While some exiles were relocating throughout the nation, a counter

11. Exiles established a Cuban enclave in Union City, New Jersey, and much like Little Havana, it thrived. Small Cuban-owned businesses eventually dominated the commercial district of this so-called "Havana on the Hudson."

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trend also ensued; a four-square-mile area in Miami’s southwest section continued to attract new Cubans. It was during this period that the first Cuban businesses made their appearance on Flagler and Eighth streets, the area’s main commercial thoroughfares. Although difficult to anticipate, in a few years Miami’s *la saguesera*—as the early exiles mispronounced “southwest”—would emerge as the heart of the economically-viable exile enclave in South Florida; it would come to be known as “Little Havana.”

The new Cubans settling in Miami were not coming directly from the island, since flights between the United States and Cuba were discontinued after the Missile Crisis. Once Miami became identified as the capital of the “Cuban Exile Country,” it acted as a magnet to Cubans who had first gone to Spain and Latin America, as to some who had earlier been resettled elsewhere in the United States. Their common motivation was the desire to share life with their fellow Cubans, for inaccessible as the island actually was, it felt a lot closer from Little Havana.

During the *Transition Stage*, hundreds of Cuban-owned mom-and-pop shops that catered almost exclusively to an exile clientele dotted Little Havana’s emerging landscape; and each opening was celebrated by the exiles as a collective victory. A rudimentary service network, partly underground, was also developing within the fledgling enclave. Doctors, dentists, and accountants saw their Cuban clients in their own apartments; electricians, roofers, plumbers, and other technicians offered cut-rate prices to fellow exiles.

Hialeah also attracted thousands of exiles and, although on a smaller scale than Little Havana, a Cuban enclave developed in this working-class community during the period. The exiles settling in Hialeah found employment at nearby Miami International Airport and in the textile and garment industries. The fact that these were nonunion companies made for a thriving industrial district, and the city of Hi-

aleah eventually emerged as the second-largest exile community in the United States.

THE ADJUSTMENT STAGE (1965-1973)

Beginnings of the Second Exodus—The Camarioca Boatlift: The *Adjustment Stage* started in September 1965, when Castro announced that any Cuban with family residing in the United States would be allowed to leave through Camarioca, a port located on the northern coast of Cuba. The Cuban leader also invited the exiles to come by sea to Camarioca to pick up their relatives who were left stranded in Cuba since commercial flights between the two countries were discontinued.

With this dramatic action, Castro probably intended to rid the island of political malcontents with close ties to the exiles. But by unleashing this demographic bomb, Castro also wanted to show that Havana, not Washington, exercised de facto control over Cubans entering Florida’s seacoast borders.¹² Predictably, thousands of exiles sailed to Cuba, much to the chagrin of U.S. immigration authorities. In just a few weeks, about 5,000 Cubans made the trip to freedom before the United States halted the boatlift.

Although Cubans who left from Camarioca—as well as those who followed in the Freedom Flights—belonged mainly to the middle class that had supported Castro’s initial revolutionary promises, a not-insignificant number of peasants and blue-collar workers also left during this second emigration wave. In contrast to their relatives who had left earlier hoping for a quick return to a free Cuba, this new wave did not entertain such illusions; they just wanted to get away from the Communist regime, not plot its destruction from across the Straits of Florida.

The Freedom Flights and the 1966 Cuban Adjustment Act: Soon after the beginning of the Camarioca Boatlift, President Lyndon B. Johnson announced that the United States would continue to welcome Cubans seeking freedom—as long as they sought it in an orderly, lawful fashion. The following month,

12. Since Camarioca, one of Castro’s most effective tools has been the periodic encouragement of emigration. He has adroitly played this hand whenever he wanted to retaliate against the U.S. or relieve internal political pressures. Castro would use the “demographic bomb” again during the 1980 Mariel Boatlift and the 1994 rafter exodus.

the Johnson administration disclosed it had negotiated a “Memorandum of Understanding” with the Cuban government whereby close relatives of Cubans already in the United States would be allowed to emigrate into this country. In December 1965, the Freedom Flights were inaugurated.

Almost one year to the day of his first announcement, the American president also signed the Cuban Adjustment Act into law. With its passage, Cubans who lived in the United States were given the opportunity to “adjust” their legal status so that they could become American residents or naturalized citizens. Coming during the height of the Cold War, the Cuban Adjustment Act resonated with the prevalent anticommunist rhetoric of the time, even as it set a policy for treating Cubans differently from other immigrants, creating in effect a double standard.¹³

For the next eight years, planes loaded with Cubans would make the short daily trip from Varadero, Cuba, to Miami. About 300,000 Cubans had come to the United States by the time Castro discontinued the Freedom Flights in 1973.¹⁴ This second wave was predominantly white, attesting to the fact that most were the relatives of those in the initial exodus. Because the revolutionary regime restricted the emigration of men of military age, females and older men were vastly over represented in this second wave. From a socioeconomic perspective, however, there were other marked differences. Whereas about a third of the earlier exiles had come from the professional and managerial ranks, less than a fifth of those coming between 1965 and 1973 belonged in that category.¹⁵

Cuban Exiles Turn to the Economic Arena: It was during the *Adjustment Stage* that most exiles were able to reconcile apparently clashing demands: the practical requirements of their new life and the devo-

tion to their old political agenda. Cubans managed this convoluted adjustment by subliminally elevating their commonplace ambitions to the realm of an ideological quest; they were intent in demonstrating the superiority of the capitalist system—of which they considered themselves self-appointed representatives—over Cuban socialism.

Finding a new direction consistent with their old ideological cause was an unconscious yet masterful stroke that allowed them to change behavior without dismantling their essential political values. But their new quest was not simply a matter of realism plus ideology; it was also motivated by a much deeper need to prove their self-worth. How else but by excelling economically in their new land could the exiles demonstrate they were really not “the scum of the Earth and worthless worms” that Castro called them? The disgrace and humiliation of their political defeat became the psychological impetus that fueled their efforts to prevail in the economic arena. Anticommunist ideals, practical imperatives, and psychological motivations were three elements that coincided at that difficult juncture; they produced a winning economic formula.

Self-Employment in the Informal Private Sector Economy: During the *Adjustment Stage*, many exiles gravitated toward the informal fringes of the private sector—a variety of professional, technical, and personal services rendered to other Cubans; a narrow range of marginal business activities requiring minimum start-up capital; and non-unionized garment and construction jobs. As soon as the enterprising exiles mastered entry level jobs, however, they began to talk their employers into restructuring hiring practices in the form of subcontracts.

This new arrangement, which became prevalent in the garment industry, proved to be mutually advan-

13. This preferential treatment lasted until the summer of 1994, when the Clinton Administration placed a de facto hold on the “open-arms” policy toward Cuban refugees.

14. U.S. agencies persuaded about half of the newly arrived Cubans to resettle outside of Miami.

15. Researchers often disagree on the precise socioeconomic extraction of the second wave. See, Silvia Pedraza-Bailey, “Cuba’s Exiles: Portrait of a Refugee Migration,” *International Migration Review* 19 (1985); and Juan M. Clark, “The Exodus from Revolutionary Cuba (1959-74): A Sociological Analysis,” diss., University of Florida.

tageous: for the same amount of money, Cuban subcontractors took on the responsibility of hiring and accommodating workers in their living rooms and garages and delivering the finished goods on time. That rudimentary mode of self-employment often meant working longer hours, but the emigrés could enjoy the satisfaction of being their own bosses—even if their “workers” were actually relatives or friends. Self-employment also became widespread in the Cuban service sector, particularly in the construction trades. It is easy today to sneer at the underground network of “independent” tradesmen, unlicensed doctors, dentists and electricians, clandestine beauty shops, and door-to-door service workers that became increasingly prevalent in the *Adjustment Stage*, but that network provided much-needed income to thousands of uprooted professionals and technicians while rendering inexpensive benefits to the ever-expanding emigré population.

By this time, self-employment was the preferred mode for the entrepreneurial class that had been overrepresented in the initial exodus as well as for industrious Cubans whose lack of marketable skills severely limited other job opportunities. These aspiring businessmen *and* businesswomen pooled their family resources and continued to set up mom-and-pop stores along Eighth Street and Flagler Street. With hardly any need for capital to buy equipment and inventory, the exiles were able to open up groceries stores and cafeterias that offered culturally-differentiated products and services not available outside the Cuban enclave. They served a distinct market of fellow exiles.

The minimal risks of going into business were worth taking in those days when the Freedom Flights continued to bring an endless flow of Cubans from the island. To the exile entrepreneur, the newcomers provided two critical ingredients that fueled their developing businesses: a growing captive market and a source of cheap labor. The third ingredient, availability of financing, was the only bottleneck that kept the Cuban enclave from experiencing a true economic take-off.

Personal Style of Doing Business: The lack of investment capital with which to finance the growth of

their small businesses was largely overcome by relying upon personal contacts. This style of conducting business was really an extension of a time-tested tradition brought from Cuba. When looking for a loan to start-up or expand a business, it seemed only natural that the exiles would rely upon their characteristic personal style.

Because the exiles had neither the track record in the Anglo community nor the collateral to secure conventional financing, they needed to locate, or being recommended to, a handful of Cubans already working for Miami’s banks. That was how the practice of lending based “on moral character” became instituted, particularly at Republic Bank, a newly-established financial institution that attracted a Cuban management team around 1970. Taking advantage of such a practice, the enterprising exiles were able to expand the business base of their economic enclave, and Republic Bank was on its way to becoming the largest Miami-based bank some years later.

The personal style of doing business also proved effective in Latin America. The exiles’ old contacts in that region offered a quick entry into the largely untapped import-export field. It was a perfect fit for the Spanish-speaking exiles. So much so that they packed their bags with samples and catalogues and headed south of the border by the hundreds. The strategy paid off: These international traveling salesmen returned to Miami with lucrative orders and contracts. Within a few years, they managed to establish countless small import-export businesses operating out of their homes and apartments—the incipient foundation of a thriving international market that would lead South Florida’s economic development during the 1970s.

Diehard Exiles, Militant Students, and Terrorists:

While by the mid-1960s most Cubans had actively abandoned the war against Castro, others tried to keep that struggle alive. In addition to the obvious economic imperatives and the hindrance of U.S. officials, diehard exiles faced obstacles of their own making. Lack of significant support from a largely-disenchanted emigré community, internal strife among the militant leadership and questions about some of their extremist tactics undermined several well-inten-

tioned initiatives, while others were exposed as ill-conceived efforts or simple frauds.¹⁶ Among the more bizarre of these initiatives was led by José Elías de la Torriente. On February 1970, the so-called *Plan Torriente* organized a major rally at a baseball stadium that was attended by about 40,000 Miami Cubans; shortly thereafter, a paramilitary commando operation on the island was staged under its auspices, but neither event succeeded in reviving the war against Castro.

During this period, the younger emigrés tried to keep the spirit of the anti-Castro struggle alive by involving themselves in protests designed to bring international attention to the Cuban issue. They founded the Federation of Cuban Students (FEC), an organization that soon had chapters in the United States, Puerto Rico and Costa Rica. The FEC published a monthly newspaper, *Antorcha*, and organized two student congresses. At the same time, another group of students founded Abdala in New York. Although it initially constituted a small study group, after 1972 the group broadened its scope to include non students and, for the next few years, served as the cradle for a new generation of militancy in exile.

During the *Adjustment Stage*, terrorist tactics also gathered new momentum, leading to what the exiles referred to as *la guerra por los caminos del mundo* (the war through the roads of the world). In the 1970s, frustrated diehard militants formed secret groups such as the Frente de Liberación Nacional (National Liberation Front), Acción Cubana (Cuban Action), Omega Siete (Omega Seven), Gobierno Cubano Secreto (Secret Cuban Government), and Joven Cuba (Young Cuba), which revived the violent tactics against pro-Castro targets throughout the world; hundreds of explosions rocked Cuban embassies in Europe, Canada, Latin America, and the United States, and attacks against the Cuban regime's personnel abroad became commonplace. By 1974, the wave of terror reached its peak, and those allegedly linked to such activities—Orlando Bosh, Guillermo

Novo, Humberto López, and Luis Crespo—became heroes to many exiles.

By the end of the *Adjustment Stage*, terrorism was becoming more indiscriminate, as its targets then included exiles considered traitors to the anti-Castro cause; José Elías de la Torriente was the first of a series of exile victims. *La guerra por los caminos del mundo* was entering a new violent phase.

THE ECONOMIC MIRACLE STAGE (1973-1980)

Expansion of Miami's Cuban Enclave: Castro's suspension of the Freedom Flights signaled the onset of the *Economic Miracle Stage*, during which the once-displaced exiles finally put down roots in the United States. In South Florida, this period was fueled primarily by the business boom that began within the Cuban enclave. The shops in Little Havana flourished, leading to the establishment and expansion of countless restaurants, cafeterias, supermarkets, gas stations, book, record and hardware stores, private schools, appliance and furniture outlets, dry cleaners, pharmacies, clinics and doctors' offices, theaters, radio stations, funeral homes, and a whole gamut of services that could well have supported the population of a medium-sized city.

The exiles then extended the borders of their enclave into the middle-class neighborhoods of Westchester and the residential districts of Coral Gables and Kendall. Typically, the sections of Greater Miami to which they moved could be distinguished by the opening of new Cuban shops and the large number of cars parked outside their homes—clear evidence that the traditional concept of the extended family still prevailed. Another telling sign was the coming and going of pickup trucks and vans carrying construction supplies to convert garages into family rooms or to build new additions to accommodate relatives who had arrived from Cuba or to serve as offices for their businesses. Naturally, the small construction companies the exiles had started from the back of their trucks grew into aggressive firms.

16. For a unique insider's account of the anti-Castro war, see Enrique Encinosa, *Cuba en Guerra* (Miami: The Endowment for Cuban Studies of the Cuban American National Foundation, 1994).

The proliferation of the small-business sector and service network, as well as the boom linked to international trade, continued to drive the economic fortunes of the “Cuban Exile Country.” Its prosperity was reinforced by three distinct developments: The entry of a younger generation into the professional ranks, the licensing of older Cuban professionals, and the return to Miami of many relocated exiles. By the end of the 1970s, as many as 40 percent of the Cuban population in Greater Miami may have settled previously in other American cities.¹⁷

The New Professional Class: Upon their arrival in America, the first generation of exiles had to face all sorts of hardships, but they always insisted that their children learn English, graduate from high school and attend college. Hence, the youngsters went to school in record proportions while their parents, lacking valid U.S. credentials, were forced to put on hold their professional careers or to practice underground. In the *Economic Miracle Stage*, however, those youngsters were completing their university education, and many of their parents were returning to school to obtain professional licenses. The gradual entrance of both generations into the professional ranks further boosted their prospects.

From the beginning, the parents’ road to earning professional licenses in the United States was fraught with frustration, and not just because of their lack of English proficiency. Florida’s politically-entrenched professional associations, for example, fought them every inch of the way. Not until the exiles started to flex their economic and political muscles, did former doctors, architects, lawyers, and other Cuban professionals could see their dream of practicing in America become, at long last, a reality.

For the younger generation, on the other hand, the educational path was much smoother.¹⁸ Upon gradu-

ation, many of them returned to work in Greater Miami, or other areas of exile concentration. These young professionals were as eager to prosper as their parents, but they were better-prepared to compete for high-paying executive positions in mainstream businesses, take over and expand their parents’ small shops, and challenge the “Anglo” establishment on its own turf. This bilingual generation, raised and educated in the United States, became known as “Cuban Americans.”

Miami Emerges as the Gateway to Latin America.

The embryonic import-export network started by the Cubans in the 1960s flourished during the *Economic Miracle Stage*. The expansion of Cuban firms involved in international markets triggered an unprecedented surge of related activities that broadened Miami’s commercial base and bestowed a new economic identity on the city. It became the Gateway to Latin America.

The boom in international trade lured a growing number of multinational corporations, initiating a trend of moving their Latin American headquarters from New York, New Orleans, Mexico City or Caracas to Coral Gables and, later, to Miami. This development, in turn, attracted freight forwarders and insurance companies as well as out-of-state institutions specializing in financing import-export transactions. To cap the internationalization of South Florida, many wealthy Latin Americans, fearing their own country’s political instability, brought large amounts of capital.¹⁹

Ethnic Politics in the South Florida Enclave: Since settling in South Florida the exiles had chosen to remain isolated from the political life of their adopted community. Even adopting U.S. citizenship, not to mention actually registering to vote, was often deemed a betrayal to their homeland. That attitude,

17. According to a recent survey conducted by *The Miami Herald*.

18. The author has long referred to this group as “the last generation.” They are the *last generation* of Cubans old enough to remember pre-Castro Cuba.

19. The flow of billions of dollars from Latin America to Miami included both legitimately earned funds and drug monies. This capital provided further impetus to the economic Latinization of South Florida. Drug laundering schemes flourished during the period, and some Cubans became involved in illegal financial operations.

however, began to change with the emergence of a new Cuban American consciousness in the 1970s. Still, before breaking away from their self-imposed political marginality, Cubans needed to find a justification that would make sense in terms of their old exile mind-set. That rationale was provided by the argument that, as voters, they would be able to influence U.S. foreign policy toward Cuba.

During the *Economic Miracle Stage*, when Cubans still lacked the voting power to elect their own representatives, prominent exiles like Manolo Rebozo and Alfredo Durán, who enjoyed impeccable anti-Castro credentials because of their participation in the Bay of Pigs Invasion, escorted “Anglo” politicians who were courting votes to Little Havana, Westchester and Hialeah. English-speaking politicians had to learn just enough Spanish to yell *¡Viva Cuba Libre!* at political rallies in order to throw Cuban crowds into a frenzy. It was American ethnic politics as it had been traditionally practiced by first-generation immigrants.

In the early 1970s, Rebozo and Durán were able to leverage their own political power among Cuban Americans into appointments for themselves to the City of Miami Commission and the Dade County School Board, respectively, thus becoming the first exile incumbents. In the case of Rebozo, he was elected to the nonpartisan City of Miami Commission at the conclusion of his term. Durán, on the other hand, could not win the Democratic party’s nomination to the School Board, his failure attests to the bias of registered Democrats against Cuban American candidates. That rejection, if anything, spurred the exiles to register—but as Republicans.

By the latter part of the 1970s, the old dilemma between competing allegiances to Cuba and the United States was finally overcome, opening the way to massive American citizenship and voter registration drives. During the decade, the number of Cubans who became American citizens more than doubled.²⁰ It would be misleading, however, to assume that all those who adopted U.S. citizenship had actually re-

placed their sense of identity as Cuban exiles for that of ethnic immigrants. Becoming American, in most cases, involved a rather pragmatic consideration. Since they were not about to return to their homeland, they wanted to take advantage of their full rights as citizens of the United States.

La Guerra por los Caminos del Mundo: The new wave of terrorism that resumed around 1970 reached its peak in the middle of the decade. By then, the attacks were not limited exclusively to pro-Castro targets such as Cuban embassies and consulates; among its victims were now several exile leaders who supported dialogue with the Cuban regime as well as others such as radio personality Emilio Milián who had publicly criticized these radical tactics.

In the three-year period between 1973 and 1976, more than 100 bombs exploded in South Florida. Debate over the appropriateness of these extreme tactics divided the exile community as well as the terrorists themselves. In 1976 the exile terrorists grew even bolder: In Washington, D.C., they killed Orlando Letelier, a former minister of Chile who was allegedly linked to Castro’s regime; far more brutal was the blowing up of a Cubana de Aviación airplane off the coast of Barbados killing 73 passengers.

From then on popular opinion throughout the “Cuban Exile Country” turned against the indiscriminate spread of violence. The consensus at the time was that random terrorism had tarnished the image of the exiles’ cause and had actually strengthened of Castro’s regime. By then, moreover, there was increasing evidence that Castro’s agents in the United States were behind some of the terrorist actions that were blamed on militant exiles. The violent “war through the roads of the world” had finally reached a dead-end.

THE DIVERSIFICATION STAGE (1980-1990)

The Controversial *Diálogo*: Once again, shock waves originating from within the island impacted the lives of Cubans living in the United States. The fuse that triggered it was set in November 1978,

20. Whereas in 1970 only 25 percent of the Cuban exiles were American citizens, by 1980 a majority (55 percent) was.

when Castro invited a group of exiles to meet with him in Havana. The unforeseen consequences of that event soon turned it into a milestone that changed Cubans on both sides of the Florida Straits. Arguably, in the wake of this dialogue, the prosperous Cuban American community was stunned into a new era—the *Diversification Stage*.

The meeting between Castro and the exiles was supposed to follow a strictly humanitarian agenda, but its political implications soon overshadowed the professed goals of negotiating the release of political prisoners and the lifting of travel restrictions to the island. Upon returning from their meeting with Castro, the dialogue’s seventy-five participants were denounced as traitors by a majority of their fellow exiles. Threats soon escalated into terrorist attacks against some of the exiles who had participated in the controversial talks.²¹ Since then, the rift between supporters and opponents of the *Diálogo* has dominated the political debate among Cuban exiles.

The consequences of the agreement negotiated between Castro and the exiles were not any less significant on the communist island. As a result of the dialogue, the Cuban regime for the first time opened its doors to emigrés who wanted to visit their families back home. Thousands of Miami Cubans defied threats from hard-line exiles and descended in droves upon the island. The impact of the visitors —and their gifts to family and friends—shook the communist regime to its ideological core. The exiles, whom Castro had repeatedly called *gusanos* (worms), were now welcomed as beneficent *mariposas* (butterflies) by their countrymen. To be sure, the Cuban population, tired of years of the severe hardships and shortages caused by the system’s economic failures, were amazed at the contrast between their own ordeal and the exiles’ success in America.

The Peruvian Embassy Incident: Given the widespread dissatisfaction with conditions in the island,

Cubans attempted to leave by whatever means they could. After one daring episode, in which a bus crashed through the gates of the Peruvian Embassy in Havana and a Cuban guard was killed, the government of Perú lodged an official protest against the communist regime’s heavy-handling of the incident. An angry Castro retaliated by announcing he was re-tiring the security forces that surrounded the Peruvian Embassy.

Within a few days, over 10,000 Cubans crowded the embassy compound. The resulting spectacle embarrassed the *Máximo Líder* to no end, for the massive defections represented an obvious rejection of his regime—by a generation raised under Marxist slogans, no less. Trying to end such a damning display of disaffection, the regime offered safe-conduct to the refugees so that they could return to their homes while it negotiated their emigration. Peru, however, agreed to accept only one thousand refugees. It was then that Castro resorted once again to his old ploy—the demographic bomb.

In April 1980, just as he had done in 1965, Castro invited the exiles to come by sea and pick up, not only those who had originally sought asylum at the embassy, but anyone who wanted to leave. What followed was a reprise, albeit in a much larger scale, of the earlier opening of the port of Camarioca—although this time Mariel was designated the port of exit. As on the previous occasion, Cuban Americans sailed south to retrieve their loved ones. The Mariel Boatlift was underway.²²

The Third Exodus—The Mariel Boatlift: The *Diversification Stage* may have actually started that moment in May 1980 when the first exiles sailed to the Cuban port of Mariel, and it certainly started off with a bang. About five months later, when this chaotic exodus finally concluded, some 125,000 Cubans had been brought into the United States in vessels owned or chartered by their fellow Cubans in exile.

21. Bombs exploded in Miami at the Continental Bank and at Padrón Cigars: their respective principals, Bernardo Benes and Orlando Padrón, had participated in the dialogue. *Dialogueros* were also victims of terrorist attacks in Jersey City and Puerto Rico.

22. In 1965 the Cuban government opened the port of Camarioca to exiles. Although only 5,000 refugees left with exiles at that time, this event led to the Freedom Flights which brought 300,000 Cubans to the United States between 1965 and 1973.

By then, the new refugees²³ had also managed to sink Miami into a deep crisis and to stigmatize the exiles who had brought them to America. Admittedly, the Mariel Boatlift cast a dark shadow over the image of the established exile community. Thereafter, *el exilio* would never be the same.

Demographically and ideologically, the refugees who arrived during the Mariel Boatlift appeared very different from the Cubans already in the United States. Whereas the two earlier waves were made up of older, mostly white emigrés who belonged to the upper and middle classes, the *Marielitos* were younger and represented a mix of races more typical of the island's multiracial population. Brought up under Cuba's socialist regime, the newcomers lacked their predecessors' business and professional experiences as well as their familiarity with free market economies.²⁴ To these differences in racial background and socioeconomic status, it is important to add the obvious contrast between the revolutionary political upbringing of the new arrivals and that of the established exiles. Moreover, unlike those who came in the first two waves, this new group was completely unfamiliar with Miami; they were clearly of a different vintage.

At first, Cuban Americans had reacted with enthusiasm to the incident at the Peruvian Embassy and the ensuing boatlift. The fact that these mostly young men, raised by the revolutionary regime, had turned their backs on communism was certainly cause for great celebration in Miami and the other exile colonies. But the festive mood lasted only a short while. As boat upon boat load of racially-mixed *Marielitos* made their way across the Florida Straights, the euphoria gave way to apprehension. After it was revealed that Castro had sprinkled the exodus with thousands of criminals and the mentally-ill, the exiles' mood turned to rancor.

The Post-Mariel Crisis: Within a few weeks of its on-set, the adverse repercussions of the boatlift had reached crisis levels. The housing shortage, unemployment and the crime wave unleashed by the newcomers upon South Florida prompted President Jimmy Carter to declare a state of emergency and to release \$10 million to help local governments cope with the mounting crisis.²⁵ But that was hardly enough. By then, community leaders were up in arms, and Cuban Americans were blamed for bringing in the refugees.

For a while, it seemed as if the Cuban success story would be eclipsed by the *Marielitos'* penchant for getting themselves into trouble. A grim tent city appeared within the heart of once-quaint Little Havana, homeless peddlers roamed the streets, and violent crime engulfed South Florida. When police arrested the offenders, federal authorities confined these so-called excludables to prisons in other states, where they were to remain without hope of ever being released, even after serving their full sentences—unless they could be deported to Cuba. And Castro, of course, did not want to take them back. Facing such a dreadful legal limbo, the *Marielitos* who were confined at Fort Chaffee rioted, injuring scores of guards and setting fire to several buildings. Those housed at other federal penitentiaries soon followed suit.

U.S. officials had initially attempted to control the boatlift, but later they changed their position when President Carter himself reaffirmed this country's open-arms policy to Cubans seeking freedom. Toward the end of the summer of 1980, as the boatlift began to slacken, the Cuban regime finally closed the port of Mariel to the exiles, which effectively concluded this bizarre episode. Despite the damage that sensationalist reports had caused to South Florida's

23. To observe the prevailing terminology, Cubans who came in the first two emigration waves are referred to as "exiles" in this text; those who left during the 1980 Mariel Boatlift and the 1994 exodus are referred to as "refugees."

24. It was estimated that only 8.7 percent of the new arrivals, compared to 22.2 percent of the early exiles, had a managerial background.

25. At first, the *Marielitos* were processed by exile volunteers. That practice changed, however, after the federal government took charge and sent thousands to camps around the country: Eglin Air Force Base in Florida, Fort Chaffee in Arkansas, Fort Indian Gap in Pennsylvania, and Fort McCoy in Wisconsin.

Development Stages of the “Cuban Exile Country”

image, and in particular to Cuban Americans, the worst was finally over; the troublemakers among the Mariel refugees, in reality, represented only a small minority, perhaps as low as 5 percent of the total. Once authorities had rounded them up, the post-Mariel crisis slowly faded away, but the damage had been done; the American press, and even the exiles themselves, echoed Castro’s characterization of the entire batch of refugees as “worms and scum.”

The “Cuban Exile Country” Matures and Diversifies: After a fleeting but chaotic interlude, the post-Mariel period was characterized by a consolidation of earlier trends toward a more diversified exile community, as evidenced by the appearance of new and often-contradictory developments: demographic shock, renewed leadership, political mobilization, economic maturity, and controversy over exile trips to the island.

Up to the *Diversification Stage*, the major thrust of Cuban business development in Miami had taken place within the ever-expanding boundaries of the enclave economy. Although by 1980 there were already over a dozen bank presidents and more than a hundred bank vice presidents born in Cuba, and the new U.S.-trained bilingual generation was being recruited by local enterprises as well as by multinational corporations, it was outside the mainstream economy where the exiles had concentrated their business efforts. That was to change drastically. In the 1980s, Cuban enterprises expanded beyond the enclave and began to challenge the “Anglo” business establishment on its own turf.

The growth of exile business outside the enclave proved rather successful in attracting the patronage of younger Cuban Americans (and even some “Anglo” customers) to a new breed of Cuban-owned supermarket chains, car dealerships, appliance stores, health maintenance organizations, etc. They managed to accomplish this feat by combining the traditional personal practices that had served them so well within the informal enclave economy with the ag-

gressive advertising and price discounting that were generally associated with large mainstream businesses. It was a winning strategy.

Cuban construction companies and developers, by now proficient in taking advantage of minority opportunities, began to vie with the biggest established enterprises for their share of government contracts and multi-million dollar projects. When South Florida’s entrenched businesses realized the full potential of the exile economy, it was too late to stop the advance of the exiles; by then, Cubans not only enjoyed an almost-exclusive control of their thriving enclave, but were also making significant inroads into the rest of the South Florida market.

Cuban Americans Become a Political Force in South Florida: During the 1980s, the exiles fully discarded their earlier reservations about participating in American politics. Once that barrier was surmounted, the political enfranchisement of thousands of newly-registered Cuban American voters, as well as the reapportionment of new Hispanic districts, gave additional clout to the exiles. Cuban Americans quickly became adept at the art of using a political base to serve economic interests.

That combination of economic and political power proved very effective in furthering the aspirations of the “Cuban Exile Country.” During the *Diversification Stage*, in fact, the exiles mustered sufficient political power to realize a goal that only a decade before had seemed highly implausible —influencing U.S. foreign policy toward Cuba. The creation of the Cuban American National Foundation (CANF) in the early 1980s stands as the best example of how the exiles managed to integrate political and economic power, and in so doing, avail themselves of a sophisticated lobby in Washington.²⁶

Although primarily a politically-oriented group that advocates Cuban freedom, *la Fundación* helped articulate a sense of collective pride in what Cuban Americans have achieved. By reviving and refining the cru-

26. The Cuban American National Foundation’s most dramatic accomplishment was its lobbying effort in favor of creating the U.S.-sponsored Radio Martí which broadcasts news and commentaries to Cubans on the island.

sading spirit that had driven the exiles in the 1960s, CANF and its chairman, Jorge Mas Canosa, have attracted considerable popular support and have emerged as formidable forces in the “Cuban Exile Country.” The Cuban American National Foundation has also attracted scores of critics. Although no one appears to question its effectiveness, some perceive its political tactics as heavy-handed.

THE POST-SOVIET STAGE (1990-)

Renewed Hopes After Soviet Collapse (1990): After the disintegration of the Soviet Union and the suspension of the massive economic assistance it had been providing to the Cuban communist regime since the 1960s, Cuban society suffered a dramatic deterioration. Hope for the demise of the regime revived among the exiles, who became once again convinced that Castro’s days were numbered. Those expectations drove Cuban Americans to recommit themselves to the struggle to liberate Cuba. They did so with novel strategies, but with the same passion of old.

The strategies often embraced by these groups were somewhat different from those of the early 1960s: Cuban Americans now recognized that for political change to take place in Cuba, it would have to be initiated by the opposition movement inside the island. Admittedly, this younger generation that is taking over the political agenda of *el exilio* has been more moderate than its predecessors and is more inclined to consider a wider range of approaches—a development that has revived the bitter political debate between moderate and hard-line exiles.

In the 1990s, the involvement of the “last generation” of Cubans, who came as youngsters and rebuilt their lives in America, surprised most observers, since it had been generally assumed that this generation of successful Cuban Americans had lost all interest in Cuba’s political future. It is still too early to ascertain whether this constituency will demonstrate the same enduring commitment of its militant predecessors, but the new consciousness that younger Cuban

Americans have introduced in the anti-Castro movement seems to be spreading throughout the “Cuban Exile Country.”

The Fourth Exodus: The Rafters (1994): In the early 1990s, the number of Cubans leaving the island began to increase noticeably. Their exodus seemed to follow the carrot-and-stick effects of two powerful forces: hope for a better life among exiles in the United States, and despair about worsening conditions on the island. But it is the latter, the near-collapse that Cuban society suffered after the disintegration of the Soviet Union, that appeared to be the determining factor in the new exodus.

From the perspective of the exiles, the latest wave of refugees seeking to escape Cuba’s miserable conditions suggested that the Castro regime could be reaching its final phase. To be sure, economic activity in Cuba had dropped by about 40 percent since the collapse of the Soviet Union, a predicament that forced the communist regime to impose draconian measures that clearly undermined its popular support. It was no coincidence that human rights and dissident groups opposing Castro proliferated throughout the island and, for the first time, established working alliances with moderate exile political organizations.²⁷ The emergence of these loose coalitions linking opponents on both sides of the Florida Straights began to nurture a new kinship between Cubans who, although very dissimilar in backgrounds, experiences and even ideological visions of Cuba’s future, shared a commitment to rid the island of communism.

Coupled with the continuing downward-spiral of the Cuban economy, the emboldened internal opposition added instability to the political climate on the island. Before conditions could reach a flash point, however, Castro again resorted to his time-tested ploy—the demographic bomb. In the spring of 1994, the communist regime reversed its three-decade-old policy of arresting anyone who tried to escape the island by sea; from then on, Castro an-

27. In 1996 more than one hundred independent unions and dissident groups came together in Cuba under an umbrella organization called Concilio Cubano, arguably the most recognized anti-Castro movement on the island.

nounced that Cubans would be allowed to leave in small vessels and makeshift rafts if they wished to embark for the United States.

The End of Open-Arms U.S. Immigration Policy toward Cubans: By the summer of 1994, as tens of thousands of *balseros* (rafters) took to the sea with the regime’s overt encouragement, the Clinton administration negotiated an agreement with Cuba to put a stop to this new exodus. The new accord between the United States and Cuba suspended the preferential treatment that had been accorded to Cubans for three decades, provoking angry reactions among the exiles, who interpreted the de facto suspension of the open-arms policy toward Cubans fleeing the island as a first step toward normalization of relations between the two countries. In protest, exiles staged civil disobedience demonstrations throughout South Florida.

The 1994 immigration agreement also provided for the detention of those rafters who managed to reach American soil; from then on, all *balseros* were to be sent to the U.S. Navy Base in Guantanamo,²⁸ where they would have to stay indefinitely, unless they agreed to go back to the island from which they had risked their lives to escape. In a matter of weeks, the detainee population at Guantanamo reached 32,000 men, women and children. Six months later, however, the Clinton administration again shifted its position, allowing the Guantanamo detainee to qualify for entrance into this country.

New Crisis and the Tightening of the Embargo:

The 1994 immigration accord gave credence to the notion that *el exilio*, as such, could be approaching its final phase. Although for different reasons, both Washington and Havana were under intense pressure to end the thirty-year-old U.S. trade embargo on Cuba and to normalize diplomatic and commercial relations. These speculations, however, proved premature. What derailed the fledgling rapprochement was Cuba’s shooting down over international waters of two unarmed American airplanes belonging to Brothers to the Rescue. Four Cuban Americans lost

their lives in the incident, which dragged U.S.-Cuba relations to a confrontation level reminiscent of the bygone Cold War days.

In many ways, the genesis of this tragedy was somewhat predictable. Since the beginning of the recent *balsero* wave, Brothers to the Rescue planes had been engaged in humanitarian missions, carrying out thousands of rescue flights near or inside Cuban airspace in search of rafters adrift in the Straits of Florida. In 1995, however, the exile organization deviated from its original life-saving objective, and twice their airplanes actually intruded over Cuban territory to drop leaflets encouraging nonviolent rebellion. Truth be told, they seemed intent on provoking Castro, though peacefully. Finally, on February 24, 1996, Castro retaliated with a vengeance. He ordered the Cuban air force to shoot down two exile planes flying close to the island, thereby triggering an international crisis. President Clinton forcefully denounced the Cuban government for its criminal aggression and, reversing his personal opposition to the then-pending Helms-Burton Bill, promptly signed it into law. Enacted by the name of The Cuban Liberty and Democratic Solidarity Act, this piece of legislation tightened the U.S. embargo on Cuba even further—too much, according to its critics; just enough to force Castro out, according to its supporters. Its most controversial feature imposes sanctions on international companies doing business in Cuba.

What will happen in the wake of these developments is yet to be seen. In the short term, the once-hopeful prospect of forcing Castro into initiating a democratic transition have all but disappeared as a result of the latest incidents—which is not to suggest that the *Máximo Líder* had shown the slightest inclination to amend his totalitarian ways. Ironically, the hard-liners’ position appeared to be validated by the belligerence of their nemesis, who at the same time cracked down against dissidents on the island with renewed ruthlessness. Once thing remains certain: given Castro’s obstinate hold on power, *el exilio* can be expected to go on as long as the aging dictator continues to extend his thirty-eight-year old rule.

28. The Guantanamo Navy Base has operated on Cuban territory since it was ceded to the United States following Cuban independence in 1902. This last vestige of American imperialism on the island has remained a vexing presence often denounced by Castro.