

Community and State: The Case of Miami vs. Washington, D.C.

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I take as my text the remarkable work of the great Austrian writer, Robert Musil, *The Man Without Qualities*. Especially relevant in this connection is his observation that

... for the most part history is made without authors. It evolves not from some inner center but from the periphery, set in motion by trifling causes.

So matters stand in the bitter aftermath of the Elian Gonzalez Case. The plight of a six-year-old whose mother perished in an attempt to escape the Cuban dictatorship, and of a father's effort, aided and abetted by the regime, to return the child to that *status quo ante* gripped the imagination of the nation for a brief period. Rather than rehash what is already well-trodden journalistic territory, I would like to examine some long-range consequences as well as deeper implications of the aftermath of this episode and the national debate it generated.

(1) First and foremost, a community is fragile, albeit flexible, while a state is tough and inflexible. This is because a community is dependent on uncertain cultural norms, what Toennies long ago identified as a "community of fate." In contrast, a state is dependent on political force, what Hobbes identified 350 years ago as instruments to curb and bridle the life of man which he memorably called "solitary, poor, nasty, brutish, and short."

(2) With respect to the Cuban Americans of Miami, those who believe that culture always trumps the exercise of power are optimists. Those who believe that power always trumps culture can equally be labeled pessimists. I confess up front that in relation to prospects for the Cuban American community of Miami, I count myself among the pessimists. This is not a pleasant admission, but it is one dictated by the actions we have recently seen by even the best of states—and I would rank the United States as just that, the best of nation-states.

(3) The special status of Cuban Americans in Miami has offered a unique example of the ongoing struggle between community and state. It is the special case of Cuban exiles that many carried with them the professional and commercial world of pre-revolutionary Havana. This knowledge and experience contributed to the

rapidity of their integration into the mainstream of the economic life of the United States. It also slowed, sometimes to a halt, the process of their political and social integration. This is revealed by everything from the definition of South Florida as part of a larger Caribbean region, to the maintenance of the Spanish language as a primary mode of communication, to continuation of traditions of racial separatism, and, perhaps above all, to continuing hope for the prospect of the overthrow of Castro and the return to Cuba proper. These special characteristics have also made the Cuban American community a force to contend with and a model for other new immigrants.

(4) But factors that make for powerful community solidarity sometimes feed intense resentments beyond and outside the community. These include leftists who adore Castro and cannot abide middle-class values; African Americans who perceived Cubans as racists in their dealings with Haitians, and moreover who resent the fact they have leaped over them in economic terms; old-line Floridians who drew a line at Flagler Street as a buffer against the march of Calle Ocho; other Latinos such as Hondurans and Nicaraguans who suffer the presumed indignity of being a poor cousin. All of these resentments could have been negotiated and navigated if the Cuban American community had federal power. But they did not; Washington, D.C. remained both benefactor and determinator of the Cuban American miracle.

(5) The federal government has always maintained an ambiguous relationship with the Cuban community in Miami. It tried mightily to relocate Cuban refugees to other parts of the United States, only to see these people filter back into the geographic and linguistic comforts of South Florida. The United States government subverted or at least failed to support exile efforts to recapture Cuba from the Castro regime. It did so directly in failing to provide air cover during the Bay of Pigs fiasco and indirectly ever since by preventing any sort of armed military buildup on U.S. soil. Increasingly in recent years, the terms of the American boycott of Cuba has been weakened, not so much in law as in practice. This raises questions of Washington, D.C.'s resolve with respect to ending the forty-one year dictatorship on the island of Cuba.

(6) It is my opinion that the stunning events of the last half-year involving the fates and fortunes of one six-year-old child illumine the course of federal power and community control in a sharp, clear and painfully decisive manner. I do not want to review the situation that surrounds the Elian Gonzalez case. The facts are sufficiently well known although the end results are less clear. Under other circumstances and times these events would be ranked as pedestrian immigration matters. But in the context of the symbols of culture versus state, the Cuban Americans of Miami versus those who direct the instruments of power and coercion in Washington, D.C., the issues have risen to a level that is anything but pedestrian.

(7) Survey research indicates that after the Clinton administration's two full terms in office, the American people appear to be more critical of Miami than of Havana.

It is the “have” image of Cubans in Miami rather than the “have-not” image of Cubans under Communism that seems to have captured the sensibility of Middle America. American opinion in the Elian matter is complex and multi-layered. In terms of basic sentiments, Americans by a two-to-one margin believe that a child should always be with a parent or a remaining parent as in the Elian case. With respect to legal and constitutional concerns, Americans are evenly divided between those who believe force was necessary to reunite a child with the father, and those who believe that the force used to achieve this was excessive and dangerous. At a third level, there is the Cuba Lobby in Washington, D.C. It has triumphed over the Miami hard-liners. Roughly seventy percent of the American people now believe that an end to diplomatic and commercial isolation of Cuba would be best for American interests.

(8) The Elian Gonzalez case has opened a number of rifts. Not least of these is the divide between public opinion and legal opinion. For while the American people seem unmoved by concerns about violations of the Fourth Amendment to the Constitution, the legal sentiment is heavily on the side of upholding traditional legal safeguards. Thus everyone from Aaron Podhurst, Laurence Tribe, Alan Dershowitz, Andrew Napolitano, among others, have spoken forcefully and eloquently on the enormous dangers in the Department of Justice’s style of abrogating legal safeguards in pursuit of its quarry—from Waco and Ruby Ridge to Miami. But such juridical concerns have seemingly left American public opinion largely unmoved.

(9) Why are the American people at loggerheads with their own legal system? Part of the answer is that they support the effort to bridle the supposed power of Cuban Americans. Julia Sweig, deputy director for Latin American Affairs for the Council on Foreign Relations, put the matter bluntly: “People are tired of deferring to a Cuban American minority view.” The fact that this “exhaustion” is fueled by a variety of new programs sanctioned by the Clinton administration indicates that it is less the people than the government that is shifting ground. Not only is the Cuban American community perceived as a minority, but as an economically successful and politically intransigent group. The Elian Case became an opportunity for the Clinton administration to show its independence from such parochial community forces. It also widens the options of the administration to reconsider policy initiatives with respect to the Castro regime.

(10) The media took its cue from federal hostility to Miami’s Cuban community. It gave increased emphasis to those dissident leaders within the Miami Cuban American community who echoed similar sentiments—ranging from viewing Miami Cubans as a community “out of control” to one presumably advocating “secession.” The media pursued this track despite limited resistance from onlookers during the INS operation in taking the child from his relatives and returning him to the father. In fact, the Cuban American community’s style reflected more the traditions of Gandhi and King than Marx and Mao. For such tactics to work, they need the tacit, moral approbation of large numbers beyond the group protesting.

Integration efforts of African Americans in the 1960s had allies and widespread public support in the nation as a whole. This was not the case in the five-month standoff during which Elian Gonzalez was with his Miami relatives. It was and remains the absence of a national context of support that ultimately has proven to be a shock for the Cuban American community of Miami.

(11) We thus arrive at the crux of the matter, or at least my theme. What is to become of the Cuban American community of Miami? Any analysis must be based on a *ceterus paribus* or all things being equal estimate. Among those things that are equal are the continuing holding of state power by Castro, the relatively newfound solidarity within the anti-Castro forces of South Florida, and most important, the character of presidential politics in the next four years. It is or at least should be clear that the impulse within the Democratic Party is for opening the trade and aid relationships with Cuba at the least, and at the maximum level, establishing normal diplomatic relations with Havana. Changes in the United States' relationships with Cuba would impact the Cuban American community and could dramatically alter the assessment that follows.

(12) There is one element that is undoubtedly going to take place in the Cuban American community, whatever contextual changes occur: and that is a changed perception of the United States. The relative utopianism of the Cuban American notion of the United States—one fostered by economic success and regional political strength—will doubtlessly give way to a harder, more realistic sense of America as a much more difficult country to navigate than they had imagined. That will involve radically more critical images of American domestic and foreign policy. Shifts in local party allegiances from Democratic to Republican enrollment are simply the tip of the iceberg. Also involved are possible long-term social realignments. The traditional indifference—and at times contempt—for the Haitian community could well shift, with alliances forming on the basis of common concerns over police brutality, illegal immigrant status, and ghettoization. But such views will likely involve only a small minority of politically left-leaning Cuban Americans.

(13) More to the point are the fissures and rifts within the community over the Elian Gonzalez Case. Few are likely to forget how specific individuals lined up on the matter. The traditional internal consensus of the Cuban American community on most issues is likely to implode. So the question becomes, will Cuban Americans vote with their feet—in this instance leaving Miami and joining different parts of America? This was the pattern with other immigrant groups before them, who started in a single city, say New York or Boston, and then fanned out to the rest of the country in the second and the third generations. Even if the original migrating generation maintains its roots in Miami, this may not deter a second and third generation from moving to other places within the state and then in the nation.

(14) A critical causal agent in this process is the continuation in power of Fidel Castro in Cuba. It is not that the dictator has achieved legitimacy—although

longevity is indeed an element in the legitimization process—so much as the disenchantment that follows the failure of prophecy. Rumors of the impending fall of the Castro government in Cuba have persisted throughout its forty-one-year history. Everything from serious personal medical problems to presumed opposition forces in government and military have been adduced to predict an end to the regime. Such prophecies served to cement the Miami Cuban American community even as other, more practical and local issues, served to divide that community. But there reaches a point in time when the failures of prophecy become so evident, so apparent, that believers in the imminent fall of Castro must move on to different predictions, or at least lose hope in the integrating potentials of the prophecies as such. Of course, if nothing else, biology will trump politics, and Castro will pass into the eternal darkness. But as the ability of the Cuban dictator to floor manage the Elian Gonzalez case, that date with eternity may still be far removed. Inevitably, second and even third generation Cuban Americans will find other faiths and myths upon which to anchor their beliefs. My own view, admittedly conjectural, is that such beliefs will become increasingly Americanized to the point where residing in Miami is a choice, but not a necessity.

(15) At first, the out-migration from Miami may involve only or primarily those out of sympathy with the traditional anti-Castro consensus. But even an outflow of twenty percent would represent a serious depletion of the demographic strength of Miami's Cuban Americans. What would be involved is not simply an indication of dissatisfaction with the dominant ideology of Miami, but an indication that the larger nation is more hospitable to those with what conventionally would be called liberal or even radical views. And if the Elian Gonzalez Case moves people to hardened positions, then the likelihood of movement increases. I daresay that the outflow would be gradual. In the initial stages there might be movement to other parts of Florida, and then to other areas of the nation as a whole.

(16) The Cuban American community may become more realistic about America, but that has never prevented previous critical minorities—or better said, minorities critical of aspects of American life—from finding their place within the larger society. Even if and when attitudes do not shift, as in views on Cuban Communism, physical location may serve to diminish the emphasis on single-issue politics, and make this new migrant group more critical of the United States but also more integrated into its mainstream. We already see evidence of this in the intellectual and academic class. Many Cubans have gained access to teaching and research positions based on being a Latin American minority, not a Cuban success story. In this way, the pattern of migration can take place with nary a trace of *angustia* (anguish).

(17) This is not intended to give a cynical reading of the long-range outcomes of the Elian Gonzalez Case. Such tendencies are already underway—from a harsher reading of American culture to a move to other parts of the country in which politics recede and issues of personal promotion and economic well-being become all consuming. Survey research indicates sharp divergences between generations

before the Elian Case. Such divergences are evident in a variety of public functions and performances. Indeed, the special sentiments evoked by the Elian Case muted and glossed over such tendencies, providing a patina of consensus in a community that is notoriously lacking in same. The recent “Cubanization” of Miami’s City Hall is indicative of how splits between Cuban Americans and so-called Anglos, Blacks, and Spanish-speaking people from other parts of Latin America provide a harbinger of conflict that may offer temporary solace, but only at the cost of a long-term consensus. Ethnic insularity and democratic norms make for uneasy bedfellows. Such a contradiction also provides additional groundwork for conflicts within Cuban American affairs.

(18) It is quite clear that a return to Cuba on a permanent basis is unlikely for all but a fraction of the Miami community. The power of American cultural norms on one hand and the extraordinary changes in Cuban life these past forty-one years make such a prediction perhaps the easiest one to substantiate. Cuba will become a fine place to visit, to vacation, and to receive and send relatives. But it is increasingly unlikely that the Cuban American community will return to Cuba any more than the African American community will return to Africa or the Jewish American community will navigate to Israel and Zion. It is a cruel but important truism that if choices must be made, wealth, power, and affluence will for the most part trump culture, family, and belief systems.

(19) The Americanization of the Miami Cuban community has been extremely painful, and it will not easily cease to be so, despite short-term reversals in policies and goals. But it is not an educational lesson without its benefits. It will perhaps enable Cuban Americans to achieve even greater prominence and fame in the larger American society. And not incidentally it will further deprive the Cuban dictatorship of a stranglehold on the public opinion of Cubans. Those few beneficiaries in Cuba who fear that the end of Communism will inaugurate a revanchist capitalist onslaught on the Island, and a rejection of what are perceived as positive results of the Castro Epoch—from racial equity to medical care—may become more open to outside views. Whatever the actual status of both of these items, forces that now inhibit opposition to Castro can be expected to be strengthened.

(20) So at the end of the day, we have a mixed prognosis and probably a mixed blessing. The golden years of the Cuban American community of Miami will fade. Cuban Americans will integrate into the American mainstream. An obstacle to normalized relations with Cuba will dissolve. These are all pills of a varying sort of bitterness. But to speak in either purely emotive or optimistic terms would be a disservice to reality, and hence to the Cuban American people as such. The dictatorship of Castro will come to an end. The democratic spirit of the Cuban American people will become part and parcel of the larger spirit of democracy embodied in all prior immigrant forces. Out of the ashes of despair comes hope for reconciliation and redemption. I believe that this will also be one of the consequences of the bizarre experience of symbolic politics called the Elian Gonzalez Case. Ω