

U.S. Senate Republican Policy Committee
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May 10, 2000

Dick Morris: 'Clinton Would Do Anything to Placate Castro'

Was Reno's Predawn Raid About Elian — or Fidel?

“Fidel Castro can make Bill Clinton jump any time he wants to. . . . [W]hen the Cuban Air Force shot down a Cessna aircraft used by Cuban exiles to drop leaflets over Havana, Clinton spoke to me again of his fear of Castro. ‘If I make him mad, he’ll dump the Cubans on me again,’ he worried aloud. ‘I’ve got to be careful on this one.’ Earlier this year, Castro again warned that, if provoked, he would dump more Cubans as the 2000 election approached. Once again, the warning seems to have sent Clinton into a tizzy. When Clinton has a fear (justified or not), [it] becomes an obsession which structures all the rest of his thinking. Haunted by scenes of boatloads of Cubans, fresh from jail or mental institutions, washing up on Florida shores, Clinton would do anything to placate Castro.”

[“Because Bill Fears Fidel,” by former Clinton confidant Dick Morris, *New York Post*, 4/24/00]

The Santeros [i.e., practitioners of the Afro-Caribbean Santeria religion popular with many Cubans and Cuban-Americans] are now predicting the future of the Castro regime . . . is tied to the fate of Elian Gonzalez, who to them is the reincarnation of . . . a kind of Christ child. . . . They declared he was . . . divine . . . and that if he remained in Miami — in other words, in exile — Mr. Castro ‘would fall.’ [Elian] had to be brought back to Cuba for the protection of an atheist dictator who believes all of the Santeros’ prophecies.

[“Fears Fueling Castro’s Fulminations,” by exiled Cuban author Guillermo Cabrera Infante, *Washington Times*, 4/15/00]

Notwithstanding official assurances that the federal agent’s finger was not on the trigger and that his automatic weapon wasn’t even pointed at the six-year-old object of the predawn raid, tens of millions of Americans — including many who favor the return of Elian Gonzalez to his father — were outraged by images of an obviously terrified child being yanked from the arms of his fisherman-rescuer by a Border Patrol officer decked out in full battle gear. While public attention since then has focused largely on the mechanics of that seizure, there is a larger question at stake: what were the *policy* motivations that led to the seizure?

This paper explores the possibility that the brazen and unnecessary use of force to seize Elian is a result of Bill Clinton's fear (if former-Clinton-confidant-turned-harsh-critic Dick Morris is to be believed) of a flood of Cuban refugees threatened by Castro if the boy is not returned. In turn, there are those who assert that Castro's threat is based largely on the child's symbolic importance to the many Cuban followers of the Afro-Caribbean religion known as Santeria — a symbolism significant enough to compel Castro to put his prestige on the line.

Elian's Seizure: An Abuse of Power

Criticism of the seizure to date has almost completely ignored issues of Clinton Administration policy toward Cuba; instead, critics of the raid — including such demigods in the liberal legal firmament as Harvard law professors Laurence Tribe and Alan Dershowitz — have focused on the secondary (though nonetheless important) questions of legal irregularities and abuse of power, such as —

- In the absence of any danger to Elian's safety, why did Attorney General Janet Reno *create* such a danger by ordering an invasion of the home of American citizens by armed federal agents?
- In trying to justify the action, why did she claim that talks regarding Elian's custody had broken down, when — even at the very moment a federal SWAT team smashed its way into the Lazaro Gonzalez household — telephone negotiations were continuing and agreement on custody was still possible, as confirmed even by attorney and Reno friend Aaron Podhurst, who was helping in mediation efforts?
- Why did Reno base her raid's claimed legality on false assertions (that Elian was being "concealed" and "unlawfully restrained" in the Gonzalez home) used to secure warrants after business hours on Easter weekend from "a notoriously pro-government" federal duty magistrate who was "not familiar with the case" rather than from the federal district judge who had been handling the matter? [See "Reno's Raid Was Based on A Tissue of Lies," by law professor and former judge Andrew P. Napolitano, *Wall Street Journal*, 4/26/00.]
- Why is the Reno Justice Department and the Immigration and Naturalization Service (INS) so adamant that the question of Elian's future be determined *solely* as an immigration question under the administrative purview of INS, rather than as a child custody matter before a Florida family court looking at the totality of the circumstances relevant to the boy's best interests — even though federal officials (see below) initially indicated that was the proper venue for deciding his fate?

Beyond Abuse of Power, What are the Policy Motivations?

Adequate answers to the above questions would shed light on the lawlessness and anti-constitutionality of yet another example of the abuse of force that has become a hallmark of the Clinton/Gore Administration and of Reno's tenure as attorney general in particular. What is less likely to be explained, however, are the *policy* motivations that have led to an obvious and urgent insistence by the Administration that Elian be sent back to Cuba at all costs. (Literally, at all

costs; expenses to INS and the U.S. Marshals as of May 3, 2000, totaled \$762,000, including travel and overtime [abcNEWS.com, 5/3/00].) Thus, it is all the more imperative to understand what those policy motivations might be in light of the patently absurd justifications advanced to date by Administration officials (and nonofficial hirelings like Clinton impeachment defender Gregory Craig), such as a supposed concern for upholding the sacredness of parental rights by an Administration that has never before met a parental right it liked (see “Justice, State Departments Ignore Plight of *American* Children: Elian Case Prompts Clinton/Gore Officials to Shed Crocodile Tears for Parental Rights,” 1/31/00), or the endlessly repeated vow to uphold “the rule of law” — a protestation that in less tragic circumstances might be laughable coming from this most scandal-ridden Administration in American history.

Applying Occam’s razor, an examination of the Clinton/Gore Administration’s policy toward Castro’s Cuba leads to a much simpler conclusion — that Bill Clinton wants to give Elian Gonzalez back to Fidel Castro not because he cares about the boy — or his father — or the law — but because Castro demands that he do so and Clinton is seemingly unwilling to face the wrath of the aging communist dictator. This explanation leads in turn to two other questions:

- Why is Bill Clinton so afraid of Fidel Castro?
- Why is Fidel Castro so afraid of Elian Gonzalez?

This paper will take a look at the possible answers following a brief review of Clinton/Gore policy toward Castro and his unreconstructed communist regime leading up to the Elian crisis.

The Ups and Downs of the Clinton/Castro Relations

In March 1996, as his presidential reelection campaign was getting underway, Bill Clinton signed the Helms-Burton Cuban Liberty and Democratic Solidarity (LIBERTAD) Act (P.L. 104-144), which denied visas to Cubans trafficking in confiscated American property and, more importantly, enacted into statute all existing Cuba embargo Executive Orders and regulations imposed beginning with the Kennedy Administration. No presidential waiver authority was included. Under the provisions of the LIBERTAD Act, Clinton would not be able (as he earlier did with Vietnam) to lift the economic embargo against Cuba as a prelude to normalization, unless Congress were to agree. Thus, by his signature — in the politically charged aftermath of the downing by Castro of two private aircraft and the killing of United States citizens, forcing the Administration to reverse its previous opposition to the Act — Clinton clearly made a calculation to sacrifice prospects for normalizing relations with Castro to the political needs of the moment. The effort paid off: in 1996 with substantial support from Cuban-Americans concentrated in the Miami/Dade County area, Clinton carried Florida, a state he had lost in 1992.

The 1996 Clinton political reversal on the LIBERTAD Act should be seen in light of the 1995 Cuban refugee crisis and his Administration’s earlier efforts to improve relations with the communist Castro regime. Following anti-Castro demonstrations in August 1994, Castro — in a move widely seen as a repeat of his use of the “migration bomb” against President Carter during the Mariel Boat Lift of 1980 — announced his government would not interfere with persons who

wished to leave Cuba by sea. In the ensuing months an estimated 35,000 Cubans set sail for Florida, resulting in a severe overloading of U.S. abilities to cope with the refugee tide, as well as the deaths at sea of an unknown number of Cubans. The Clinton Administration housed some 20,000 of the Cubans at the U.S. base at Guantanamo Bay, and opened a separate facility in Panama — but the refugee flood continued.

Clinton Capitulates to Castro in 1995 . . .

By May 1995, Clinton capitulated. Reversing a 35-year-old policy of giving refuge to Cubans fleeing Castro, the Clinton/Gore Administration reached an agreement with Cuban officials to admit some 20,000 Cubans per year into the United States — but to forcibly return to Castro any Cubans picked up at sea. (Indeed, according to the terms of that agreement, Elian and the two survivors rescued with him should have been returned to Cuba, since they had not actually made it to shore in the United States.) Senator Helms, Chairman of the Foreign Relations Committee, commented at the time: “For over 35 years, the United States has been a safe haven for Cubans fleeing Castro’s repressive Communist dictatorship. Cuban-Americans feel that the Administration has joined with the Castro regime in an effort having the continuing effect of enslaving the people of Cuba.” In effect, Castro had leveraged the migration threat into Clinton’s giving him what he had never been able to get from any previous American president — U.S. cooperation in preventing the escape of his human property. Attorney General Reno, defending the new policy, emphasized the U.S./Cuba cooperative aspects of the agreement: “These new procedures represent another step toward regularizing migration procedures with Cuba, finding a humanitarian solution to the situation at Guantanamo, and preventing another uncontrolled and dangerous outflow from Cuba” [*New York Times*, 5/3/95].

. . . But Castro’s 1996 Cessna Shoot-down Stalls Rapprochement

By October 1995, having “regularized” the refugee problem, President Clinton announced new policy initiatives with regard to Cuba, including authorization for U.S. news organizations to open bureaus in Cuba and allowing non-governmental organizations to expand their activities in that country. But whether this step was intended to be followed up with an easing of trade sanctions and (based on the Vietnam precedent) eventual normalization may never be known. Instead, on February 24, 1996, Cuban MiGs shot down two unarmed Cessna aircraft belonging to a Miami-based exile group over international waters, forcing Clinton to reverse course and seemingly dooming any hope of improved Washington-Havana ties in the foreseeable future.

Elian Crashes Clinton/Castro Party, Round 2

By last year (notably with the May 1999 “baseball diplomacy” featuring exhibition games in Havana and Baltimore between the Cuban national team and the Baltimore Orioles), indications were that the Administration was ready to return to the rapprochement that had been rudely interrupted more than three years earlier. But once again, circumstances intervened, with the unexpected — and to many in the Cuban exile community, miraculous — rescue of Elian Gonzalez and two others on Thanksgiving Day, November 25, 1999. The Miami office of the U.S. Border Patrol (which is part of INS, and ultimately answerable to the attorney general) announced the following day the three survivors would be allowed to stay in the United States. As

to Elian's safekeeping, federal officials unambiguously accepted the jurisdiction of the state courts for what was then portrayed as a simple child custody matter:

“Although **INS has no role in the family custody decision process**, we have discussed this case with the State of Florida officials who have confirmed that the issue of legal custody must be decided by its State court. However, Elian will remain in the U.S. until the issues surrounding his custody are resolved. If Elian's family is unable to resolve the question of his custody, it is our understanding that **the involved parties will have to file in Florida family court**. . . . Once proceedings have been initiated, it is likely that the court will appoint a guardian ad litem, i.e., someone **who will specifically represent Elian's interests** in the custody determination process.”

[Response to Query, INS Office of Public Affairs, 12/1/99, emphasis added.]

State Department spokesman Jamie Rubin confirmed substantially the same position several days later [*New York Times*, 12/6/99]. For more than a week, it appeared that Elian simply would become one of the occasional exceptions to the rules, and that the incident would have little or no impact on U.S./Cuban relations. If *Newsweek/Washington Post* columnist George Will has his facts straight, this would hardly been seen as surprising — Will claims the father was complicit in his son's flight to the United States:

“The Miami relatives say that three days before Elian was plucked from the sea, his father phoned to say that Elian and his mother were coming. Sprint telephone records confirm a collect call from Cuba to the relatives. When Elian's relatives visited him at the hospital on the day he was rescued, they called his father, who, they say, asked them to take care of Elian. It was not until after Castro's regime demanded the return of Elian . . . that his father was quoted as saying he now thought Elian had been kidnapped.”

[*Newsweek*, 5/1/00]

Clinton and Reno Reverse Course

Then, on December 5, 1999, Fidel Castro launched the first of many public eruptions on state-owned media and, before massed (and regime-managed) rallies, demanded the return of the “kidnapped” Cuban child. A week later (December 13), the Clinton/Reno INS dispatched officials to Cuba to meet with Elian's father, Juan Miguel Gonzalez, for the purpose (as stated in press reports) of verifying that he was in fact the child's father and of finding out his wishes for his son. But according to Juan Miguel, the INS officials came to Cuba not just to verify — but with a predetermined agenda:

“**These people** [the INS] **have been on our side all along**. They agree that he should be back here, that the child should be returned as soon as possible,” a beaming Gonzalez said”

[*Washington Post*, 12/14/99; bracketed text in original; emphasis added]

The *Post* cites a unnamed U.S. official in Washington as calling the father's description of his meeting with the INS officials "absolutely erroneous." But was it? Following a second INS interview with Gonzalez in late December, INS Director Doris Meissner announced (January 5, 2000) that Elian must be returned to his father, a decision that Reno confirmed on January 12. Thus, the same Executive Branch agencies (INS, Justice, State) that had earlier been content to let the Florida courts determine the boy's status were visibly mobilized to assist in Elian's repatriation to his father in Cuba. They did so not as a matter of state child custody law (per INS's statement of December 1) but of federal immigration policy that would not even reach the larger issue of Elian's welfare. Having reversed their position on the venue and the legal criteria for determining the boy's custody, Clinton and Reno have never wavered in their determination to accomplish their new goal: ship the kid back to Cuba.

Fidel to Bill: 'Send Elian Back' — *or Else!*

Clearly within a few weeks from late November to (at the latest) mid-December, *something* had caused the Clinton Administration to reverse course 180 degrees. The question is — *what?* One plausible answer is given by a man who was formerly one of Bill Clinton's closest confidants, described by many as having been his alter ego: political consultant and commentator Dick Morris. While it is understood that Morris is no longer a Clinton confidant, and in fact has become one of his leading public critics, the views of a man who knows Clinton as well as does Morris should be given some weight:

"As Americans awoke and watched the sobbing boy at the other end of a Border Patrol machine gun, there was a universal question in their vicarious agony: Why? . . . What was the urgency? What was the immediate danger to this pitiful child that warranted this primitive violation of our trust in our government? Why was it so vitally important that a little boy . . . be returned to his father at this particular hour? Why did they have to act suddenly in the dark of the night? Why did Clinton and Reno have to make a 6-year-old have nightmares for the rest of his life? . . . **Because Fidel Castro can make Bill Clinton jump any time he wants to.**"
["Because Bill Fears Fidel," *New York Post*, 4/24/00; emphasis added]

Clinton, Castro, and Cuban Refugees: Once Burned, Twice Shy

Morris goes on to describe what he calls Castro's "unique power" over Clinton stemming from his 1980 defeat for reelection as Arkansas governor due to his allowing then-President Jimmy Carter to store Cuban detainees (many of them criminals and mental patients) at Ft. Chaffee, Arkansas. Despite Carter's assurance they would be taken back to Florida before election day in Arkansas, they stayed; the detainees' presence and subsequent rioting and escapes became a campaign issue that — Clinton firmly believes, writes Morris — cost him the state house. Morris states this is not speculation but that Clinton related it to him in 1981.

Morris then asserts Clinton's renewed fears of Castro's migration bomb in 1995 (Clinton: "If I make him mad, he'll dump the Cubans on me again. I've got to be careful on this one.") — again, he says, based on Clinton's personal statement to him. Finally, Morris takes us to the Elian crisis:

“Earlier this year [i.e., 2000] Castro again warned that, if provoked, he would dump more Cubans as the 2000 election approached. Once again, the warning seems to have sent Clinton into a tizzy. . . . Haunted by scenes of boatloads of Cubans, fresh from jail or mental institutions, washing up on Florida shores, Clinton would do anything to placate Castro.”

In this printed account, Morris does not indicate either the mode of delivery or the degree of specificity of the warning. But his explanation — that Fidel Castro knew just the right button to push — fits with the Administration’s apparent rush to do Castro’s bidding, employing all the coercive force available to the Executive Branch of the American government.

Santeros See Elian as Divine Harbinger of Freedom

If the Clinton determination to return Elian to Cuba may be explicable as a simple Pavlovian response to a threat from Fidel Castro, the reasons behind Castro’s seeming fixation on the boy’s return are less obvious to most Americans. After all, with approximately a fifth of Cuba’s total population now residing in exile, it seems one small boy hardly should matter to him. And this is after all the same tyrant who didn’t bat an eye when his gunboats sank the tugboat *Trece de Marzo* in July 1994, drowning 10 children along with 22 adults.

So why has Castro seemingly staked his credibility and that of his regime on his ability to force the United States to return Elian? According to some observers, the answer may lie in the extraordinary — even miraculous — interpretation Elian’s deliverance from the sea has assumed in the Cuban-American community and reportedly in Cuba itself. Unlike virtually all other Cuban fugitives pulled from Straits of Florida, Elian reportedly did not suffer from sores and sunburn. Further, by accounts current in the Cuban-American community, he was found escorted by dolphins protecting him in the shark-infested waters. “God wanted him here for freedom,” his cousin told a Miami television station, echoing a common view in the Cuban-American community [*Associated Press*, 11/26/99].

But within days of his rescue, Elian’s significance grew from the miraculous to the mystical, especially among the large element in the Cuban community familiar with the syncretic belief system known as Santeria, in which sacred persons in Roman Catholicism (with which the large majority of Cuban-Americans identify) have parallel identities as gods of African origin. (For example, the official patron saint of Cuba, la Virgen del Cobre, in Santeria is identified with the sea goddess Ochun.) [For further background on the presence of Santeria in the south Florida community, see the 1993 U.S. Supreme Court decision in *Church of the Lukumi Babalu Aye v. City of Hialeah* (508 U.S. 520). It should be emphasized that while many Cubans and Cuban-Americans adhere to Christian/Santeria parallelism, many others do not.] For those influenced by Santeria, Elian’s identification with one of the most potent of the deities, Elegua, has profound political implications which Castro may well not be able to ignore:

“Every year Santeria, the African-rooted religion popularly practiced in Cuba, publishes its horoscope. . . . **The Santeros are now predicting the future of the Castro regime as it is tied to the fate of Elian Gonzalez**, who to them is the reincarnation of Elegua, a kind of Christ child in Cuba’s mix of Catholic- and

Santeria-influenced culture. . . . Many Catholic believers have no doubt that Elian is the reincarnation of the Christ Child [who], according to Santeria, is one of the 21 forms that the Elegua takes. As soon as the Santeros learned of Elian's fate . . . , they declared he was a divine Elegua and that if he remained in Miami — in other words, in exile — Mr. Castro 'would fall.' The Elegua had to be brought back to Cuba for the protection of an atheist dictator who believes all of the Santeros' prophecies. **Soon after these predictions became known, Mr. Castro began his speeches**, roaring threateningly, as he always does.”

[“Fears Fueling Castro's Fulminations,” by Guillermo Cabrera Infante, *Washington Times*, 4/15/00, emphasis added.]

“A mural near the house of Lazaro Gonzalez, Elian's great-uncle, depicts Elian inside an inner tube in rough seas, surrounded by dolphins. A woman resembling the Virgin Mary stands over him, and a pair of giant outstretched hands reach down from the sky. Many . . . also say Elian's account of being protected by dolphins . . . has theological implications. . . . **A pamphlet circulating among the crowd, said to have been published in Cuba**, accuses Castro of being obsessed with Santeria, an Afro-Cuban religion. It compares Elian with 'Elegua,' a chosen child in the religion. **'Elegua, the chosen one — the boy who opens and leads the way — moved away from Fidel and with him went his luck,' the pamphlet says.**”

[“In Elian's Neighborhood, Images of God Multiply,” *Associated Press*, 4/7/00, emphasis added.]

“Juan Carlos Formell, a Grammy-nominated Cuban musician who left a life of material luxury to defect in 1993, **compared Castro's obsession with Elian to the Bible's King Herod, who wanted to kill the baby Jesus.** Noting that Cuba's patron saints are always pictured holding a child over water, and Cuban Santeria folklore venerates anyone rescued at sea, Mr. Formell said that Mr. Castro is well aware of the powerful symbol Elian represents for Cubans. 'Fidel Castro's hysterical insistence on the return of the child is based on his knowledge of this icon,' he said. **'In his mind, the future of the regime rests on regaining this child.'**”

[*Washington Times*, 3/2/00, emphasis added.]

Although Castro is an atheist and a communist, some Cuban exiles flatly state that he believes in the Elian/Elegua identification (which may also be influenced by the superficial similarities of the god's name and the child's, a combination of his mother “Elisabet” and his father “Juan”). Others believe it more likely that he places no credence in the Elegua idea but is aware that large numbers of Cuban-Americans *do* believe. (And even more disquieting for him, believers in Elian/Elegua may include Cubans *in Cuba*, if the one pamphlet noted above was in fact published underground in Cuba.) The possibility that Elian could become a rallying point with an unpredictable spiritual dimension ultimately impacting the stability of Castro's autocratic reign might explain why — after about a week when the depth of the Elian reverberations were becoming clear — Castro broke his silence and whipped up the return-Elian campaign and delivered his ultimatum to a pliant Clinton Administration. Conversely, a successful return of

Elian to Cuba would not only be seen as yet another triumph over America but as a humiliating defeat for the anti-Castro Cuban exile community, which historically has been a major obstacle to normalized relations. Moreover, it would demonstrate that Castro's power is greater than that of any mysticism ideas connected with Elian.

For Castro, Elian to Be a Revolutionary Icon?

And what if Elian is returned to Cuba? Only the most naive of observers would expect that he would be allowed a normal life with his father and his stepmother (or as normal a life as any child can have in Cuba today; see "A Firsthand Account of Child Abuse, Castro Style," by exiled Cuban dissident Armando Valladares, *Wall Street Journal*, 5/5/00). In fact, for all of the sanctimonious and saccharine solicitousness of Administration officials for reuniting father and son, White House press spokesman Joe Lockhart would not even confirm, despite repeated questioning, that the Clinton Administration had *even asked*, much less received, any assurance that Elian would be permitted to live with his father if he is returned to Cuba [see RPC's "Could the Answer Be . . . NO? Has Clinton Gotten Assurances that Elian Would Be with His Father and Not with Fidel? Clinton's Mouthpiece Won't Say," 4/27/00].

Given the total subordination of family life to the dictates of the Cuban communist regime and party, few people in the Cuban exile community, who have experienced communist family policy first-hand, believe Elian would be returned to his father in any meaningful sense. One who speaks with special authority is Fidel Castro's daughter, Alina Fernandez, who escaped in 1993 and now lives in Spain. She warns that Elian faces an army of psychiatrists and psychologists who will "brainwash" him of the taint of his American experience (for example, having been to Disney World), and that if he's lucky he'll spend his life as a revolutionary icon in a kind of "golden jail" already prepared for him ["Fox Hannity & Colmes," *Fox News Network*, 4/18/00]. Conversely, if his reprogramming does not go well, she warns, he may be hailed as a hero upon his return but later may simply "disappear somewhere" [Newsmax.com interview, 4/18/00].

Perhaps most disturbing is the extraordinary deference the Clinton Administration has afforded to Castro thus far in allowing Mr. Gonzalez and his forcibly "returned" son to be kept in what amounts to a little patch of totalitarian Cuba on American soil, and even allowing Castro's secret police to assault peaceful demonstrators with impunity [see "Castro's Thugs Beat Us Up — in Washington," by Brigida and Jorge Benitez, *Wall Street Journal*, 2/25/00]. While Elian's handlers have found time to show him off to top-dollar Democratic Party contributors ["Elian Gets a Look at Georgetown Fat Cats: Hosts Bristle at Suggestions the Boy Was Displayed for Democratic Contributors," *Washington Times*, 5/9/00; "Elian & Dad Dine at Ritzy Estate," *New York Post*, 5/8/00], no access of the Miami family or of any independent observers has been permitted. Thus, it would be difficult to say with any degree of certainty that Elian has *not* already begun to be subjected to reprogramming in preparation for his asylum hearing in federal court scheduled for tomorrow, May 11. But that possibility is no more likely to trouble the consciences of Bill Clinton and Janet Reno than did the violent outrage they perpetrated in the early morning hours of Holy Saturday, April 22, 2000. In fact, the urgent need to ensure Elian's acceptable performance in his court appearance may be the best explanation of why they concluded the child had to be removed from his Miami family without delay with whatever force might be necessary and placed in the hands of Castro's agents.

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