

A Case Study of Anti-Cuban-American Editorializing:
The *Pensacola News Journal* on Elián González

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On Thanksgiving Day, 1999, six-year old Elián González was picked up in Florida waters, having survived the crossing of the straits from Cuba on a home-made raft. His mother perished in the attempt. The rescue launched a months-long tug of war between, on one side, the Castro regime, which demanded the return of the child to Cuba, and the Clinton administration, which essentially agreed with Castro, and, on the other side, the boy's Miami relatives and the Cuban-American community, which took to the courts and the streets in a futile effort to keep Elián in the United States.

Cuban-Americans were shocked and dismayed at the manner in which the American media reported and commented on the uneven struggle. CNN and ABC News, in particular, were said to have been engaged in anti-Cuban exile reporting (Aguirre 2000, 257). The bias was not limited to the national media, however, but percolated to the local level, even in generally conservative areas, such as the South. Such, in any case, is what I seek to demonstrate in these notes, which analyze editorials on the Elián González affair published in my hometown newspaper, *The Pensacola News Journal*, between December 1999 and July 2000. (My aim, therefore, is limited. For a more ambitious attempt to explain why the media behaved as it did, see Aguirre 2000.)

The *Pensacola News Journal* editorials develop three themes, to wit:

1. Contempt for Elián's Miami relatives and Cuban-Americans more generally
2. Taking it easy on Fidel Castro
3. A political agenda to end the embargo

These themes cohere ideologically. If one wants to justify a change of policy toward the Castro regime, one could do a lot worse than to begin by discrediting the principal political obstacle to ending the embargo, i.e., the Cuban-American community. At the same time, the Castro regime has to be made to seem an almost harmless anachronism, helpless to stop the democratizing effects of trade and tourism.

Before presenting the evidence, and by way of preface, be it noted that it goes without saying that reasonable people could take different positions on whether Elián González should have been sent back with his father to Cuba. The point is not that the American media took the wrong side on the controversy, but the manner in which they editorialized on the subject. Never in my 21 years of

residence in Pensacola have I have seen such contempt for an ethno-cultural-political community emanate from the editorial pages of *The Pensacola News Journal*.

Be it noted, finally, that I sent an earlier draft of these notes to Mr. Carl Wernicke, the Editorial Page Editor of the newspaper. His response was as evasive and frivolous as it was brief: AI can no longer tell whether you are writing >analysis= or fiction. I suppose we all have our own realities,@ and AI feel like one of those authors who writes a book and then watches in bemusement as the critics then explain to him what he REALLY meant. I'd love to see your interpretation of the back panel of a Wheaties box. It would be a hoot@(e-mail correspondence from Mr. Wernicke, 7/19/01 and 7/20/01, respectively).

What follows are quotes taken from *Pensacola News Journal* editorials grouped into the above-mentioned themes. After that, the same quotes are listed chronologically, with dates and page references provided. Each set of quotes is introduced by an analytical summary (in italics). Also, several quotes are followed by comments of my own (italicized and in brackets). Readers will decide for themselves whether I have misinterpreted or misrepresented the plain meaning of the newspaper's own words.

THEMES

I. Contempt for Elian's Miami relatives and Cuban-Americans generally.

The PNJ attributes nothing but crass or political motives to Elian's Miami relatives and ACastro-hating@Cuban-Americans in Miami. In this interpretation, Cuban-Americans cared not a whit about Elián's welfare. Shamelessly, they exploited him for their own purposes. The relatives wanted their Afifteen minutes of fame.@ To the larger Cuban-American community, the boy was only a Apolitical playtoy,@ a Aweapon@used to Ascore points@against the Castro regime. Also deserving censure are those Acraven and reactionary politicians@who Akiss the feet@of the Cuban-American community, pandering to them for their votes rather than doing the right thing, i.e., end the embargo.

It's been a shameful display of posturing by politicians and Cuban exiles, who have used Elian's future as a weapon in their fight against Fidel Castro.

[Elián is] 6 years old and has been treated like royalty, showered with gifts and feted everywhere.

If not for the interference of politicians and an exile community determined to score points against Castro at any cost, Elián would have already been returned to his father.

In America today, not even a father's right to guide the fate of his son is allowed to interfere with a political agenda.

The boy has been a political playtoy for two months now.

Elian has been a pawn in a battle over political ideology by politicians and Cuban exiles, who have used the boy's future as a weapon in their fight against Fidel Castro.

[R]espect for parental rights so far has been outweighed by the hatred of Castro held by Miami's politically intimidating exile community. So Elian remains in the United States, being manipulated by relatives and partisan politicians.

U.S. officials have to remove Elian from his Castro-hating relatives, who have vowed to prevent that by forming a human chain around the home where he's staying.

The most hysterical braying yet has to have come from [Cuban-American] U.S. Rep. Lincoln Diaz Balart

Was the raid overdone a bit? Perhaps. . . . It have surprised no one if weapons had been found in the house. *[No weapons were found. No matter. ~~A~~They could have been found.]* Would the PNJ support random frisking for weapons in high crime areas on the same grounds?]

Elian's American relations saw the talks as nothing but a tool to stall any decisive action that would return Elian to his father.

So far as we can tell, concern for Elian and his father have been at the tail end of this whole sordid parade.

Elian's relatives, for reasons of their own and apparently fueled by hatred for Castro, have used the boy shamelessly, always claiming whatever they did was in his interests, all the while keeping him from his father.

This has been a shameful display of posturing by politicians and Cuban exiles, who have used Elian as a political playtoy in their fight against Fidel Castro.

[Elian's Miami relatives=] 15 minutes of fame obviously is more important than the well-being of little Elian.

We support the demise of Castro and the opening of Cuba, but abhor this crass interference with a family as a way of doing it.

It's [sic] appears, however, that outrage in Miami's Little Havana is losing its power and presence.

Meanwhile, because of a few reactionary politicians in Washington such as Sen. Jesse Helms, and the craven politicians who kiss the feet of the Cuban voters in Miami in hopes of winning the presidency,

there isn't enough political backbone to do the right thing and the smart thing and end the trade embargo.

II. Taking it easy on Castro.

The PNJ said that it supports the demise of the Castro regime, but said very little about the nature of the regime. It acknowledged that Castro was using the Elian saga for propaganda purposes. But it made no reference to the status of human rights in the Island, or the U.N. condemnations of Castro's human rights violations. Curiously for a newspaper, it said nothing about the complete lack of freedom of the press in Cuba. At one point the PNJ said that Cuba was not on trial, that the good or bad of the regime was something for the people on the Island to decide! As if Cuba were ruled by a regime that was open to internal criticism or opposition, or would subject itself to a free and fair election or referendum, as Chile's Pinochet did. Another editorial said that it hoped that a change in U.S.-Cuba relations would prevent Cubans from having to flee, without specifying what, exactly, it is they are fleeing from. Regarding parental rights, the PNJ said that it would be tragic if Juan Miguel were to lose those rights, thus demonstrating no awareness of the precariousness of parental rights in Cuba (see Aguirre 2000, 256). It made no reference to the thousands of Cuban parents who in the 1960s sent their children to the United States in the Peter Pan program so that they could be free. Neither did it speak of the regime's practice of holding children hostage while Cubans are on missions abroad, of the obligatory separation of children from their parents while they are in boarding schools, nor of the political indoctrination of children against the wishes of their parents. Finally, it made the Castro regime appear to be a harmless anachronism. This despite the fact that the U.S. Department of State classifies it as one of only seven state sponsors of terrorism around the world. It granted that in the short run, the regime would be propped up by trade and tourism from the U.S.A., but that it would be helpless to stop economic pressures for . . . what? The PNJ did not say.

Elian has become the pawn in a debate in the U.S. about the worth of the Cuban revolution. But Cuba is not on trial here. The issue of whether the government of Cuba is good or bad is up to the Cubans who live on the island to decide. [Note the terminology--not Castro's dictatorship but the Cuban revolution, which is how the regime calls itself. The Cuban revolution took place forty years ago. What has been in place ever since is an oppressive dictatorship, the longest-lived in Latin American history, ruled by a man that combines the traits of Mussolini (whom he idolized during his days at the university) and Stalin. Note, also, the PNJ's presumption in excluding of Cuban-Americans, even recent arrivals from the Island, from participation in any decision about the future of their homeland.]

[Eschewing the term dictator or tyrant, an editorial respectfully refers to the head of longest-ruling dictatorship in the history of Latin America as] President Fidel Castro. [Would the PNJ describe Gen. Pinochet as the former president of Chile?]

Cuba is a poor country, made worse by Castro's misguided economic policies. [*Castro is only Amisguided@-not a thief, corrupt dealer in stolen goods, an oppressor and exploiter of his people, one who sends workers to jail for trying to form labor unions.*]

While we support the end of Castro's regime and the opening of Cuba, we oppose the interference with a child's well-being as a way of doing it. [*As if Miami Cubans thought that keeping Elián in the USA would have brought about Athe end of Castro's regime@or Athe opening of Cuba.@*]

This sad saga is not about Fidel Castro, who has earned the animosity of the exiles. It is about a father's right to decide what's best for his son. [*Not a word about what it is, really, that has caused this Aanimus@for Castro among the exiles.*].

Castro, of course, sees it as useful propaganda.

Cuba has become a Caribbean backwater, a threat to no one but itself. [*This ignores Castro's continuing ties with the international drug trade and international terrorist groups. The Castro regime, after all, is classified as a state that supports terrorism by the U.S. Department of State. And be it noted that, since the end of the Elián saga, several Cubans, one in the Immigration and Naturalization Service, others at large in Miami, were convicted of espionage. More recently, a Puerto Rican woman working at the National Security Agency was arrested on a charge of spying for the Castro regime.*]

Having had his parental rights affirmed by the U.S. courts, it would be tragic for Juan Miguel to lose them to Cuba's authoritarian regime. [*What does the PNJ mean by Alose@them--one cannot lose what one is lacking in the first place. Parental rights taken for granted in the USA or any other free country are observed largely in the breach in Cuba. Also, note the sanitized adjective Aauthoritarian@to characterize the longest-lasting tyranny of the Americas.*]

Foremost, may Elian be able to return to the normal life of a kid--and not be turned into a poster boy for a communist system. And may Elian's taste of freedom provide hope for a future for all Cuba's children. [*Nice expression of hope. But if the PNJ faced up to the real nature of the Castro regime, it would know that this is purely wishful-thinking. Cuba is not a Anormal@country and kids there do not lead Anormal@lives. They are indoctrinated in communist tenets, fed a steady diet of hatred for the U.S.A. and Cuban exiles, and required to march and chant regime slogans, such as AI want to be like El Ché [Guevara].@ And, as it turned out, since his return to Cuba Elián has become a Aposter child,@a mascot for Fidel Castro, to be trotted out at regime-organized demonstrations against the U.S.A.*]

III. Political Agenda

While accusing the Cuban-American community of having a political agenda, it turns out that the PNJ harbored one all along: an end to the embargo.

The Cold War is over--end the embargo.

If we [ended the embargo], Castro, would soon be irrelevant, Cubans could travel freely both ways to see their families, and trade between the two nations would create jobs in both places.

When trade and tourism between the two countries become normalized, the back-and-forth flow of Americans and Cubans should create economic pressures not even Fidel Castro can deflect. [*This assumes that ~~A~~trade in Cuba would take place as it does in the USA, or between the USA and other free economies, i.e., among businesses and individuals independent of the regime. Doesn't the PNJ know that Cubans are not ~~f~~free to travel any more than they are free to form labor unions or found newspapers, that all international trade is controlled by the regime, and that foreign companies investing in Cuba must hire all their employees and pay them through the regime, which takes the dollars and pays the employees mostly in pesos, all the while keeping a close eye on them?*]

Anti-Castro lawmakers argue that allowing Cuba to receive more U.S. trade and tourists would only help prop up his regime. . . . Opening up Cuba may benefit Castro in the short run, but easing the trade and travel embargoes should speed up the drive toward freedom in Cuba. [*Well, this is a debatable point. It hasn't happened in China.*]

Our hope and prayer is that this experience will help break down barriers and open trade and visitation to prevent others from having to take to dangerous rafts to flee. [*Cubans can thank the PNJ for its prayers, but one would think that advocacy of policy, especially advocacy as forceful as that of the PNJ on this issue, would be founded on something stronger than ~~A~~hope.*]

If we really want to end the kind of tragedy that left Elian without his mother and separated for so long from his father, we can start by normalizing relations with Cuba. [*As if Cuba were ruled by a ~~n~~normal regime. Also, this statement sweeps under the rug the real reason why Elián's father did not go to Miami right away to see his child. It wasn't because the United States government was denying him a visa!*]

Allowing free travel for Americans to Cuba would be a significant step, opening the gates for tourism and opportunities to build good will between the two countries. [*The question is not one of good will between countries, but of how the United States deals with a regime, a sponsor of international terrorism, that is its sworn enemy, ruled by a tyrant who, even before seizing control of Cuba, wrote that his true destiny was to wage war on the USA.*]

After nearly 40 years of embargoes, Florida ports--including the Port of Pensacola--are posed [sic] to become shipping points for Cuban trade. [*Ah, here we come to PNJ's interest in ending the embargo. It thinks it smells dollars.*]

Easing sanctions against Cuba is the first step. The next step should be to end the embargoes altogether.

The quotes previously grouped according to themes in the previous section are here listed in chronological order, with dates and page references.

ASend Cuban Boy Home,@December 16, 199, p. 12A.

As parents, would we accept economic capability or political ideology as a determination of our fitness as parents? That's what is taking place in Elian Gonzalez's case.

Elian has become the pawn in a debate in the U.S. about the worth of the Cuban revolution. But Cuba is not on trial here. The issue of whether the government of Cuba is good or bad is up to the Cubans who live on the island to decide.

President Fidel Castro.

The boy belongs with his father. This situation is as simple as that.

AINS right to send Elian Gonzalez home,@January 8, 2000, p. 8AS.

everyone without a political axe to grind . . . knew: A child's place is with his parent(s).

[Elian has] been a political playtoy.

It's been a shameful display of posturing by politicians and Cuban exiles, who have used Elian's future as a weapon in their fight against Fidel Castro. Fidel, of course, has been whipping up emotions in Cuba over the incident to serve his interests.

We support the demise of Castro and the opening of Cuba, but abhor this crass interference with a family as a way of doing it.

Cuba is a poor country, made worse by Castro's misguided economic policies.

[Elian is] 6 years old and has been treated like royalty, showered with gifts and feted everywhere.

If not for the interference of politicians and an exile community determined to score points against Castro at any cost, Elian would have already been returned to his father.

In America today, not even a father's right to guide the fate of his son is allowed to interfere with a political agenda.

AElian needs to go home, not become U.S. citizen,@ January 25, 2000,

The boy has been a political playtoy for two months now.

Elian has been a pawn in a battle over political ideology by politicians and Cuban exiles, who have used the boy's future as a weapon in their fight against Fidel Castro.

While we support the end of Castro's regime and the opening of Cuba, we oppose the interference with a child's well-being as a way of doing it.

ALittle Elian remains a political playtoy,@ April 1, 2000, p.

[The request for 31 visas for an entourage to accompany Elian's father] obviously is a ploy by Castro, who is concerned that the father may remain in the United States if allowed to visit.

[R]espect for parental rights so far has been outweighed by the hatred of Castro held by Miami's politically intimidating exile community. So Elian remains in the United States, being manipulated by relatives and partisan politicians.

To be sure, Elian remains a political playtoy.

U.S. officials have to remove Elian from his Castro-hating relatives, who have vowed to prevent that by forming a human chain around the home where he's staying.

This sad saga is not about Fidel Castro, who has earned the animosity of the exiles. It is about a father's right to decide what's best for his son.

ATime to let Elian's father lead the way,@ April 25, 2000,

The most hysterical braying yet has to have come from U.S. Rep. Lincoln Diaz Balart.

Was the raid overdone a bit? Perhaps. . . . It have surprised no one if weapons had been found in the house.

Eliañs American relations saw the talks as nothing but a tool to stall any decisive action that would return Elian to his father.

So far as we can tell, concern for Elian and his father have been at the tail end of this whole sordid parade.

Castro, of course, sees it as useful propaganda.

Eliañs relatives, for reasons of their own and apparently fueled by hatred for Castro, have used the boy shamelessly, always claiming whatever they did was in his interests, all the while keeping him from his father.

AMaybe Elian can go home to Cuba,@ June 5, 2000, p. 8A

This has been a shameful display of posturing by politicians and Cuban exiles, who have used Elian as a political playtoy in their fight against Fidel Castro.

[Eliañs Miami relatives=] 15 minutes of fame obviously is more important than the well-being of little Elian.

Itñs [sic] appears, however, that outrage in Miamiñs Little Havana is losing its power and presence.

AMEnd Cuba trade embargo,@ June 3, 2000

Miami has become almost as Cuban as Havana.

Cuba has become a Caribbean backwater, a threat to no one but itself.

Meanwhile, because of a few reactionary politicians in Washington such as Sen. Jesse Helms, and the craven politicians who kiss the feet of the Cuban voters in Miami in hopes of winning the presidency, there isn't enough political backbone to do the right thing and the smart thing and end the trade embargo.

If we did, Castro would soon be irrelevant, Cubans could travel freely both ways to see their families, and trade between the two nations would create jobs in both places.

The Cold War is over--end the embargo.

Will Elian saga improve relationship with Cuba?,@July 2, 2000

Having had his parental rights affirmed by the U.S. courts, it would be tragic for Juan Miguel to lose them to Cuba's authoritarian regime.

Foremost, may Elian be able to return to the normal life of a kid--and not be turned into a poster boy for a communist system. And may Elian's taste of freedom provide hope for a future for all Cuba's children.

Our hope and prayer is that this experience will help break down barriers and open trade and visitation to prevent others from having to take to dangerous rafts to flee.

If we really want to end the kind of tragedy that left Elian without his mother and separated for so long from his father, we can start by normalizing relations with Cuba.

That would be happy ending to this sad story.

Easing Cuban sanctions opens door for freedom,@July 23, 2000

When trade and tourism between the two countries become normalized, the back-and-forth flow of Americans and Cuban should create economic pressures not even Fidel Castro can deflect.

Allowing free travel for Americans to Cuba would be a significant step, opening the gates for tourism and opportunities to build good will between the two countries.

After nearly 40 years of embargoes, Florida ports--including the Port of Pensacola--are posed [sic] to become shipping points for Cuban trade.

Anti-Castro lawmakers argue that allowing Cuba to receive more U.S. trade and tourists would only help prop up his regime.

Opening up Cuba may benefit Castro in the short run, but easing the trade and travel embargoes should speed up the drive toward freedom in Cuba.

Easing sanctions against Cuba is the first step. The next step should be to end the embargoes altogether.

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