THE ROLE OF HISPANICS IN RELATION TO BLACK AND WHITE TENSIONS

MIAMI - A CASE STUDY

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The purpose of this paper is to provide the socio-historical background for a case study of Miami. During the month of May, 1980, Miami made the headlines in all media, not only nationally but internationally. Mariel, the name of a small fishing port on the north west coast of Cuba, became a household word, as the embarkation point for some 125,000 Cubans making the trip in small boats to Florida and Miami. This unprecedented exodus from Cuba against the wishes of the United States, but with the cooperation and indeed at the initiative of the Cuban Government, posed enormous logistic and legal problems for the U.S. Government.

The impact upon south Florida and, in particular, the City of Miami, was aggravated by the inconsistent policy decisions and fundamental errors made by the Carter administration in dealing with the situation. The situation was further aggravated by the presence in the exodus of some two thousand common criminals and mentally defective persons and an unknown number of others who were forced to come against their will by the Cuban Government, leaving family behind. The opportunity was seized by the Cuban Government to get rid of
those whom it judged to be undesirable and unproductive members of the new society. Included among these were high school dropouts, petty criminals and other marginal members of society. The exodus reflected in general a preponderance of blue collar workers of whom an extremely high percentage were single males between 16 and 40 years of age. While the majority of those who came were claimed by relatives from Miami who made the hazardous trip to Mariel to rescue their loved ones, Cuban authorities forced onto the boats persons totally unknown to the owners. Many boat owners never did succeed in getting their own families out.

Because of a mismanaged resettlement program and prejudicial exaggerated publicity regarding the small percentage of common criminals, some 60% of the Mariel refugees remain in the Miami area, being cared for by the Cuban community. Government assistance as of this date (October 15th) has been minimal or non-existent.

The Mariel exodus began on April 24, 1980, and continued for approximately three months. It was terminated, as it had begun, by the unilateral action of the Cuban Government. All efforts of the U.S. Government to stop the traffic failed. The end result was that some 80,000 new Cuban refugees were added to the 600,000 Cubans who had migrated to Miami from the island during the past twenty years.

Some three weeks after Mariel began, when as many as 5,000 Cubans already were pouring into Miami, riots broke out in the Black
areas of the city's north west. White owned businesses were
fire bombed and eighteen people were murdered and some $100,000,000
went up in smoke. The spark that triggered this conflagration, the
first in Miami since 1968, was the acquittal by an all White jury
of four White policemen who had been accused of killing a Black
insurance executive named Arthur McDuffie. The McDuffie case
was one of nine police brutality incidents reported by the press
during the previous year. The conditions for the disturbance had
been set by some twelve years of the Black community being neglected
by the White majority since the 1968 riots. The results of this
neglect were evident in high unemployment rates among young Blacks
and Viet Nam veterans, de facto segregated housing pattern for the
majority of Blacks, poor inner city schools, the destruction of
once prosperous Black business neighborhoods by expressway construction
and urban renewal. However, the overriding factor was the perception
in the Black community that the criminal justice system was biased
against Blacks.

The coincidence of the McDuffie riots and the Mariel refugees led
many outside observers to jump to the conclusion that the two were
linked. Few, if any, Black leaders in Miami accept this view, though
it is generally admitted that the evident success of the Hispanic
migration to Miami over the past twenty years does serve to highlight
what is perceived to be intransigent racism in the economic,
educational, criminal justice and political systems of the community.
During the past several years, the negative reception given Black Haitian refugees by the U.S. Government has served to reinforce the perception of racism, a perception that has been supported by findings in the U.S. District Court.

These events of May, 1980, make Miami an appropriate subject for this case study of the role of Hispanics in relation to Black-White tensions. The rest of this paper will cover four aspects of the social-historical background for such a case study.

1. Miami - History up to March, 1980
2. Miami - April to September, 1980
3. Miami Looks to the Future
4. Miami - Lessons for the Nation

During its first sixty years of existence, Miami grew from a small village on the banks of Biscayne Bay (c. 1890's) to a population of some 800,000 in the late 1950's. It was a typically segregated community with a small Spanish speaking colony. Its economic base was tourism and construction. In 1959, it was in deep economic recession with tourism loosing out to the islands of the Carribbean and a slump in construction with an enormous surplus of housing on the market. In 1960, the United Way failed to make 50% of its goal.

The Catholic Church had grown with Miami from one parish in the 1890's to four in the 1930's to forty in the 1950's. In 1958, the Diocese of Miami, which would become an archdiocese in 1968, was created. With
its founding, the Church emerged as a factor in the development of the community. It was destined to play an increasingly important role as the phenomenon of the Cuban refugee migration of the 50's and 60's developed.

While technically, the Cuban refugee migration dates from the Castro takeover on January 1, 1959, it was about two years later, in the winter of 1960, that its impact began to affect Miami. The major force in mobilizing the community was the Diocese of Miami. The refugees ushered in a new era in Miami's history - the 60's which saw three simultaneous developments.

1. Refugees          2. Desegregation          3. Industrialization
Two waves -    1960-62    Lunch counters -    School desegregation    Economic base switched
1966-73    1968 Riots         1968 Riots            from tourism to manufacturing and transportation.

During the 60's some half a million Cubans settled in Dade County. While there was some significant out migration of Whites to other south Florida counties, the population grew to about 1.4 million. Desegregation proceeded peacefully with the exception of the disturbances during the 1968 Republican Convention - a disturbance which was minor compared to those in Detroit or Newark. The presence of a half a million middle and upper class Cubans with strong entrepreneurial drives contributed in no small measure to the growth of industry, especially in the garment field and light manufacturing and to Miami's development
as the transportation gateway by air and sea for Latin America and the Caribbean.

Federal refugee aid, while relatively small, was an essential factor in providing the new refugee with an economic basis from which to start. This combined with the ready availability of cheap housing enabled the new refugee to become independent in an extraordinarily short period of time - the average being somewhat less than three months.

While the Black Miamian shared to an extent in the new prosperity, he found several developments which had a negative impact on his progress. While desegregation opened up new jobs for Blacks, the Blacks found themselves in competition with a highly educated, entrepreneurially oriented new minority - the Cubans.

The construction of the new expressways which began in 1962 ripped apart the old Black neighborhoods. What was left was about totally wiped out by urban renewal attempts which were poorly conceived and executed. Desegregation itself tended to remove the protective wall around Black businesses in the ghetto which were neighborhood oriented and the result was the virtual destruction of Black business communities.

Major forces in promoting community peace and cooperation were the Metro Community Relations Board, which was largely the creation of
Bishop Carroll, and the Greater Miami Coalition. These offered structures and avenues for the Black voice to be heard and helped to bring the new Hispanic groups into contact with White and Black Miami.

For Miami, the 1970's were characterized by a sort of status quo. The Cuban Refugee Freedom Flight wound down and finally ceased in April of 1973. Hopes of a return to a free Cuba died for all but a hand full of activists. Political activity among the Cubans switched from the national and international scenes to the local. Under their influence, trade and Latin American tourism in Miami continued to grow. U.S. tourism continued to decline. Downtown Miami became virtually a Latin American city with Anglos continuing to move to the suburbs or to other parts of Florida. Beginning in 1972, a new kind of refugee began to appear on south Florida beaches - the Haitian. By 1980, arrivals would reach 600 per month by small boat despite U.S. Government attempts to deny them political asylum and return them to Haiti. The urban coalition experiment in community organization expired. The housing shortage grew progressively worse. For Black Americans it was a decade of benign neglect. Blacks saw the new Hispanic majority rapidly outnumber them and outgrow them in prosperity. An end of the decade revival in tourism was fueled entirely by Latin America and Europe. Bilingualism became essential for almost any type of job. By 1980, Anglos could see no future for themselves in Dade County and Blacks could see no change. The future belonged to the Hispanic
and, as one legislator described it, tri-ethnic in Miami meant Hispanic, Black and Jewish.

The last year of the decade saw a dramatic increase in police violence involving Black citizens. The most dramatic incident being the McDuffie case which would spark the May 17th civil disturbances.

Such was the state of Miami in April, 1980, when Castro opened the flood-gates of Mariel which would bring 125,000 more Cuban refugees to Florida to be followed three weeks later by the McDuffie riots.

The combination of the two events created massive polarization in the community, especially between the White Anglo and the Hispanic population. This polarization orchestrated by certain radio talk show hosts led to a citizen initiated anti-bilingual referendum which gives every indication of being successful in November.

The impact of the new refugees on Miami was aggravated by the inconsistent and often contradicting policies of the Carter administration. One week after the new influx began, the twenty year old Cuban Assistance Program was terminated leaving the new refugees without financial assistance. The situation was complicated by unequal treatment accorded by the U.S. Government to the
increasing numbers of Haitian as compared to Cuban arrivals. It was clear that Cuban refugees who once were welcomed and encouraged by the U.S. Government were now an embarrassment and a burden.

In review, three crises can be identified in Miami.

1. A crisis in leadership - Black, White and Hispanic
2. A crisis in violence - both criminal and police
3. A crisis in White flight

In comparing Miami to the rest of the nation's cities we can distinguish similarities and differences. Similarities are police violence, ghetto violence and White flight. Differences are bilingualism, Hispanic economics and ethnic politics.

Solutions to Miami's problems involve showing Whites that they have a future in Miami, police morale and its relationship to violence, and greater communication between Hispanics and Blacks.

Side issues that must be faced include White-Hispanic relationships with Black-Hispanics (45% of Mariel refugees are Black). Black Americans must relate to the presence of 27,000 Black Haitians who differ in language and culture. Perhaps the most serious problem facing the Hispanic community is the tendency to use the Mariel Cuban as a scapegoat for all the community's problems.