

Cuban and Haitian Immigration

Hist7203 – Immigration and the American Identity

Summer 2009 – FSC

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In order to demonstrate the experiences of immigrants from the Caribbean Islands, it is useful to highlight the vastly different situations of Cuba and Haiti. Cuban and Haitian migrants moved from their homelands during relatively similar periods of time, yet encountered almost opposite reactions from the government of the United States, a destination chosen primarily for its proximity to the two nations.

The circumstances that affected Haitian migration can be traced back to the 1801 slave revolt led by Toussaint L'Ouverture, obtaining independence for the colony and abolishing slavery therein. (BBC News Timeline: Haiti) Despite this early triumph, however, Haiti evolved into a racially divided, economically dysfunctional and politically turbulent nation. From the early 1800s until roughly 1934, Haiti underwent twenty-two changes in government and tensions rise between ethnic groups, with blacks losing all political power. ("Haiti")

The first large-scale wave of Haitian immigrants to the United States took place following Francois "Papa Doc" Duvalier's rise to power in 1957. Duvalier established his own presidency-for-life one year later and created the Tontons Macoutes, a paramilitary service designed to eliminate political opponents using terror and violent force. While this regime was condemned by the Kennedy administration, the United States encouraged Haitians to immigrate and accepted many skilled, upper-class migrants to enter its borders. Interestingly, this opening only applied to those arriving via airplane at first. The first boat of Haitian political refugees in 1962 was denied and forced to return home. (Haitian Immigration: 20th Century)

In 1965, the Hart-Cellar Act passed in Congress, ending the use of quotas and allowing families to reunite. (Spickard, 474) This law, along with the death of Papa Doc and the continued brutal reign of his son, increased middle-class Haitian immigration during the 1970s and 80s. However, in 1980, U.S. immigration policy toward Haiti became more firm. Faced with a drastic increase in Cuban refugees from the Mariel boatlift, Congress decided to redefine what it means to be a "refugee" (thus labeling Haitians as economic migrants), and President Reagan began an interdiction program, allowing the Coast Guard to search, detain, and return any undocumented Haitians. (Skop, 45, Wasem 2-3) Furthermore, the U.S. stigmatized Haitians

by declaring diseases such as tuberculosis and AIDS as endemic to their population. In the 1980s, the Center for Disease Control refused to accept Haitian donor blood. (Haitian Immigration: 20th Century)

The third and final wave of Haitian immigrants attempted to travel to the United States in 1991 following the failure of the nation's first democratically elected leader, Jean-Bertrand Aristide. (Haitian Immigration: 20th Century) From this point to the present, Presidents H.W. Bush, Clinton, and G.W. Bush have all made slight adjustments in the policy toward Haitians. Those migrants intercepted at sea have continually been turned away, especially after the September 11th attacks, due to the potential for a serious national security threat. The only concession to Haitian refugees came in 1998, when Congress decided to extend residence to those immigrants already living on U.S. soil. (Wasem, Congressional Report, 5-6)

In stark contrast, Cuban migrants were allowed to enter the United States fairly unrestricted until the most recent decades. In fact, the relationship between the two nations can be traced back to the nineteenth century where the sugar, rum, and tobacco trades provided a link. The U.S. government found itself drawn to the island for the resources it possessed and, later, militarily as it was forced to protect its citizens and assets during Cuba's fight for independence. Finally, with its win in the Spanish-American War, the U.S. took control of the island, and while the occupation ended shortly thereafter, an open door policy was created which provided for the free movement between the U.S. and Cuba. (Perez 387-9)

During the slow process of transferring complete decision-making power back to Cuba, the island became politically unstable (while profits increased) and between the years of 1933 to 1958, the public grew increasingly unhappy with its U.S. supported leader, Fulgencio Batista. This unrest led to the overthrow of the Batista regime by Fidel Castro and other Cuban revolutionaries in January 1959. (BBC News Timeline: US-Cuba Relations)

The revolution prompted the first large wave of Cuban immigrants. Most of these "Golden Exiles" were members of Cuba's professional and upper classes. These people were the ones that stood to lose the most as Castro nationalized all businesses, allied with the U.S.S.R. and declared his nation to be a communist state. They generally travelled by air and all were granted political refugee status by the government of the United States. (Skop 44-45)

After the U.S. broke diplomatic ties with communist Cuba, the same Hart-Cellar Act which only modestly increased immigration from Haiti, generated an incredible amount of

middle- to lower-class, but skilled Cuban immigrants until the mid-1970s. Furthermore, not only did Congress give preference to political refugees from communist nations, it also passed the Cuban Adjustment Act, providing resident status and federal support for the migrants once they were settled in the country. (Grosfoguel 235) Interestingly, they were largely allowed to retain their “cubanidad” as well. Miami, in particular, flourished with Cuban culture and influence and, as a group, Cubans were more readily accepted into political and religious communities than other immigrants. (Skop 45-46)

The end of the Cuban contradiction in U.S. immigration policy began to take place in the 1980s, at the onset of the third wave of Cuban movement. In 1980, Castro’s government announced the opening of Mariel Harbor and encouraged anyone who wanted to leave to do so. At this time, approximately 125,000 Cubans travelled by boat to Florida. These migrants were not the post-revolution “Golden Exiles.” Rather, the “Marielitos” were of the lower classes, suspected to be criminals or mentally defective, and counted among their ranks many black Cubans (30%). (Skop 45) President Carter was less enthusiastic about accepting this large population and some Cubans were deported. Still, many were allowed to stay. (Spickard 376)

Finally, the collapse of the Soviet Union and the deteriorating conditions in Cuba prompted the last wave of Cuban immigration and, finally, action by the U.S. government. In the early 1990s, Cuban “balseros” (rafters) arrived on Florida shores by the tens of thousands. In response to this situation, President Clinton ended the precedent set by the Hart-Cellar Act and refused to accept all Cubans as refugees any longer. In fact, many Cubans would start to be detained at Guantanamo Bay for interrogation or to wait for documentation. (“American Experience | Fidel Castro | People and Events”)

Despite all this, in April 2006, a boat of unauthorized migrants including 44 Haitians, one Jamaican, and one Cuban was detained by the Coast Guard off the shores of the United States. After questioning, the Cuban migrant was permitted to enter the U.S. All others were denied. (Haas and Francois)

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Cuban Migration

19th Century – Cuba was a Spanish colony. The sugar, rum, and tobacco commerce between Cuba and the United States led to the settlement of small Cuban communities in America in New Orleans, New York, and Key West.

1895 – 1898 – Cuban war for independence begins.

1898 – United States send USS Maine to Havana harbor to protect American citizens during Cuban-Spanish War. Following the perceived Spanish attack of the USS Maine, the United States declares war against Spain on April 25.

December 1898 – Following the US victory in the Spanish-American War, the Treaty of Paris is signed giving America possession of Cuba.

1902 – Cuba received partial independence. Under the Platt Amendment, the US still reserved the right to intervene in Cuban issues.

1902 – 1958 – An open door policy was created allowing Cubans to travel back and forth between Cuba and US.

1903 – The United States gains control of Cuba's Guantanamo Bay and designates it a US naval base.

1904 – US military ends occupation of Cuba.

1906 – 1933 – US military intervenes in Cuba on three separate occasions to bring about political stability and to protect American business interests.

Haitian Migration

1801 – Slave Revolt led by former black slave, Toussaint L'Ouverture. Slavery abolished in Haiti.

1806 – An independent Haiti is divided between a Mulatto ruled south and a Black ruled north.

1818 – 1843 – Haiti unified under the rule of Pierre Boyer. Blacks lose all political power in Haiti.

1843 – 1915 – Haiti undergoes 22 changes in government.

1915 – United States invades Haiti to protect US economic interests as tension between Haitian blacks and mulattos rises.

1934 – US troops withdraw from Haiti.

1956 - 1971 – Francois 'Papa Doc' Duvalier seizes power in military coup and becomes president 1 year later.

1958 – Papa Doc establishes Tontons Macoutes, a paramilitary organization created to eliminate political adversaries. Approximately 30,000 Haitians murdered under Papa Doc's rule for political reasons.

1950's/early 1960's – First large-scale wave of Haitian Immigrants to the United States arrive legally through air travel. This group of Haitians was upper-class and encouraged to leave by Kennedy administration.

September 1963 - First group of Haitians via boat arrived to US seeking political asylum. US did not grant them

1933 – 1958 – US supported strongman, Sergeant Fulgencio Batista, controls Cuba after military coup. US gives up right to intervene in Cuban affairs in 1934. Batista controlled Cuba as a dictator during a time when social and political justice was sacrificed for economic prosperity. Animosity for Batista grew amongst the Cuban peasantry, as US interests controlled most of Cuba's land.

January 1959 – Fidel Castro led Cuban revolutionaries to defeat Batista, send him and his government into exile.

1959 – 1962 – First wave of post-revolution immigration to the US begins. Most migrants are comprised of professionals and upper class Cubans (the 'Golden Exiles'), and travel to the US by air. US government automatically provides these Cubans political refugee status.

October 1960 – Following the nationalization of all American business in Cuba, the Eisenhower Administration officially breaks all diplomatic ties with Cuban government and begin economic embargo.

1961 – Cuba officially becomes a communist state and Castro allies with the USSR.

April 1961 – US supports small group of Cuban exiles in a failed attempt to overthrow Castro's government known as the Bay of Pigs Invasion.

October 1962 – The Cuban Missile Crisis takes place as the USSR attempts to arm the island with nuclear weapons.

political refugee status and sent them back to Haiti.

1965 – US Hart-Cellar Act passed which ends quota system and adjusts preference system to allow family reunions first and occupation preferences second. It opens legal path to citizenship to more Haitians.

1971 – 1986 – Following Papa Docs death, his son 'Baby Doc' Duvalier takes power and continues violent dictatorship that mirrors his father.

Late 1970's/early 80's – Second large-scale migration of Haitian 'boat people' attempt to seek asylum in US. US designated Haitians as primarily economic migrants.

1980 – Congress passes Refugee Act that redefines a refugee under United Nations guidelines and lowers the amount of refugees the US will accept.

1981 - Reagan administration creates Haitian interdiction program to respond to large scale Haitian immigrations arriving by boats. US Coast Guard were authorized to stop and board all Haitian and unidentified ships, interrogate passengers, and send back any undocumented Haitians back to Haiti. Haitians that made it to the US were detained by US authorities until a official hearing to determine status took place.

1986 – 1990 – Following a popular uprising that overthrows Baby Doc from power, Haiti suffers from an instable political landscape.

1991 – Jean-Bertrand Aristide becomes first democratically elected president.

1965 - US Hart-Cellar Act passed which ends quota system and gives preference to political refugees escaping communist nations, which benefits Cuban migrants to the United States.

1965 - 1974 – As economic hardships worsened in Cuba and private property rights disappeared, a second wave of Cuban migrants left Cuba through US organized refugee airlifts known as ‘freedom flights’. This group was comprised of lower and middle class, skilled Cubans.

1966 – Congress passes the Cuban Adjustment Act allowing Cuban refugees to receive permanent resident status and provided federal support for the settling of Cuban migrants.

April – September 1980 – Following Castro’s opening of Mariel Harbor in Cuba to anyone who wanted to leave Cuba, 125,000 Cubans traveled by boat to Florida in a third wave of migration known as the Mariel Boatlift. Under President Carter, the United States was less willing to support these migrants as political refugees, as they carried the stigma of being Cuban criminals (even though only 1 – 2% were may have had criminal pasts), comprised of the lower class and many black Cubans (30% of Marielitos). Unlike earlier waves of migrants, some Cubans were deported.

Early 1990s – The collapse of the Soviet Union and the further weakening of the Cuban economy sparked a fourth wave of Cuban immigrants known as balseros or ‘rafters’ that arrived on US shores in the tens of thousands.

August 1994 – In response to the wave of balseros, President Clinton ends US

September 1991 – A military coup overthrows Aristide and leads to another wave of Haitian boat people to the US.

May 1992 - President H.W. Bush signs Executive order 12807 authorizing the Coast Guard to immediately return all Haitian boat people intercepted at sea, due to the mass influx of migrants following 1991 coup.

1998 – Congress passes the Haitian Refugee Immigration Fairness Act which allowed Haitians living in the US to receive legal permanent residence and provide them a legal channel to citizenship.

Post 9/11/2001 – US Department of Justice argues that all migrants that arrive to US by sea pose a risk to national security and it became necessary to detain all migrants until potential risk can be evaluated.

April 2006 – A boat of unauthorized migrants (44 Haitians, 1 Jamaican, and 1 Cuban) detained by Coast Guard. Only the Cuban migrant is allowed to come to the US and all other migrants were sent home.

policy to welcome all Cubans as refugees to the US. All Cuban refugees detained at Guantanamo Naval Base to avoid a second Mariel-like incident.

November 1999 – A six year old Cuban boy, Elian Gonzalez, is rescued off the Florida shore and creates a trans-national custody case. The boy's father wanted to see him returned to Cuba, while the Cuban-American relatives wanted him to remain in the US. In 2000, federal officials physically removed Gonzalez from his relatives and sent him home to his father in 2004.

April 2006 – A boat of unauthorized migrants (44 Haitians, 1 Jamaican, and 1 Cuban) detained by Coast Guard. Only the Cuban migrant is allowed to come to the US and all other migrants were sent home.