NPG FOOTNOTES

CARIBBEAN BOAT PEOPLE: CLINTON'S FIRST CRISIS?

By the time he is inaugurated on Jan. 20, President-elect Bill Clinton may be faced with a record flood of both Haitian and Cuban boat people. Besides, immigration from the Dominican Republic — our biggest Caribbean immigrant sending country — and Jamaica is even greater, though underpublicized. The convergence of these trends could produce a major crisis.

Clinton's election, reports the *New York Times* (Nov. 23), made Haitians "giddy" with expectation that he will either restore democracy to their unhappy country or welcome them into the U.S. "with open arms." Hundreds of boats are now being readied to sail the nearly 500 miles of choppy Caribbean waters to Miami, Coast Guard aerial surveillance reveals. Some are being built with wood ripped from their ramshackle homes.

A parallel rush of boat people is expected from that other oppressed Caribbean island, Cuba. They have continued crowding into Florida since the 1980 Mariel boatlift, when 125,000 of them arrived. They are not necessarily reacting to Clinton's election. Quite simply, as one Cuban refugee explained:

"There is nothing in Cuba. Everyone wants to leave."

The Haitian Problem

Haiti's situation is worst of all. Generations of corrupt politicians, businessmen, and generals have virtually destroyed a once-flourishing economy, while illiterate peasants have eroded the once fertile land and cut down the trees to burn and sell them for charcoal.

To aggravate matters, Haiti's population grows exponentially. The UN estimates (official Haitian figures are notoriously unreliable) that it has increased from 4.5 million in 1970 to about 6.8 million today. Its natural increase rate is 2.9 percent, highest in the hemisphere.

The underlying problem is that Haiti, Jamaica, the Dominican Republic and other Caribbean countries suffer from economic growth rates that are too low to support high population growth rates. (Cuba, though with a lower population growth rate, nevertheless has more people than its economy can afford.) Unless steps are taken to reduce population to sustainable levels, boatlifts are virtually guaranteed to continue indefinitely.

President-elect Clinton has not yet addressed the much greater overall Caribbean problem, but has commented on the Haitian exodus. During the election campaign, he said he opposed President Bush's policy of interdicting and repatriating Haitian asylum-seekers. He indicated that he would be generous toward them, implying that they were fleeing to the U.S. to escape persecution under Haiti's military regime. That attitude, however, aroused concern among his own followers as well as opponents that he would open up the floodgates to Haitian boat people.

At a Capitol Hill press conference on Nov. 19, Clinton tried to allay such fears. He said that he stood by his opposition to Bush's policy yet agreed that "the distinction between economic and political refugees was a legitimate one and if you wipe it away altogether you do violence to our immigration laws" — the policy's raison d'etre. He further reassured, "I've tried to send out a clear signal...that I think it would be very unwise for anybody to think that I'm going to articulate a policy that would promote mass migration."

But he also said he wanted to give Haitians "the chance to make a case that they should be granted asylum in this country temporarily until we can see a democratically elected government restored to Haiti." However, the return to office of freely elected President Jean-Bertrand Aristide, who was ousted by the military in September 1991, would not "restore" democracy and halt the tide of boat people. Democracy has been non-existent in Haiti since its independence, in 1804, and emigration is likely to continue rising as it has for over a generation regardless of who rules.

The net result, so far, of Clinton's offer to grant Haitians "temporary" asylum has been to tacitly encourage them to prepare to flee their country en masse by Jan. 20.

The Bush Administration argues that its repatriation policy is justified because Haitians are leaving their country not for political, but economic reasons — one cannot make a living there.

Nevertheless, in July the 2nd U.S. Court of Appeals ruled that the Bush policy violates the Refugee Act of 1980. The Administration has persuaded the U.S. Supreme Court to take the case, holding that the ruling interfered with its foreign policy. The Supreme Court is expected to issue its verdict early in 1993.

The chief difference between Bush and Clinton is that the latter would give Haitians a "chance to make [their] case" for asylum. But Clinton did not specify where that might take place — a key question. No third country is willing to accept Haitians en masse for screening. Our naval base at Guantanamo, Cuba, where Haitians have been interned before repatriation, can accommodate only 12,500. That leaves the continental U.S. as the only alternative site. But such an option is fraught with frightening implications.

The German Lesson

The anti-foreign violence in Germany suggests why. It should be studied thoroughly by President-elect Clinton before he takes office. Germany has pursued a policy of permitting would-be asylees to arrive in the country, apply for asylum, and reside there while their applications are processed — the pattern implicit in Clinton's approach to Haiti. Applications have been mounting annually from 121,318 in 1989, when the Berlin Wall fell, to approximately 500,000 in 1992. A backlog of 418,000 cases has piled up. Meanwhile, the government is obligated under the 1949 Constitution to provide applicants with food, housing, and a monthly stipend of about $275 while they await processing. In the midst of a recession and record unemployment, idle youths resented so many foreigners living off the state while they suffer extreme poverty. Incited and led by neo Nazis and skinheads, they turned to violence on a massive scale.

Is the U.S. prepared to receive and process hundreds of thousands of Haitians at the risk of duplicating the German catastrophe? What would happen then to Clinton's first priority, to create jobs for Americans and get the economy moving again? What about the impact on specific sites that seem logical for the processing? An obvious one, Miami, is already battered and bruised after years of interethnic violence. Another, Fort Chafee, Ark., was the scene of riots by Cuban refugees whom Gov. Clinton, under pressure from Jimmy Carter, had agreed to house there. That may have cost him his re-election.

The Invidious Comparison

If large numbers of Cuban and Haitian boat people land on our shores simultaneously how will the Clinton Administration cope with them all at the same time? Under the 1966 Cuban Refugee Adjustment Act, Cubans are allowed to enter the U.S. freely and become permanent residents after two years; they cannot legally be repatriated. The contrast between the benign reception they get while Haitians are turned back has for years generated fierce resentment at what appears to be racial discrimination. Race riots may accompany a new tide of Caribbean refugees.

What is the solution to the twin problems of Cuba and Haiti?

The first can be alleviated, at least, by restoring the principle of equal treatment of refugees through terminating our preferential treatment of Cubans. It was both strategically necessary and humane to grant immediate asylum to those who, in earlier years, fled from repression under Castro's communist dictatorship. But today very few are left who can claim political persecution, unless we assume that the entire Cuban people are persecuted by the dictatorship and take in all 10 million of them. By ending the 1966 act, Clinton could seriously reduce the inflow of Cuban refugees and also avoid the damaging charge of discrimination.

The Haitian problem is deeper. To solve it would require creating almost from scratch a viable economy and a relatively democratic political system. A basis would then be established for a continuing educational effort to demonstrate the benefits of planned parenthood and a corresponding reduction in fertility rates. Unfortunately, Haiti lacks the forces to pursue that path.

What then? Intervention by the Organization of American States, with U.S. backing, has been proposed. But Americans are highly unlikely to approve the use of an armed force to support it, and in any case past military intervention has proven futile.

The Broader Issue

The new administration should also plan how to deal with the quiet, but far greater exodus from the Dominican Republic. From 1981 to 1990, 252,000 Dominicans arrived here legally or have been legalized; today New York City alone boasts nearly half a million of them. Most do not claim to be political refugees, since their country is run by elected civilian officials; instead, they make their way to the U.S. through Puerto Rico by the simple expedient of obtaining passage from there. This loophole should be plugged by the incoming Clinton team.

Jamaica is second only to the Dominican Republic as the Caribbean's biggest immigrant-sender, with a total of 208,000 entering the U.S. between 1981 and 1990. They represented, however, a greater proportion of the total population — 9 percent — than the more numerous Dominicans did of theirs — 3.5 percent. This does not include illegal migrants, who are by nature uncountable.

"We are no longer receiving immigration from some areas of the Caribbean, Latin America and Asia," says Dan Stein, Executive Director of the Federation for American Immigration Reform. "What we are now seeing are wholesale transfers of population from countries like Jamaica, Laos, El Salvador and Haiti."

The U.S. is in no position to absorb such "wholesale transfers of population," inundated as it is by an unprecedented and rising wave of immigration since 1965. This represents a challenge to Bill Clinton that is equally unprecedented.

— Daniel James

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