

FULFILLING MISS LIBERTY'S PROMISE FOR CUBAN REFUGEES

With sad irony too often typical of the federal bureaucracy, at the very moment when Americans are celebrating the centennial of the Statue of Liberty, the U.S. is barring the door to thousands of deserving Cuban refugees. After prolonged prodding from the Reagan Administration, Cuban dictator Fidel Castro agreed to release some 3,000 political prisoners from his jails and allow them to come to the U.S. American officials are convinced that these are genuine political prisoners and not the kind of hardened criminals Castro poured into the U.S. during the 1980 Mariel boatlift. The State Department wants these prisoners admitted to the U.S. as permitted under the Refugee Act of 1980. But the Immigration and Naturalization Service (INS) has thrown up an enormous roadblock, arguing that until Cuba follows through on its agreement to take back the Mariel criminals, the U.S. will deny asylum to Cuban political prisoners.

Under the terms of an agreement signed on December 14, 1984, Cuba agreed to take back 2,746 criminals and mental patients who had been among the 129,000 Cubans fleeing Castro's tyranny during the Mariel exodus. In return, the U.S. would resume accepting some 20,000 Cuban immigrants per year, as well as 3,000 of the Cubans imprisoned for political reasons. The latter group had already received permission from Castro to leave his oppressive "workers' paradise" prior to the 1980 boatlift.

Processing of the Cuban refugees' visas was delayed because of the lack of staff at the U.S. Interests Section in Havana. Further delays occurred following a decision to deport the Mariel criminals and mental patients at a rate of only 100 per month. The final blow to the hope of freedom for the Cuban prisoners of conscience came on May 20, 1985, when Fidel Castro suspended his government's immigration agreement in retaliation for the beginning of Radio Marti's broadcasts the same day. The Cuban dictator refused to accept any more Mariel deportees, yet did not bar Cubans leaving the island.

In turn, the U.S. decided to "punish" Castro by halting visa processing and denying asylum to political prisoners and their families. Since that time, only a trickle of Cuban refugees have been allowed legal entry into the U.S. under what the State Department calls "exceptional circumstances." A few have been let in because of pressure from world figures such as Jacques Cousteau and U.S. politicians such as Senator Edward Kennedy, the Massachusetts Democrat. Recently, several ex-political prisoners without such powerful patrons had their visa applications turned down by the U.S. Interests Section, forcing them back into a limbo-like existence on the edges of Cuban society where they suffer constant harassment by Cuban authorities.

Such a policy seems totally inconsistent with the ideals of freedom and justice that Americans celebrate on July 4th. By refusing to grant asylum to the victims of Cuba's communist dictatorship, the U.S. is punishing not Fidel Castro but the thousands of brave men and women who already have endured years of suffering in the dictator's jails. The U.S. is also harming itself, politically and morally, in the eyes of millions of oppressed people throughout the world, who look to America as a land where freedom is always paramount. Punishing one's friends to penalize one's enemies is unwise as well as politically and diplomatically damaging.

The INS provides a valuable service as the guardian of U.S. borders, but its policy on Cuban immigration is short-sighted and counterproductive. It is not, moreover, Ronald Reagan's policy. During a recent news conference, Reagan promised that he would make "any effort" to help Cuban political prisoners come to the U.S. Vice President George Bush also asserted that the Administration would do everything it could to grant asylum to Cubans whose "voices cry out from behind prison walls."

Castro must be made to take back the criminals and mental patients he unleashed on the U.S., but other means can be found to achieve this. It is imperative for the Reagan Administration to overrule the INS policy and quickly provide a haven for Cuba's prisoners of conscience. President Reagan must issue an order to grant asylum to these long-suffering victims of Castro's dictatorship.

Victory over communist oppression requires more than military strength. The cause of freedom must not fall victim to bureaucratic policies of dubious merit. Although a wise and consistently just immigration policy is necessary to protect the interests of U.S. citizens, Miss Liberty's arms must always be open to those, such as Cuba's political prisoners, who are truly seeking freedom from tyranny.

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