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# Cuban Migration: A Postrevolution Exodus Ebbs and Flows

**JULY 6, 2017** PROFILE | By Jorge Duany

In 1959, the Cuban Revolution unleashed the largest refugee flow to the United States in history, with approximately 1.4 million people fleeing the island after the toppling of dictator Fulgencio Batista by Fidel Castro's guerrilla fighters. Since then, Cuba has remained one of the top migrant-sending nations to its northern neighbor, and the Cuban exodus has been oriented primarily toward the mainland United States. In addition, at least 300,000 Cubans have relocated to Spain, Puerto Rico, Venezuela, Mexico, and other Latin American and Caribbean countries, as well as Canada and European nations such as Germany, Italy, and France.

Cuba was the fifth-largest source of immigrants admitted to the United States for legal permanent residence during 2015 (more than 54,000 persons); just six countries had a larger immigrant population in the United States, with some 1,211,000 U.S. residents born in Cuba—nearly 940,000 of whom now live in Florida. In total, approximately 2 million U.S. residents are natives of Cuba or claim Cuban ancestry.

This massive and sustained flow—spawned not only by political and economic conditions in Cuba, but also by U.S. policies that have served as a magnet for this migration—has drawn substantial attention from scholars, journalists, and policymakers, particularly in the context of longstanding Cold War tensions between the two neighbors. As those tensions eased and the long-time adversaries moved to normalize relations late in the Obama administration, migration flows picked up amid concerns that the United States would revoke preferential treatment for Cuban migrants. With the Trump administration taking steps to reverse some of its predecessor's Cuba policies, the effects on future migration flows remain to be seen.

This article examines the history of Cuban emigration—primarily to the United States—which has grown more diverse over time, particularly since the revolution. It also explores the Cold War context that has shaped relations and migration policy between the two countries for decades, as well as current debates and questions surrounding Cuban migration as a result of the normalization of relations.

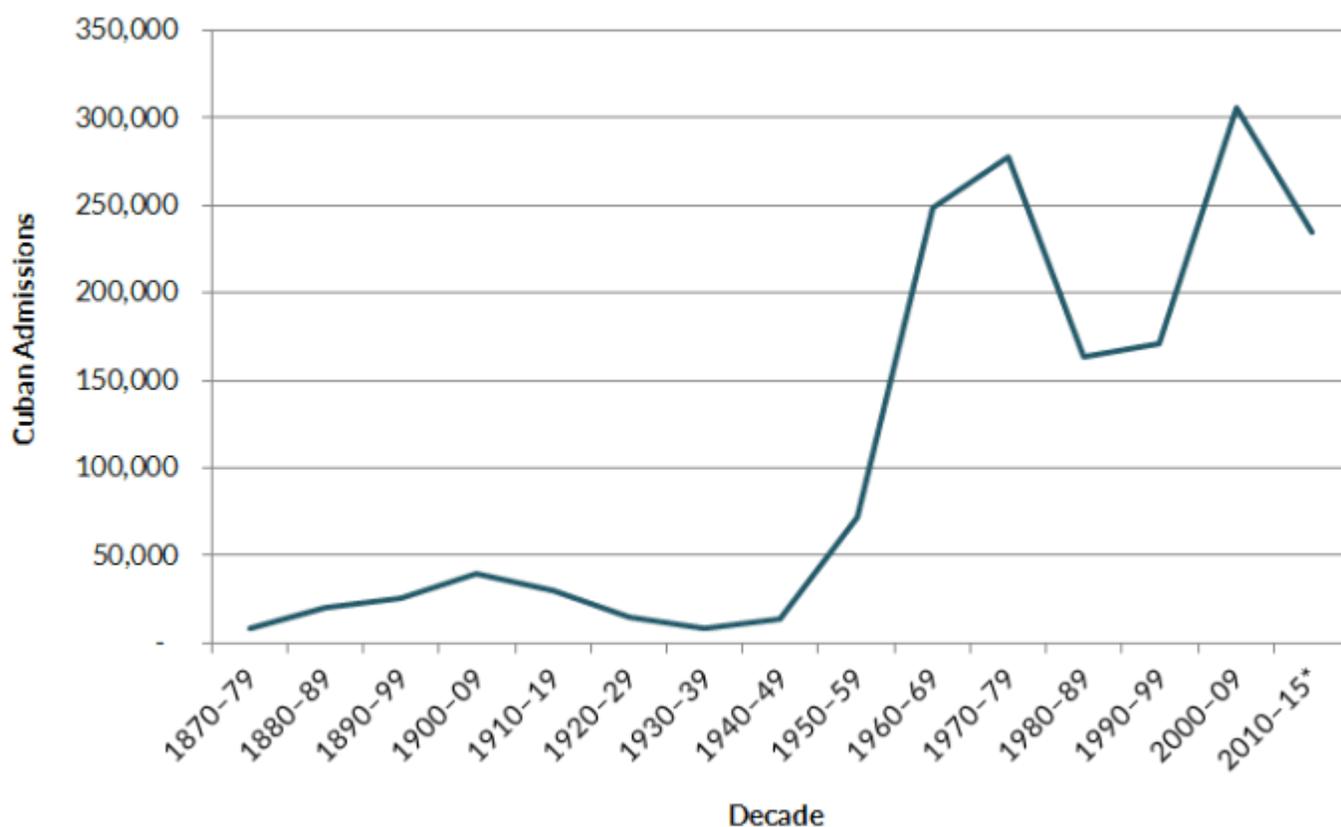
## **Background: Prerevolutionary Flows**

Until 1959, Cuba was primarily a country of immigration. During the Spanish colonial period (1492–1898), African slaves and Spanish settlers largely replaced the island’s indigenous population. More than 600,000 African slaves were brought to Cuba during the 19<sup>th</sup> century. Some 150,000 Chinese contract workers were also imported between 1847 and 1874. Spanish immigration increased substantially from the late 19<sup>th</sup> century to the early 20<sup>th</sup> century, with approximately 785,000 Spaniards arriving between 1902 (when Cuba became independent) and 1933. At the same time, approximately 311,000 immigrants came from other Caribbean countries, especially Haiti and Jamaica.

Beginning in the early 19<sup>th</sup> century, a steady stream of Cubans moved to the United States. By the 1820s hundreds of Cuban professionals, merchants, and landowners had resettled in New York City, Philadelphia, and New Orleans. Large-scale emigration from Cuba began in earnest in the latter part of the 19<sup>th</sup> century as Cubans struggled to end Spain’s colonial domination. The Ten Years’ War (1868–78) represented the first uprising for independence from Spain, followed by the Little War (1879–80) and the Cuban War of Independence (1895–98), which escalated into the Spanish-American War.

Between 1868 and 1898, the United States admitted approximately 55,700 Cuban immigrants, the largest group from the Caribbean region (see Figure 1). Most were either political refugees or skilled workers in cigar manufacturing. By the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, Cubans had established sizable communities in Key West and Tampa, Florida; New York City; and New Orleans, having fled political and economic turmoil on the island.

Figure 1. Cuban Admissions to the United States by Decade, 1870–2015



\* Data for current decade are partial and reflect the most recent information available.

*Sources:* For 1893–1932, U.S. Commissioner General of Immigration, *Annual Report* (Washington, DC: U.S. Commissioner General of Immigration, various years); for 1932–2015, U.S. Department of Homeland Security (DHS), *Yearbook of Immigration Statistics* (Washington, DC: DHS Office of Immigration Statistics, various years), **available online**.

Cubans continued to move to the United States during Cuba’s republican period (1902–58). During the first three decades of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, several crises displaced more Cubans to the United States, including disruptions in the international sugar and tobacco markets and violent upheavals in the fragile Cuban republic. Tens of thousands of Cubans moved abroad during the 1940s and 1950s, seeking better economic opportunities and civil liberties. On the eve of the Cuban Revolution on January 1, 1959, about 60,600 Cubans lived in the United States, primarily in New York. Smaller émigré communities were found in Spain, Mexico, and Venezuela. Meanwhile, immigration to Cuba had declined sharply since the late 1920s.

### **An Evolving Postrevolution Exodus**

Large-scale refugee flows began with the dismantling of the Batista regime (1952–58). Most of the exiles moved to the mainland United States, but some relocated to Spain, Puerto Rico, Mexico, and Venezuela. Fidel Castro’s ascent to power in 1959 launched the first socialist revolution in the Americas and drove a large wave of exiles northward across the Straits of Florida. Military officers, government officials, large landowners, and businesspersons associated with the deposed Batista regime were the first to leave. As the revolution became more radical, the exodus expanded to disillusioned members of the middle class, such as professionals and managers.

Since 1959, the Cuban exodus can be divided into five main stages: the “Historical Exiles” (1959–62); the Freedom Flights (1965–73); the Mariel boatlift (1980); the *balseo* (rafter) crisis (1994); and the post-Soviet exodus (1995–2017; see Table 1). This periodization highlights shifting socioeconomic characteristics of migrants, the impact of various junctures in U.S.-Cuba relations, and the unfolding of the Cuban Revolution itself.

**Table 1. Main Postrevolution Periods of Cuban Migration to the United States**

Phase	Dates	Landmark Events	Number of Emigrants
Historical exile	January 1959- October 1962	The success of the revolution onward through the missile crisis	248,100
Freedom flights	December 1965- April 1973	The closing of the port of Camarioca to the end of the airbridge flights	260,600
Mariel exodus	April-September 1980	The opening of the Mariel harbor and closing several months later	124,800
<i>Balsero</i> crisis	August- September 1994	The lifting of Cuban restrictions on migration and eventual U.S.- Cuban migration agreements	30,900
Post-Soviet migration	May 1995-January 2017	Establishment of the “wet-foot, dry-foot” policy, and its rewriting by the Obama administration	649,700 (up to 2015)

Source: Jorge Duany, “Cuban Communities in the United States: Migration Waves, Settlement Patterns and Socioeconomic Diversity,” *Pouvoirs dans la Caraïbe* 11 (1999): 69–103, [available online](#); María Cristina García, *Havana USA: Cuban Exiles and Cuban Americans in South Florida, 1959–1994* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1996); DHS, *Yearbook of Immigration Statistics* (Washington, DC: DHS Office of Immigration Statistics, 2015), [available online](#).

## The “Historical Exiles,” 1959–62

The first postrevolutionary migrant wave, from 1959 to 1962, has been dubbed the Golden Exile because most refugees came from the upper and middle strata of Cuban society. (Members of this cohort prefer to describe themselves as “historical exiles.”) The majority were urban, middle-aged, well-educated, light-skinned, and white-collar workers. Most were born in the largest cities, particularly Havana. Many fled for political or religious reasons, fearing persecution by the revolutionary government. During this period, between 1,600 and 1,700 Cubans arrived in the United States per week on commercial airlines, and the U.S. government admitted approximately 248,100 Cubans. One dramatic episode during this period was Operation Pedro Pan, which brought more than 14,000 unaccompanied children to the United States between December 1960 and October 1962.

On January 3, 1961, the United States broke diplomatic relations with Cuba. Until then, the U.S. embassy in Havana and consulate in Santiago had issued regular visas to those who wished to emigrate. After the rupture in relations, the United States extended visa waivers to Cubans for humanitarian reasons. On arriving in U.S. territory, they could apply for parole and obtain refugee status, claiming they were escaping communist oppression. Most of the refugees remained in Miami, their main port of entry.

The Cuban Missile Crisis in October 1962 interrupted commercial travel between the two countries. Clandestine migration rose correspondingly, mostly by inner tubes and small, makeshift vessels, across the

Florida Straits. Per U.S. sources, about 6,700 “boat people” (*balseros*) arrived in Florida between 1962 and 1965. In addition, during the same period, the United States admitted some 55,900 Cubans arriving from other countries, such as Mexico and Spain. On October 10, 1965, the Cuban government opened the port of Camarioca in northern Matanzas, allowing nearly 4,500 people to leave before closing it again on November 15. This was the first of three major episodes (Camarioca in 1965, Mariel in 1980, and the *balsero* crisis in 1994), in which the Cuban government allowed people to leave the island without U.S. authorization. Since the beginning of the revolution, Cuban authorities have often used emigration as an escape valve to export political dissidence and surplus labor.

### *The Freedom Flights, 1965-73*

The opening of Camarioca ushered in a second emigration wave. Diplomatic negotiations between Washington and Havana resulted in the creation of an airbridge between Varadero and Miami from December 1, 1965 to April 6, 1973. The so-called Freedom Flights became the largest and longest refugee resettlement initiative in U.S. history, with twice-daily flights funded by the U.S. government transporting between 3,000 and 4,000 refugees per month, for a total of about 260,600 persons.

By the end of the Freedom Flights, the exodus had become more representative of the island’s population, with the share of blue-collar and service workers increasing. Skilled and semiskilled workers, salespeople, and small farmers made up the bulk of the émigrés between 1965 and 1973. Shifts in the refugee flow mirrored the impact of revolutionary programs on wider segments of the Cuban population, such as small-scale vendors and artisans. As with their predecessors, the new arrivals settled primarily in Miami, Hialeah, and other cities in South Florida.

After the Freedom Flights ended, Cuban migration fell to a trickle. Nearly 38,000 Cubans resettled in the United States between 1973 and 1979, arriving primarily from other countries, including Jamaica and Venezuela. Ideological and economic reasons to emigrate became intertwined by the end of the 1970s, and Cubans increasingly resembled labor migrants from countries such as Mexico or the Dominican Republic, driven abroad by a desire to improve their living standards. The main difference was that the U.S. government categorized Cubans as refugees from communism (and with that designation offered them a fast track to legal permanent residence and immediate access to federal safety-net benefits—a preferential treatment unlike that afforded to any other immigrant or refugee group) and most of the others as economic migrants.

### **The Mariel Exodus of 1980**

Between April 20 and September 26, 1980, the third wave of Cuban migration took place, from Mariel harbor to Key West, Florida. In 1979, more than 100,000 exiles returned to visit Cuba, familiarizing family members with economic opportunities abroad. Subsequently, in April 1980, more than 10,800 Cubans who wanted to migrate swarmed the Peruvian embassy in Havana. In a reprise of Camarioca, the Cuban government opened the port of Mariel for those who could be picked up by relatives living abroad. When the exiles arrived

#### **Box 1. Effects of the Mariel Boatlift on Cuban America**

The Mariel exodus transformed and diversified Miami’s Cuban community, as more blue-collar and service workers entered the local labor market. Mariel refugees faced longer bouts of unemployment, earned lower wages, and relied more on welfare compared to earlier migrants. Furthermore, the Mariel exodus contributed to rising unemployment and crime rates in Miami. Consequently, the *Marielitos* tarnished the reputation of the entire Cuban

in Mariel to pick up family members, Cuban officials forced them to also take unrelated persons, some of whom had been inmates in prisons or psychiatric hospitals, while others had been identified as prostitutes or homosexuals.

The Mariel boatlift brought nearly 124,800 Cubans to Key West. The *Marielitos* (as they were pejoratively labeled) were primarily young, single, working-class men with little education. Approximately 20 percent were Black or mulatto, compared to just 7 percent of the Cubans who arrived between 1960 and 1964. Contrary to media reports, less than 2 percent of the *Marielitos* were common criminals. However, 25 percent had been imprisoned in Cuba for various reasons, including violating the Cuban law of *peligrosidad*, or “dangerous behavior,” which included public displays of homosexuality. In Havana, the government branded the refugees as *escoria* (scum) because it considered them antisocial and counterrevolutionary elements. The Mariel exodus deepened the rifts between “old” and “new” immigrants in Miami, where most of the latter group settled. The year of departure from Cuba became a symbol of social status within the tight-knit Cuban exile community, with those who left after 1980 receiving public scorn.

American community. A 1981 Gallup poll showed that Americans perceived Cubans to be the second least desirable group to have as neighbors, after religious cult members.

In the United States, Mariel Cubans were classified as “entrants (status pending),” an ambivalent legal category that did not provide the benefits accorded to those granted political asylum. To qualify as refugees, applicants had to prove a well-founded fear of persecution for political or religious reasons in their home country. As a result, only some Cubans, such as former political prisoners, were now eligible for refugee status. Most Mariel-era immigrants were labor migrants, reflecting the socioeconomic composition of the Cuban population more accurately than ever before.

### **The Balseiro Crisis of 1994**

The fourth migrant wave began during the “Special Period in Peacetime,” the official euphemism for Cuba’s prolonged economic crisis after the fall of the Berlin Wall in 1989 and the collapse of the Soviet Union in 1991 (and subsequent drop in financial support for Cuba). During the first half of the 1990s, Cuba experienced a profound economic recession, resulting in plunging living standards, rising social tensions, and unmet demands for political reform. Migratory pressures accumulated rapidly, encompassing broad sectors of the population. The Cuban government once again turned to emigration to release some of these pressures, allowing anyone who could and wanted to leave the island to do so on August 12, 1994.

The exodus, which had slowed down during the 1980s, accelerated during the 1990s. Between 1990 and 1994, some 61,200 Cubans were admitted to the United States. In addition, about 13,600 Cubans on rafts arrived between January 1990 and July 1994. The number reached a new post-Mariel record in August 1994; by the end of that month, the U.S. Coast Guard had rescued 21,300 Cubans near the Florida coast. The so-called *balseiro* crisis consisted of 30,900 Cuban rafters interdicted at sea during the one-month period beginning on August 13, 1994.

Since the early 1960s, the U.S. government had welcomed Cubans as refugees fleeing the Castro regime. However, the Clinton administration perceived the *balseiro* crisis as a national security threat that could quickly become “another Mariel”—a prolonged, massive, and chaotic boatlift. Seeking to avoid this, on August 19, 1994, President Bill Clinton ordered the U.S. Coast Guard to transfer the rafters to U.S. military bases in Guantánamo and Panama. The Cuban government, faced with riots (the so-called *maleconazo*) in Central Havana, also sought to end the crisis. Both governments therefore moved swiftly to address the flows through several bilateral measures, announced on September 9, 1994. On May 2, 1995, the United States and Cuba renewed their 1984

agreement to allow the migration of 20,000 Cubans per year, including a special lottery of 5,000 new visa applications, temporarily solving the *balseero* crisis.

A 1995 survey of *balseeros* detained at the U.S. naval base in Guantánamo found that they were more male, urban, light-skinned, educated, and younger than the overall Cuban population. As in the past, the majority came from Havana. In another survey of the rafters conducted between 1991 and 1994, the largest percentage was skilled workers, although many were professionals and managers.

### *The Post-Soviet Exodus, 1995-2017*

In addition to ending the *balseero* crisis, the Clinton administration implemented major policy shifts, such as intercepting, detaining, and repatriating the Cuban rafters under the “wet foot, dry foot” policy. Established in the second round of U.S.-Cuba migration accords in 1995, the policy made Cubans on boats and rafts without visas subject to return upon interception, for the first time since 1959. By contrast, those reaching U.S. soil were immediately admitted. This transformation in the official treatment of Cuban migrants signaled an attempt—not entirely successful—to develop a coherent immigration and refugee policy in the post-Cold War period. It was also a response to longstanding criticism of U.S. preference for Cubans over Haitian boat people.

The period since 1995, which might be labeled the Post-Soviet Exodus, has been the longest and largest wave of Cuban migration, with nearly 650,000 admitted to the United States between 1995 and 2015. During this period, Cuban migrants came primarily from the lower and middle rungs of the labor force, especially unskilled, semiskilled, and service workers. They traveled to the United States by land, air, and sea, both with and without immigrant visas.

Toward the end of the Obama administration, as relations between the two countries normalized, the exodus reached its highest point since the Mariel boatlift, as Cubans worried that the favorable U.S. policy toward them would be changed. Thousands set off on land journeys through South and Central America to reach the United States; the number crossing the U.S.-Mexico border after a long, often treacherous journey rose from about 31,000 in 2015 to roughly 38,500 in 2016. The flows touched off a crisis in several Central and South American countries unaccustomed to handling such large numbers of transiting migrants, with thousands stranded in Costa Rica for weeks in 2015 after Nicaragua closed its border. In the waning days of the Obama administration, the White House announced the end to the “wet-foot, dry-foot” policy, meaning that Cubans presenting themselves at U.S. land ports of entry without authorization to enter are now treated the same as migrants from other countries, and are subject to removal if they do not qualify for humanitarian relief.

During this period, the number of Cuban rafters interdicted by the U.S. Coast Guard jumped from 4,500 in 2015 to 7,400 in 2016. However, in April 2017, several months after the elimination of “wet-foot, dry-foot,” the U.S. Coast Guard did not detain a single Cuban rafter at sea. A long cycle of irregular Cuban migration had apparently concluded—at least for now.

### **Normalization of Relations and Impacts on Migration**

On December 17, 2014, President Barack Obama announced major shifts in U.S. policy toward Cuba, including taking steps toward re-establishing diplomatic relations, reviewing Cuba’s designation as a state sponsor of

terrorism, and facilitating certain types of trade and travel by U.S. citizens to the island. The Obama administration subsequently removed Cuba from the State Department's terrorism list, and the United States and Cuba formally restored diplomatic relations and reopened embassies in their respective capitals in July 2015. The following year, President Obama became the first sitting U.S. president to visit Cuba in 88 years. This diplomatic milestone was heralded by many as portending a new era in U.S.-Cuba relations.

However, the practical outcomes of the U.S.-Cuba rapprochement have been slow, modest, and largely unilateral. The highlight of 2016 was the resumption of commercial flights, cruise ship dockings, and direct postal service between Cuba and the United States. High-ranking representatives of both governments met several times to discuss matters of common interest, from migration and human trafficking to confiscated properties and human rights. The Obama administration made extensive amendments to existing sanctions against Cuba, easing trade, communication, travel, and remittances and other financial transactions with the island.

The Cuban government, in turn, has insisted on four major conditions for normalizing relations with the United States: lifting the U.S. embargo, returning the U.S. naval base in Guantánamo, repealing the Cuban Adjustment Act (discussed in greater detail below), and discontinuing U.S. broadcasting activities to Cuba via the U.S. government-run Radio and TV Martí. At this writing, none of these conditions had been met and serious impediments remain to the full normalization of relations.

In June 2017, the Trump administration, fulfilling a campaign promise to anti-Castro Cubans in Miami, announced it was partially rolling back Obama-era policy shifts on Cuba. Although President Donald Trump claimed to be canceling the rapprochement, the six-page directive he signed left in place many of the measures taken by Obama, while ordering new restrictions on travel and trade. Embassies in both countries will remain open, travel and remittance-sending by Cuban Americans will continue without restrictions, and a prohibition on financial transactions with military-controlled entities will include an exception for cruises and flights between the countries.

### *End of "Wet-Foot, Dry-Foot"*

One constant point of contention during the two years of intense negotiations between the governments was U.S. policy toward Cuban migration. The White House and the State Department had reiterated that this issue was not subject to bilateral discussion. Then, on January 13, 2017, Obama ended "wet-foot, dry-foot." The Obama administration also announced the termination of the Cuban Medical Professional Parole Program, which allowed Cuban doctors, nurses, and other health workers while on assignments abroad to enter the United States. The Trump administration has thus far left these policy shifts in place and will likely not revoke them, as they fit within Trump's rhetoric about controlling the border and keeping unauthorized immigrants from entering the United States.

### *The Cuban Adjustment Act*

In 1966 the U.S. Congress passed the Cuban Adjustment Act, which allows Cuban citizens admitted or paroled into the United States to qualify for permanent residence one year and one day after entry—the only immigrant group with this special accelerated status. The measure was designed to regularize the legal situation of

approximately 165,000 Cuban refugees living in the United States without lawful permanent residence. Henceforth, most Cubans arriving in the United States would be authorized to stay. They would also immediately become eligible for various kinds of federal government assistance, such as health and educational benefits, whereas other legal immigrants must have five years of U.S. residency before gaining access.

The Cuban Adjustment Act has come under increasing scrutiny as anachronistic, unfair, and even racist. Critics have argued that the full normalization of U.S.-Cuba relations—especially after the opening of the Cuban economy to U.S. trade, investment, and tourism—will require revising and perhaps eliminating the law. However, this is not a priority for the Trump administration or the current Congress, and as a result the prospects for changes to the law or its repeal remain unclear.

### **The End of a Mass Exodus?**

Over the past six decades, the Cuban exodus has unfolded in several distinct stages, which have grown increasingly more diverse. Emigration began with the disaffected sectors of the Cuban Revolution, initially concentrated in the most privileged groups of prerevolutionary society (especially urban, upper- and middle-class whites). But the deterioration in U.S.-Cuban relations since 1959, together with faltering economic and political conditions on the island, produced a much more heterogeneous Cuban American population. Successive migrant waves drew deeper from the middle and lower strata of Cuban society over time, and more recent émigrés represent a wide cross-section of Cuban society. In addition, economic motivations became increasingly intertwined with political ones during the later migrant waves.

The Cuban exodus has followed the ebbs and flows of the Cuban Revolution and the country's persistent conflicts with the United States. With the thawing of U.S.-Cuba relations since 2014, however, U.S. policy toward Cuban migration has come full circle. Cubans were transformed from “welcome exiles” in the 1960s to “illegal migrants” in the 1990s if arriving by sea (though those who arrived by land were still welcomed), as Félix Masud-Piloto's classic work notes. Then, in January 2017, the Obama administration terminated the “wet-foot, dry-foot” policy, which in the short run has practically halted migration of Cubans without prior authorization to the United States.

The long-term impact of this policy shift remains unclear. Current trends suggest that Cuban immigration will be reduced to about 20,000 persons per year. Larger numbers of Cuban migrants may increasingly turn to other destinations in Latin America or Europe. However, it remains to be seen what actions the Trump administration might take that could affect Cuban migration one way or another. Should the current pattern continue, Cubans will no longer be a sizable component of international migration to the United States, and may lose their symbolic value in the geopolitics of international relations.

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