

A Big Battle for a Little Boy

A six-year-old who escaped Cuba to the U.S. is fought over by relatives, and politicians, in both countries

By JOSHUA COOPER RAMO

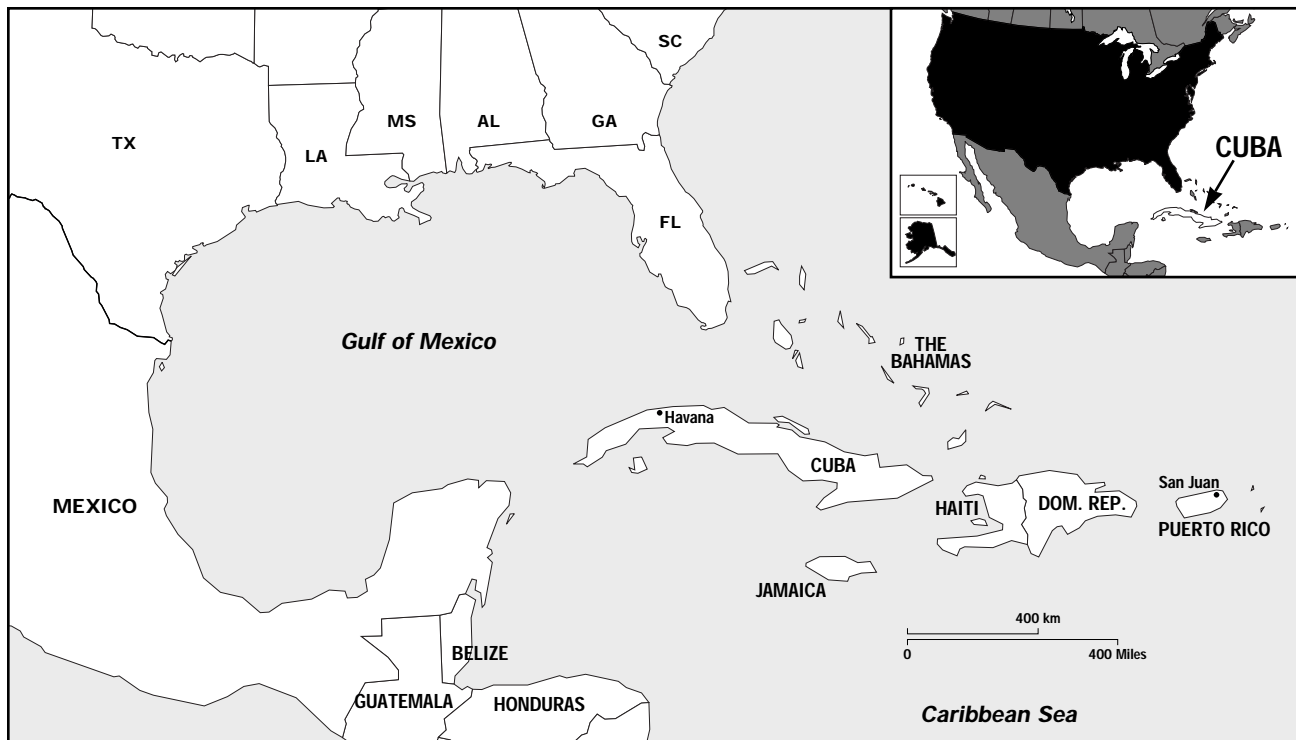
ELIÁN GONZÁLEZ WAS DAZED WHEN FISHERMEN picked him up on Thanksgiving Day, lashed atop an inner tube in the Atlantic off Fort Lauderdale, Fla. The boy and his mother Elizabet had fled their Cuban town of Cardenas three days before, along with 12 companions, in a small aluminum motorboat, which sank in heavy seas, drowning Elizabet and 10 of the others. And the sharks—TV news crews, Cuban-American activists, Fidel Castro, Jesse Helms and other U.S. politicians—were just beginning to circle.

What must this small boy, a child who loves nothing more than making and flying kites in the warm Cuban *brisa*, have thought during his hours on the water? And later, as he paraded before the world on television—at Disney World, in school, playing “rescue pilot” with his cousins in the back-

yard of their Miami home where he is being cared for—it seemed possible to read everything, anything, in his deep eyes: fear, joy, courage.

Although the U.S. Immigration and Naturalization Service ruled last week that Elián’s father Juan Miguel González has the right to call him back to Cuba, the fight over the boy’s future isn’t done yet. Representative Dan Burton, an Indiana Republican, has issued a congressional subpoena designed to freeze Elián’s repatriation, at least until his American relatives can appeal it in court.

It is hard to think rationally about Elián when your throat is swelled and your eyes wet. It’s an instinct that what Elián needs most right now is to fill his big eyes with a vision of his father, a 31-year-old hotel security guard and Communist Party member. Juan Miguel hasn’t cut his hair since Elián left, because it was their habit to make the trip to the barber together. It’s a trip they’ll have to make in the future on foot, since



Juan Miguel sold his 1956 Nash Rambler to help pay for the calls he makes regularly to his son in Miami.

Sources close to the González family in Cuba have told TIME that to help Elián, a team of Cuban government psychologists counseled Juan Miguel on what to say to him about their separation. *Just tell him he's on vacation. That all this will end soon.* But isn't it time to bring this vacation, which began for Elián in the early-morning hours of Nov. 21, to an end? Isn't it time to help him understand the awful truth about what happened to his mother? The boy seems so completely a product of two loving parents—who suffered seven miscarriages before he was born and chose as his name an elision of theirs, Elizabet and Juan—that the thing we reflexively want to do is restore to him what is left of his family.

But there is another instinct as well, felt perhaps a little by most Americans, and passionately by Miami's Cuban exiles: to keep Elián in America and surround him with all the affection (and toys and education and opportunities) that his mother hoped to find for him here. "All we hear about is the father, the father, and no one's talking about what Elián's mother wanted for him," says his cousin Marisleysis González, 21, of Miami. "Here he'll have opportunities, a career, freedoms."

Elián's case has also been influenced by less noble emotions: desire for political gain, greed, hunger for fame. For Miami's Cuban exiles, Elián has become a poster boy—literally, his giant image now hangs over I-95—for everything that's right about America and wrong with Cuba. In a TIME/CNN poll taken last week, 56% of Americans polled agreed with the INS decision to return the boy to Cuba to live with his father, rather than have him live with other relatives in the U.S. But a Miami poll found that 90% of local Cuban Americans felt Elián should remain in the U.S.

In Miami's Little Havana, it is a given that Elián's mother died for her son, who, floating alone and at a time near Christmas, was surely placed in America by God's own hand. It's not just resentment of Castro that girds Miami's protests,



but also the image of a mother giving her life—and the certainty that such a sacrifice can't be in vain.

Part of the Clinton Administration's rush to get Elián out of this logistical purgatory—and out of the country—was that he was already being embraced by conservative politicians. New York City mayor Rudy Giuliani considered having Elián drop the ball in Times Square on New Year's Eve. And presidential candidates, eyeing the Florida vote, rushed to form opinions. McCain and Bush (who kept mispronouncing the boy's name as "Alien" in last week's debate) suggested he should remain in the U.S. Gore and Bradley opted for a more opaque endorsement of whatever the INS decided. Senate Foreign Relations chairman Jesse Helms announced plans to make Elián a U.S. citizen when Congress reconvenes Jan. 24—a move that could stall repatriation procedures.

Elián's case, while unusually heart wrenching, has much in common with other recent waterborne escapes from Cuba. In 1999 the U.S. Coast Guard picked up more than 1,300 rafters, more than double the 1998 number. As many as 60 others are believed to have drowned. Driving the exodus are Cuba's poverty and political repression, generous U.S. immigration rules for Cubans and the unprecedented rise of paid refugee smugglers. ■

Questions

1. When and why did Elián González leave Cuba?
2. What are the arguments for and against returning Elián to Cuba? What stance on this issue is expressed in the cartoon above?