

Mini Simulation

Cuban Immigration in 1980

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Overview

Cuban President Fidel Castro has opened the port of Mariel for emigration from communist-led Cuba, causing a mass exodus that is expected to bring hundreds of thousands of Cubans to the United States. How should the United States respond to the mounting number of Cuban [migrants](#) arriving at U.S. shores?

Students will understand that the United States struggled to manage the influx of Cubans in 1980, revealing the limits of the U.S. [asylum](#) system.

Students will understand that [Cold War](#) interests influenced U.S. immigration policies toward Cubans.

The Situation

During and after World War II, the United States embarked on a new era of humanitarian leadership by formally welcoming hundreds of thousands of European [migrants](#) as [refugees](#). The United States designed a system to handle people applying for protective status in advance of traveling to the United States. Under U.S. law such people are known as refugees. However, this system was less equipped to absorb a sudden influx of people, known as [asylum](#) seekers, who do not apply for status until arriving at the border.

During the [Cold War](#), U.S. refugee and asylum admissions were largely influenced by the ongoing conflict. After Fidel Castro established communist rule in Cuba in 1959, the threat of containing [communism](#) in the Western Hemisphere became a foremost policy objective. The United States was desperate to minimize the threat of a new Soviet ally only 90 miles away from U.S. shores. After cutting diplomatic ties with Cuba in 1961, it sought to protect Cubans who migrated to the United States as refugees or [asylum seekers](#). These migrants were eager to flee Cuba following decades of political repression and human rights abuses. When Castro briefly opened up Cuba for emigration in 1965, thousands of boats made unauthorized trips to Florida. The United States granted Cuban migrants protection but overwhelmed the U.S. asylum system in the process. As a result, the United States established a separate refugee program for Cubans. Between 1965 and 1973, the U.S. government accepted approximately three hundred thousand Cuban refugees. Upon arrival, Cuban migrants were granted protection and were offered a path to legal residence. The protection of Cuban migrants provided a stark contrast to the treatment of thousands of Haitians arriving in Florida by boat. Haitian migrants similarly fled repression and human rights abuses in noncommunist Haiti in the 1970s but were denied asylum. Unlike Cuban migrants, Haitian asylum seekers were detained upon arrival, and often deported.

Preferential treatment toward Cuban migrants instigated a debate about U.S. immigration policy leading up to 1980. At the time, many Americans were struggling to overcome growing [inflation](#) and the economic fallout of the 1979 oil crisis. A poor economic backdrop helped sow resentment amongst many Americans. As a result, many opposed the protection of Cuban migrants out of fear that a large influx of migrants would displace American workers. Specifically, some policymakers argued that the millions of dollars spent on the Cuban refugee program placed an undue burden on the U.S. economy. Policymakers also feared that favorable treatment of Cuban asylum seekers would encourage more migrants to come; a policy that would cause further strain on the U.S. immigration system. However, critics countered that inclusive immigration policies provided a much-needed boost to the economy by bolstering the labor force. Furthermore, as Cold War tensions persisted, many argued that

protections for Cubans amplified U.S. ideological opposition to communism. Although some policymakers believed that welcoming Cuban migrants enhanced U.S. humanitarian leadership, others cautioned that U.S. favoritism toward Cubans could harm the United States' reputation abroad: discriminatory immigration policies toward migrants from noncommunist countries could ultimately damage U.S. credibility. Meanwhile, a worsening economic situation in Cuba—exacerbated by a continued U.S. [embargo](#)—left many Cubans eager for an opportunity to immigrate to the United States.

Decision Point

After a coordinated effort by Cubans desperate to flee communist-led Cuba, President Fidel Castro has opened emigration from the port of Mariel. After years of closed emigration policy, it is unclear how long Havana will provide its citizens with an opportunity to leave. The announcement has caused a mass exodus from the island. This policy decision is expected to bring as many as 125,000 Cubans to U.S. shores over the coming months. However, the United States has yet to develop a policy to address the large number of Cubans arriving in such a short period of time. As a result, this increase in migration is a threat to an already weak [asylum](#) system. President Jimmy Carter has convened the National Security Council to decide if and how the United States should provide protection to these Cuban [migrants](#). At this time, the United States will not negotiate with Cuba to manage the migration influx. Moreover, the United States will continue to diplomatically isolate Cuba in response to its communist leadership. NSC members should consider whether the United States should pursue a more inclusive or restrictive policy to unilaterally address the influx of arrivals. In making this decision, the NSC must take into account the effects on public opinion, U.S. foreign policy agenda, the asylum system, and the current economic [recession](#).

NSC members should consider the following policy options:

- *Welcome Cuban migrants* by granting blanket permission to all arriving migrants. The NSC could also choose to allocate a sizable investment of funds and resources to enhance asylum processing. This option could provide immediate relief for the asylum system. Blanket permission would also enhance U.S. humanitarian leadership and U.S. ideological opposition to [communism](#). However, this policy decision would also require more funding and encourage even more Cuban migration. Not only would blanket permission be unpopular, but it would also expose the United States to criticism over preferential treatment toward Cubans.
- *Welcome a limited number of Cuban migrants* by setting a cap on arrivals. The United States could reduce migration by extending protections to select groups of Cubans, such as political prisoners or Cubans with family ties to U.S. residents. This option could limit economic strain on the United States; however, it could still overwhelm the current asylum system and could leave vulnerable Cubans unprotected.
- *Discourage emigration from Cuba* by announcing that Cubans do not qualify for any protected status. The NSC could also decide to deploy the U.S. Coast Guard to [blockade](#) unauthorized Cuban migrants. This option risks running afoul of [international law](#) and stands in opposition to the United States' history of protections for Cuban [refugees](#). However, this policy decision could appease public opinion, and require less sustained funding than other options.

Photo: A boat carrying Cuban refugees arrives in Key West in April 1980.

Source: Tim Chapman/Getty Images

[For Migrants, Labels Matter](#) CFR Education

[“New Cuban exodus due here” \(April 29, 1980\)](#) The Miami News

[“In Search of Freedom: Cuban Exiles and the U.S. Cuban Refugee Program” Digital...](#) University of Miami Library