

'We would do well to act as if Castro weren't there'

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Wrong battle, wrong time, wrong reasons — that was the Elián affair. Water under the bridge, true, but now we're also drawing the wrong conclusion — that his return is Castro's triumph. For more than seven months, Havana shamelessly milked the Elián González situation, mobilizing millions of Cubans — many, no doubt, outraged at a father being denied his child for political reasons — to march, wave flags and shout slogans.

Now Havana has its trophy. But the fact that the Cuban government just can't seem to put it on the shelf tells us as much about its weaknesses as its strengths. Recently it announced more of the same: an ongoing campaign of street demonstrations, media blitzes and workplace discussions against the Cuban Adjustment Act and the U.S. embargo. Round-the-clock revolution!

If in the 1960s, thousands of Cubans genuinely marched, waved and shouted their support for the government. But those days are long gone. All that's left are simulations. Useful, perhaps, to project a mirage but not at all as a barometer of the popular will. In the 1990s, Castro went to extraordinary lengths to avoid the fate of his erstwhile allies. He kept a tight noose on politics and carried out only minimal economic reforms. The gamble paid off. Havana resisted the undertow of economic collapse and popular disillusionment.

Success, however, has borne a bad

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seed: the arrogance of having defied the odds. Elián, although initially a windfall for the Cuban regime, may yet prove a whirlwind. Castro is who he is — a dictator who cannot fathom giving up power. (Some dictators can, e.g., Augusto Pinochet.) Castro likely will remain at the helm until his passing or the passing of his mind.

The way there is fraught with dangers. The longer he survives, the more likely his arrogance will lead him astray. All the more so when his harangues fall on deaf and deaf ears that he, nevertheless, insists be attentive. Transforming the unfeigned sentiments many Cubans had about Elián into unremitting outrage against U.S. immigration policy and the embargo is a tall order.

Cuba is not like Eastern Europe where Communist parties had ceased to care about ideology well before their demise, nor like China where the party strangleholds politics but citizens can pursue their economic well-being. Elián could open a new stage in the end game — for that's what it is, albeit overdrawn.

A DEAD END

The regime bellows on about U.S. imperialism while the citizenry longs for breakfast, lunch, dinner and the space to lead normal lives in freedom. Therein lies the dead end — eventually. Blaring media, endless discussions and stifling marches — not a perestroika or a gradual political opening — may prove to be the regime's Achilles' heel.

Before the leaders from Latin America, Spain and Portugal gathered for a summit in Havana last November, Castro went on an oratorical mar-

athon denouncing the United States, the internal opposition, the Catholic church, Cuban exiles and anyone who didn't see eye to eye with him.

The summit itself was an unprecedented event in that foreign dignitaries met with the regime's opponents and called for democracy in Cuba. It was the most difficult diplomatic situation for Castro in a decade, and it wasn't the work of U.S. imperialism. Moreover, the dissidents in Cuba emerged as the protagonists of the opposition movement, and that's the way it should be. Then, on Thanksgiving day, a little boy was rescued from the sea, and the world's attention shifted.

CEDE THE PAST

In Elián's aftermath, the opposition in exile needs to rethink its ways and not just — as is happening, hopefully — with regard to our lives as members of the greater Miami community and citizens of the United States, but also toward the future of Cuba. Before 1989, Adam Michnik urged Poles to live as if they were free; we would do well to act as if Castro were not there. He's won the past but can't win the future.

We're too Castro-centered. We need to build on our strengths — our remittances, our family visits, our dialogue with civil society — and avoid shouting matches that we are bound to lose. The choice is ours: Either we grope along the trodden paths or illuminate new ones that expose the regime's weaknesses. Let's put on our high beams and look beyond present obscurities toward the democratic Cuba that lies ahead!

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