

## Pop-Up Case: Cuban Immigration in 1980

*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?*

Use the following historical case to spark discussion and help students think through what they would do if they were decision-makers. See the back of the page for some inspiration for how to structure your conversation.

### 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. Although the United States designed a system to handle people applying for protective status in advance of traveling to the United States, it was less equipped to absorb a sudden influx of people seeking protection upon arrival at U.S. borders, known as asylum seekers rather than refugees under U.S. law.

U.S. refugee and asylum admissions were largely influenced by Cold War interests in the second half of the twentieth century. After Cuba became the first communist-led country in the Western Hemisphere in 1959, the United States focused on how 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—many of whom experienced political repression and human rights abuses—who migrated to the United States as refugees or asylum seekers. When Castro briefly opened up Cuba for emigration in 1965, thousands of boats made unauthorized trips to Florida where many Cuban migrants received protections but overwhelmed the U.S. asylum system. As a result, the United States established a refugee program for Cubans, flying approximately three hundred thousand Cuban refugees between 1965 to 1973 to the United States where they 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, who fled repression and human rights abuses in noncommunist Haiti in the 1970s but were denied asylum, detained, and deported.

Preferential treatment toward Cuban migrants instigated a debate about U.S. immigration policy leading up to 1980. To many Americans who were struggling with growing inflation and the 1979 oil crisis, the protection of Cuban migrants sowed resentment and fears that migrants would displace American workers. Some policymakers, citing the millions of dollars spent on the Cuban refugee program, argued that investing in protections for Cubans put a burden on the U.S. economy and encouraged even more migrants to come. 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 was discriminatory toward migrants from noncommunist countries seeking refuge and could 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.

### Additional Resources:

1. ["For Migrants, Labels Matter," World101](#)
2. ["New Cuban exodus due here," article in the \*Miami News\* \(April 29, 1980\).](#)
3. ["In Search of Freedom: Cuban Exiles and the U.S. Cuban Refugee Program," Digital Exhibit by the University of Miami.](#)



Tim Chapman/Miami Herald

### Decision Point: Set in April 1980

After a coordinated effort by Cubans desperate to flee communist-led Cuba, President Fidel Castro has opened emigration from the port of Mariel for an undetermined period of time after years of a closed emigration policy. The announcement has caused a mass exodus from the island that 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, and the increase in migration is threatening to expose a 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 and 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, taking into account its effect on public opinion, U.S. foreign policy agenda, the asylum system, and the current economic recession.

#### Cabinet members should consider the following policy options:

- *Welcome Cuban migrants* by granting blanket permission to all arriving Cubans and/or allocating a sizeable investment of funds and resources to enhance asylum processing. This option could provide immediate relief for the asylum system and enhance U.S. humanitarian leadership and U.S. ideological opposition to communism, but could require more funding, encourage even more Cuban migration, be unpopular, and open the United States to criticism over preferential treatment toward Cubans.
- *Welcome a limited number of Cuban migrants* by setting a cap on arrivals or extending protections to only 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 and/or by deploying 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, but it could appease public opinion and require less sustained funding than other options.

Like Model Diplomacy? Try a full case at [modeldiplomacy.cfr.org](http://modeldiplomacy.cfr.org).

## Pop-Up Case Guidelines

U.S. history pop-up cases from Model Diplomacy are short case studies examining foreign policy decision-making in U.S. history. Designed with a U.S. history survey course in mind, the cases do assume some pre-existing knowledge for context, but there is sufficient detail in the case to fuel a lively discussion.

For historical cases, a post-discussion debrief is crucial. After a simulation, it is important to give students a chance to step out of character and reflect on the conversation: what was difficult about the decision, what was troubling about its implications. It is also important to discuss what decision was actually made.

There are lots of ways to organize a discussion using a pop-up case. It is always helpful to think about your goals for the discussion and then to consider any time or participation constraints you could have. If you are teaching online and are looking for some tips, the introduction to [this page](#) from Model Diplomacy has some great links. If you cannot discuss synchronously, consider a short writing assignment or using an online discussion board (see some excellent tips [here](#) and [here](#)). If you are teaching face-to-face or over videoconference and are looking for some inspiration, here are a few ideas:

### Gauge reaction:

If you want to show what students are thinking before diving into the discussion, here are two easy ways to do it. In one, often called “four corners,” assign each policy option to a corner of the room, and then ask students to stand in the corner associated with the policy option they support. In the other, if you want your students to think along a spectrum instead (e.g., interventionist-isolationist, unilateral-multilateral, more urgent–less urgent), put the ends of your spectrum at either end of your blackboard and have students stand along the board to indicate where along the spectrum they fall. With both approaches, everyone will sit down again with a sense of where they stand regarding the case. Use this knowledge to shape discussion—eliciting less popular opinions, challenging more popular ones, encouraging like-minded students to further develop their ideas, or having students who disagree discuss in small groups.

### Think-Pair-Share:

This exercise is particularly useful for groups where some students are hesitant. Ask everyone to spend a few minutes quietly gathering their thoughts and articulating them in a notebook (“think”), then have them turn to the person sitting next to them to compare notes (“pair”), and then have students report out to the whole group (“share”), knowing that everyone will have had time to think through something to say.



Don Pollard

### Whiparound:

Ask students to briefly share their position one after the other without responding to each other. Typically, everyone speaks in the order they are sitting. This can be a way to see where everyone stands before launching into a discussion. If you expect a topic to be particularly contentious, you could have students listen to each other and then reflect in writing.

### Simple simulation:

If you would like to simulate a simplified version of a more realistic policy debate, you can appoint yourself (or a randomly chosen student) president. Ask students to debate the policy options (or come up with new ones) and try to reach consensus on a recommendation to the president. You could consider assigning students certain perspectives or opinions to encourage debate. For example, different students or groups could prioritize the military, economic, and diplomatic considerations of the case respectively, and use their assigned perspectives to inform their arguments.

*Note: In our experience, simulations are often most productive if students focus on the policy issues and do not try to simulate the personality of particular historical figures.*

**Like Model Diplomacy? Try a full case at [modeldiplomacy.cfr.org](https://modeldiplomacy.cfr.org).**