

[Statement by Dr. Fidel Castro Ruz, President of the Republic of Cuba, upon decorating Juan Miguel González with the Carlos Manuel de Céspedes Order. Karl Marx Theater, July 5, 2000 \[1\]](#)

Date:

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Dear comrades,

I met Juan Miguel last December 2, at 5:00 p.m. Coincidentally, that day we were commemorating the 43rd anniversary of the landing of the Granma.

Five days earlier, the Ministry of Foreign Affairs had received his letter from November 27 requesting that it undertake the necessary procedures before the U.S. authorities for the return of his son Elián, a survivor of the wreckage of a makeshift boat that had illegally left from Cuba. The following day, the boy's maternal grandmother made the same request in another letter. They did not waste a single minute to make their request, just as our ministry did not waste a minute in complying with it.

I was personally unable to attend to the problem until the aforementioned date. I had asked the boy's father to come to Havana. I was well aware that not once in the last 41 years had the U.S. Government complied with a legal claim of this nature. This case, like that of the fishermen and others, would have to be resolved through a moral battle, a battle of public opinion, with the people's participation.

But, on what grounds? Who was the father, and what kind of a father was he? How much did he care for his son? What was his relationship with the boy's paternal and maternal grandparents? Although I already knew that we were dealing with a humble young worker, serious and committed to his obligations, a revolutionary activist from a young age, it was crucial to know more about these and other aspects of his conduct and character traits.

With caution and respect, but also openly and frankly, I discussed these matters with him; I was also talking to a Party member.

I asked him a number of questions and despite his obvious suffering and sadness he answered them with persuasive arguments and irrefutable proof of his affectionate, faultless and constant relationship with his son.

At every moment, I could see in his face the features of a noble, sincere and serious man.

I told him that I was convinced that the boy would never be returned by way of legal procedures. This was a case in which the U.S. courts had absolutely no jurisdiction, and it was the duty of the U.S. immigration authorities to proceed with the immediate repatriation of his son. But, I was well aware of the arrogant, arbitrary, biased and conspiratorial behavior of the U.S. authorities with regard to any misdeeds and crimes committed against our people. The return of this boy could only be accomplished through an intense political battle of national and international public opinion. I alerted Juan Miguel to the fact that it would not be a matter of days or weeks but of months. Perhaps so as not to overly discourage him, I told him that it would never be less than three months. I also advised him that the country could only launch itself into such a battle on absolutely solid legal and ethical foundations.

After a three-hour conversation, I did not have the slightest doubt that Juan Miguel was an honest and decent young man who had become the victim of an atrocious injustice. He understood and accepted the arguments I put forward.

Almost a week had passed since the delivery of the note by the Cuban Ministry of Foreign Affairs informing the U.S. authorities of the father's request for the return of his son, and absolutely no response had been given about the future of the kidnapped boy. We only knew what the U.S. media published. A real frenzy of propaganda and euphoria was launched by the Cuban-American mob and the most reactionary American politicians based on a tragedy in which 11 Cubans lost their lives and a little boy who had not even turned six arrived on that country's shores. It was yet another product of 41 years of hostility and aggression against Cuba on the part of successive U.S. administrations!

It was useless to go on sending diplomatic notes to the authorities of a deaf government that did not even respond out of courtesy.

The following day, I spoke with our comrades in the leadership and without wasting a single minute I proceeded to contact the leaders of the Young Communist League and the Federation of University Students. The country's youths and students would be in the vanguard of this struggle with the full support of all revolutionary forces.

Forty-eight hours later, on a Sunday evening, the first demonstration was held outside the U.S. Interests Section, with the participation of a thousand youths from the Technical Brigades who had just concluded a national workshop. Actually, they brought forward by 24 hours the date foreseen for the beginning of public actions.

Thus the epic struggle to free Elián began exactly seven months ago today, July 5.

On Saturday, December 4, we publicly stated that a major battle of national and international public opinion would unleash if the boy were not returned within 72 hours. Some media interpreted those words as an ultimatum to the United States while they were only intended as an honest warning about what would inevitably happen.

It was only after the third day of popular protests, which were growing exponentially, that the first response was received. The day before, a White House spokesperson had said that the matter was in the hands of the Immigration and Naturalization Service, that there was no official position on the issue, and that the case could end up in the courts.

A great many notes were exchanged over the following weeks. These documents prove that our government repeatedly warned the U.S. administration about the consequences of its wrong and illegal decision to submit the case to the jurisdiction of its courts, which did not have the right to deal with it.

In fact, something which should have and could have been resolved in a matter of days unfolded toward an endless maze of procedures, hearings and trumped-up appeals, while the little Cuban boy endured months of psychological torture subjected to the most brutal exploitation imaginable for the sake of publicity and politics. For months his mental health and even his life were in jeopardy. Amazingly, he survived dangers as great as those he faced in the first shipwreck but these transpired in a filthy swamp of immorality, hysteria, repugnant politicking and petty interests on the part of the Cuban-American mob and its allies of the extreme right. It was not chance but rather the admirable struggle waged by our people that spared him from death or a horrible fate.

Today we are doing justice to the man who fulfilled his duties as a father and a patriot in such an exemplary way. A whole nation staked everything and was prepared to do whatever was necessary for his son. But in the final stage, the success or failure of our colossal efforts depended solely on him.

The best decision made by the Revolution was to fully trust Juan Miguel. The biggest mistake made by the mob and the empire was to believe that Juan Miguel could be bribed and coaxed into treason.

While there may have been differences between the U.S. administration and the Miami mob backed by the extreme right as to their respective positions before the courts leading to a dispute between the two parties, there is a grave moral sin of which neither is innocent: They both believed that Juan Miguel could be bought and even openly urged him to defect and stay in the United States. In this regard, neither of the two factions ever gave up the hope that Elián would remain in the United States with his father. Thus the mob's attorneys systematically used the tactic of further drawing out the process, while the presidential candidates from both parties, and even the president's wife, publicly called on Juan Miguel to defect.

Senior administration officials and even the Attorney General said that they were not fighting for Elián's return to Cuba but rather for the reunion of father and son. They dreamed of seeing the battle they had already lost resolved by such a coup. It was only after they had realized that Juan Miguel's integrity and determination were unshakable, and that all the money in the world would not be enough to sway him for even a second in his loyalty to his homeland, that they finally accepted the idea of his returning to Cuba with the boy.

On countless occasions, Juan Miguel was branded a coward and shamelessly accused of not caring for his son, simply because he had not gone to the United States where so many traps had been laid for him. Yet, at the exact hour and minute that he was to present himself in that hostile and dangerous milieu, he departed for the heart of the empire with his characteristic determination and courage, taking with him his wife and six-month-old son. It was then that the battle entered a decisive stage. With his noble demeanor, his determination, his direct, sincere and guileless manner of speaking and the irrefutable proof of his freedom, that is, the company of his wife and infant son, he took to complete the work begun months earlier by Elián's grandmothers, Mariela and Raquel. He won the full support of the vast majority of the American people who were much better informed of the truth after five months of intense battle by millions of men and women, youths and children in Cuba, and who consequently took his side.

It is only fair to say that this was partly achieved through the contribution of TV networks and major publications in the United States, which brought to the United States images and news about what was happening in Cuba.

At a critical moment during Juan Miguel's stay in the United States his determination to venture forth alone into the mob's lair in Miami, accompanied only by his wife Nersy and little Hianny, forced the INS to decide sending in the men and women who bravely and skillfully rescued the boy from the grip of the criminals holding him. He was taken to Washington, and then almost immediately sent with his family to exile in Wye Plantation. There, the long wait of the final stage began.

His devoted kindergarten teacher Agueda, with help from four of his first-grade classmates and a 10-year-old cousin, immediately resumed Elián's first-grade classes that had been interrupted five months earlier. When he has completed the school year within a week and half from now, it will be a day of honor and glory for Cuban education and our people's great deed will be consecrated for all times.

To save Elián's life, Juan Miguel was prepared to give up his own, and to risk the lives of his wife and other son. Yet, he was never willing to betray his Homeland to buy the return of the son he loved so deeply. His conduct has brought him glory and the eternal admiration of his people.

This is why we are decorating him with the order that bears the name of Carlos Manuel de Céspedes. When faced with the choice of saving his son but betraying his homeland, Céspedes heroically chose, without hesitation, the death of his son, and thus earned the honorable title of Father of the Homeland. (Applause)

I have experienced many moving moments throughout my revolutionary life. I can recall the unforgettable day on December 18, 1956, when I rejoined with Raúl in Cinco Palmas and we gathered up seven weapons to resume the struggle. Then, January 5, 1957 when with a small group of comrades and 17 weapons I reached the top of a rise and saw, for the first time, a few kilometers away a high and impregnable forested mountain, where the heart of the Sierra Maestra began, and I was absolutely certain of our victory. I remember when we won our first battle in the early morning hours of January 17 and when we totally defeated, with a small but hardened force, the 10,000 troops sent by the dictatorship in an offensive that only ended on August 5, 1958 after 70 successive days of combat. Also when I found out at the end of September that Che and Camilo had arrived in Las Villas, leaving behind over 350 kilometers of flat, hostile and inhospitable land. Then January 1, 1959, when we entered Santiago de Cuba, where the attack on the Moncada barracks had marked the beginning of our armed revolutionary actions or later when we arrived at the Bay of Pigs at nightfall on April 19, 1961. I have left out many other unforgettable events, yet at none of those moments in our struggle have I felt such intense emotion as I did when I saw on television that door open on the little plane that brought them from the United States, after so many months of tireless battle, and the figures of Juan Miguel and Elián emerge, at 7:53 p.m. on June 28. A small boy and a modest Cuban father, known by very few people hardly a few months before, were returning as great moral symbols of our homeland.

At that moment I thought: How great our people are! How invincible a just cause is! How important it is to believe in human beings! How beautiful it is to fight for great ideals! How much light and happiness can emanate from an innocent little boy as a gift to the people who were prepared to die for one of their most beloved sons!

Juan Miguel, your homeland appreciates your determination and courage in defense of its honor and its deserved victory! You have showed that at crucial times in the life of a people one man's actions can compensate for the dishonor brought about by traitors like those who tried to steal your son.

Our most sacred revolutionary duty is to fight so that nothing like this ever happens again, and for other rights that we have sworn to defend.

We will continue fighting, and we will win!

(Ovation)

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