



Florida and the Mariel Boatlift of 1980: The First Twenty Days

Kathleen Dupes Hawk, Ron Villella, Adolfo Leyva de Varona

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Winner of the Florida Historical Society's 2015 Stetson Kennedy Award

The 1980 Mariel Boatlift was a profound episode in twentieth-century American history, impacting not just Florida, but the entire country. During the first twenty days of the boatlift, with little support from the federal government, the state of Florida coordinated and responded to the sudden arrival in Key West of more than thirty thousand Cuban refugees, the first wave of immigrants who became known as “Marielitos.”

Kathleen Dupes Hawk, Ron Villella, Adolfo Leyva de Varona, and Kristen Cifers combine the insights of expert observers with the experiences of actual participants. The authors organize and present a wealth of primary sources, first-hand accounts, archival research, government records, and interviews with policy-makers, volunteers, and refugees that bring into focus the many far-reaching human, political, and cultural outcomes of the Mariel Boatlift that continue to influence Florida, the United States, and Cuba today.

Emerging from these key records and accounts is a grand narrative of high human drama. Castro’s haphazard and temporary opening of Cuba spurred many thousands of Cubans to depart in calamitously rushed, unprepared, and dangerous conditions. The book tells the stories of these Cuban citizens, most legitimately seeking political asylum but also including subversive agents, convicted criminals, and the mentally ill, who began arriving in the US beginning in April 1980. It also recounts how local and state agencies and private volunteers with few directives or resources were left to improvise ways to provide the Marielitos food, shelter, and security as well as transportation away from Key West.

The book provides a definitive account of the political, legal, and administrative twists on the local, state, and federal levels in response to the crisis as well as of the often-dysfunctional attempts at collaboration between governmental and private institutions. Vivid and readable, *Florida and the Mariel Boatlift of 1980* presents the significant details that illuminate and humanize this complex humanitarian, political, and logistical crisis.

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