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A Cuban on Capitol Hill: Navigating the Immigrant Voice in Modern U.S. Politics

In 2011, the *Washington Post* published an exposé on Cuban American Senator Marco Rubio (R-FL) accusing the congressman of “embellishing the facts” concerning his family history. It questioned whether Rubio’s claim that he was a “son of exiles” fleeing Cuban communism—a story which won him great support and votes—had been politically misconstrued to appeal to sympathetic voters. The crux of the newspaper’s accusation: Rubio’s parents came to the United States several years *before* the 1959 Cuban Revolution overthrew Fulgencio Batista’s dictatorship.[1] Earlier this summer, Rubio released a memoir aptly titled *An American Son*—evoking the American dream narrative.[2] His name also made headlines as one of the more talked-about politicians on the “shortlist” of candidates Mitt Romney was vetting for the vice presidential position. Even when Romney selected Paul Ryan (R-WI) as his running mate, pundits were quick to note that Ryan had consistently voted to ease Cuba-United States relations, including lifting the decades-old embargo. This discourse rings loudest in the battleground state of Florida. Politicians must contend with diverse and often fickle constituents in order to secure the coveted twenty-nine electoral votes up for grabs. This reality raises new questions on the pivotal role of Latina/o voters in the United States. It also exposes the heterogeneity of Latina/o communities and probes whether the Cuban American experience, for example, resonates with other hyphenated Latina/os living in the United States, including Chicana/os, Puerto Ricans, Nicaraguans, Colombians, and so forth.

With *Immigrant Prince: Mel Martinez and the American Dream*, political scientist Richard E. Foglesong has published a very important and relevant book that tackles many of these issues. The book chronicles the life and career of another Cuban American politician: Melquíades Rafael Martínez Ruiz, better known as Mel Martínez. Foglesong has synthesized an extremely read-

able biography of Martínez’s political career, which ended with his abrupt resignation from the U.S. Senate in 2009. The author argues that Martínez—with his distinct personal background and many successes and tribulations—sheds light on the politics of Cuban American identities in the mid-twentieth century, the complexities of conservative values, and the implications and challenges posed by the fastest-growing minority group in the United States. Foglesong achieves this mainly by homing in on three particular issues he believes best identify Martínez and his politics: 1) the politics of Cuba and exile; 2) his opposition to abortion; and 3) immigration reform. While readers of this work will learn a great deal about national politics, it also provides great insight on the inner workings of Florida’s political system. Long before the “hanging chad” fiasco of the 2000 presidential election, scholars have noted Florida’s troubled past with governance and the electoral process.[3] Foglesong is no stranger to this narrative. His previous book, *Married to the Mouse: Walt Disney World and Orlando*, uncovered the massive corporation’s relationship with local politics, tracing competing visions of urban economic development that ultimately helped deregulate one of the largest and most powerful global companies.[4] Foglesong’s latest book complements and adds a new layer to his previous findings.

One of the strongest contributions in *Immigrant Prince* occurs in chapter 2, when Foglesong chronicles Martínez’s departure from Cuba as part of a major youth exodus best known as Operation Peter Pan (Operación Pedro Pan). With the backing of the U.S. government, Miami’s Catholic archdiocese schemed a plan to covertly charter thousands of unaccompanied Cuban youths into the United States from 1960 to 1962. In that time, over 14,000 young people left Cuba and were sent throughout the United States to live with new adoptive parents. This remains a deeply understudied episode in foreign

policy, youth and childhood, and ethnic and migration studies. By focusing on the experience of one individual, the reader gains a better understanding of the everyday realities of this exodus. Martínez's family sent their fifteen-year-old son, who could hardly understand or speak English, to the United States in 1962. He did not reunite with his parents until 1966.

Immigrant Prince offers a multilayered account of "assimilation." Martínez was ultimately assigned foster parents in Orlando. According to the author, a church leader advised foster parents against Americanizing the children. Despite that, Foglesong notes that Martínez's "separation from Cuban culture was both a challenge and an opportunity for young Mel." Had he been "trapped in a Cuban American enclave," his assimilation would have been delayed. "Had he pursued a political career in that context," Foglesong believes, "winning statewide office would have been virtually impossible" (p. 46). Foglesong details the many steps Martínez took to feel more comfortable in his new home. This included suppressing his Spanish accent, playing baseball, and keeping his "Cuban life and politics...compartmentalized," or detached from his non-Cuban friends (p. 47). Foglesong's description of Martínez's assimilation offers a new dimension to the existing historiography on Cuban Americans by examining a subject outside of an ethnic enclave.[5] Indeed, upon graduating law school and becoming a U.S. citizen, Martínez returned to Orlando to work as a trial lawyer.

The author describes Martínez's wife, Kathryn "Kitty" Tindal, as one of the most influential and important figures who shaped his political career. Foglesong argues, in particular, that the couple's Catholic faith played a formative role. He brilliantly explores their faith's relationship to his policies and sheds light on the role of religion in contemporary politics. Foglesong notes, for example, that the couple's early fertility problem helped cement their pro-life stance. In addition, when Ken Connor—Martínez's friend and college roommate—unsuccessfully ran for governor on the Right to Life ticket in 1994, the Cuban American agreed to be his running mate (i.e., lieutenant governor) with Kitty's full support. It was during Ronald Reagan's presidential victory, which coincided with a national conservative electoral sweep, when Martínez left the Democratic Party and registered as a Republican. By then, the political bug had bitten Martínez.

"Mel Martínez's political career arose from the confluence of good fortune, a remarkable personal biography, and a distinctive set of events and trend," observes Foglesong (p. 5). Indeed, Martínez often found himself

surrounded by influential people—many of whom needed a Spanish translator or a human bridge to Latina/o communities. Foglesong also credits much of his success to the "historical circumstances" that created unique opportunities for many Cubans who fled the island (p. 7). That is, Castro's communist takeover occurred in the midst of a heated international Cold War that rendered Cuban immigrants "good" refugees fleeing the United States' ideological enemy—an extension of a larger phenomenon often known as "Cuban exceptionalism." [6] Mayor Bill Frederick, for example, appointed Martínez chairman of a Hispanic advisory committee. Members soon noticed a palpable Latina/o void on city committees. In response, Frederick appointed Martínez to the Orlando Housing Authority—a position that ultimately helped him secure the position of secretary of the Department of Housing and Urban Development (HUD) in President George W. Bush's cabinet.

This next stage of his political career, Foglesong argues, found Martínez catering more astutely to Latina/o voters. For example, during his successful 1998 campaign for Orange County chairman, Martínez took the oath in both English and Spanish. The author also notes how the politician also focused on Orlando's growing Puerto Rican community—many of whom migrated to the area to find employment in theme parks. When an advisor informed the politician that some local Latina/os perceived him as "a rich attorney who hobnobbed with the Anglo elite and cared little about people like them," he canvassed more Latina/o neighborhoods. Foglesong argues that the "Hispanic bond proved strong in the election, even among Democrats" (p. 107). But nothing revealed Martínez's arrival and self-realization as a "Hispanic" politician more than his involvement with the Elián González episode of 1999. A six-year-old Elián was found off the coast of Fort Lauderdale after his mother and stepfather perished trying to escape Cuba. The story sparked an international custody battle that pitted Elián's distant family members in South Florida against his biological father in Cuba. Martínez invited the young boy to visit Disney World, where the politician served as his escort. This drew massive media attention and reminded the world of the Peter Paner's own courageous story.

Foglesong pays particular attention to how political advisers exploited Martínez's story of overcoming adversity and fleeing communism to help gain favor in the polls. Martínez's 2004 bid for the U.S. Senate represented another major stage in his political career, as major GOP leaders recruited him as one of the new faces of the party. The White House, then scurrying for new leaders to help carry President Bush's 2004 campaign, saw in

Martínez an opportunity to recruit Latina/o voters. During Martínez's race for the Senate, he went to Puerto Rico—which has a nonvoting member in the U.S. House and no voice whatsoever in the Senate—and told his listeners that if he were elected Florida's senator, he would serve as "Puerto Rico's senator too" (p. 169). Surely, he understood the importance of diaspora politics, especially with Florida's growing Puerto Rican communities. His strategy worked and he soon became the nation's first Cuban American senator.

Martínez's career was soon embroiled in controversy, however. One such example occurred in 2005, when the nation was introduced to a Florida woman named Terri Schiavo who had been living in a "persistent vegetative state" for many years. When her husband won a court decision to have her feeding tubes removed, Martínez got involved in a major congressional battle to delay the tubes' removal. In the process, a memo traced to Martínez's office leaked detailing how the GOP could use the Schiavo case to appeal to conservatives and discredit the Democrats. In many ways, Foglesong suggest this marked the beginning of the end of Martínez's political career. The politician's biggest disappointment, however, came with his efforts to reform immigration laws in the United States. He drafted a new plan that addressed border security, guest worker programs, and the fate of undocumented laborers living in the United States. Immigration reform, a major wedge issue for both parties, proved too politically risky for some members of Congress, who failed to support the measure in fear of isolating base voters. Martínez ultimately failed to pass this relatively moderate piece of legislation and isolated many in his party during the process.[7]

Foglesong observes that this period saw the White House taking notice of Martínez's newfound "pan-Hispanic consciousness" (p. 205). That is, they believed his influence extended beyond Cuban and Puerto Rican constituents—two ethnic communities who historically are less or not at all affected by U.S. immigration restrictions. Under the advisement of Karl Rove, President Bush asked a seemingly reluctant Martínez to be the new face of the GOP. Indeed, it appears some of Martínez's previous convictions were tested as chairman of the Republican Party. At times, his position on immigration appears to have been inconsistent and circumstantial. Perhaps this noncommittal stance was the product of his new responsibilities as GOP chair, which required that he successfully raise funds without polarizing the base. Under Martínez's watch, GOP fundraising actually declined and after much partisan frustration the senator handed President Bush his resignation as chair in Octo-

ber 2007. Foglesong describes the culmination of all these experiences as part of the disenchantment—with the GOP and with Capitol Hill in general—that led to his August 2009 announcement that he would resign his Senate seat a year and a half before it expired. While he officially gave personal reasons for his resignation, Foglesong cites many political instances that jaded the politician.

Despite the overall strengths of this engaging and important work, there are also a few matters that Foglesong could have clarified or presented more clearly. At times, tangential details in the text bog down and even distract the reader. Foglesong also provides limited evidence that Latina/o voters—outside of Cubans and Puerto Ricans—related to and supported Martínez. This runs the risk of reducing Latina/os to a static and homogenous community. The reader is also occasionally rendered with a conflicted narrative and left wondering what it all amounts to. That is, Foglesong's analysis often does not hold the characters accountable for their actions—sometimes even being uncritical of the protagonist's inconsistencies. For example, Foglesong seems to give Martínez a bit of a pass when he notes that the politician's "conciliatory statements about supporting border enforcement and not supporting amnesty were mostly semantics" (p. 197). Was this, however, something else altogether? After all, during his campaign for the U.S. Senate, Martínez reminded northern Floridians: "I came here legally and learned English and I expect other people to do the same" (p. 175). In some ways, these contradictions are reconciled with Foglesong's description of Martínez as an "immigrant prince." Indeed, his nod to Niccolò Machiavelli's sixteenth-century classic political treatise *The Prince* is a useful point of reference for the politician. Foglesong reveals numerous instances that convincingly portray Martínez as Machiavellian. Foglesong only suggests, however, that Martínez may have fallen victim to others far more Machiavellian than he. The narrative implies that Martínez—often willingly—contended with a sort of political "tokenism" throughout his career that defined him as living proof that the "American dream" was alive and attainable. On the other hand, there were powers outside of his control that rendered him vulnerable to attacks within and outside his own party. When he defended the positions that made him popular—often those that made him a "useful" gadget to the GOP—he was often left to dry. Foglesong seems to struggle a bit with Martínez's evolving role in the GOP. Was Martínez—described, and I believe fairly so, as not particularly partisan early in his career—a casualty of a drastically different Republican Party that no longer needed or cared for his values, but rather only the Latina/o voters he could

carry to the polls? Not enough credit is given to the architects of this strategy and the GOP that ultimately disappointed Martínez. This moment seems to foreshadow the GOP split that birthed the tea party, perhaps an institution that no longer related to or reflected Martínez's vision. Surely, something larger was happening here.

Quibbles aside, Martínez's story is far from simple and defining him and his politics proves nearly impossible. Foglesong does a remarkable job revealing Martínez's many nuances and the complex nature of the political system that governed and ultimately betrayed him. The author achieves this by relying on his impressive archive of interviews with Martínez, his family, friends, and staffers. All this is complemented by a vast array of secondary and primary sources, particularly newspapers. Overall, Foglesong maintains a balanced approach and perspective on his subject and has produced a gripping tale of the American dream with a cynical twist.[8] Readers may be left with the impression that the author wants you to form your own opinions on the events that transpired and whether or not Martínez represented more than an ethnic face for the GOP. And while we are left with the image of a defeated man disillusioned by Capitol Hill, we are treated to a fascinating story that provides great insight on the role of religion in politics and the influence of Latina/o voters in contemporary history.

Notes

[1]. Manuel Roig-Franzia, "Marco Rubio's Compelling Family Story Embellishes Facts, Documents Show," *Washington Post*, October 20, 2011, http://www.washingtonpost.com/politics/marco-rubios-compelling-family-story-embellishes-facts-documents-show/2011/10/20/gIQAaVHD1L_print.html.

[2]. Marco Rubio, *An American Son: A Memoir* (New York: Sentinel, 2012).

[3]. For example, see: Gary R. Mormino, *Land of Sunshine, State of Dreams: A Social History of Modern Florida* (Gainesville: University Press of Florida, 2005).

[4]. Richard E. Foglesong, *Married to the Mouse: Walt Disney World and Orlando* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2001).

[5]. For example, see María Cristina García, *Havana USA: Cuban Exiles and Cuban Americans in South Florida, 1959-1994* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1996); Gary R. Mormino and George E. Pozzetta, *The Immigrant World of Ybor City: Italians and Their Latin Neighbors in Tampa, 1885-1985* (Gainesville: University Press of Florida, 1998); Alejandro Portes and Alex Stepick, *City on the Edge: The Transformation of Miami* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1993); Yolanda Prieto, *The Cubans of Union City: Immigrants and Exiles in a New Jersey Community* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 2009); Melanie Shell-Weiss, *Coming to Miami: A Social History* (Gainesville: University Press of Florida, 2009); and Alex Stepick et al., *This Land Is Our Land: Immigrants and Power in Miami* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2003).

[6]. For more on Cuban exceptionalism, see Guillermo Grenier and Lisandro Perez, *The Legacy of Exile: Cubans in the United States* (Boston: Allyn and Bacon, 2003); Lillian Guerra, "Elián González and the 'Real Cuba' of Miami: Visions of Identity, Exceptionality, and Divinity," *Cuban Studies* 38 (2007): 1-25; Louis A Pérez, Jr., *On Becoming Cuban: Identity, Nationality, and Culture* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1999); and Stepick et al., *This Land Is Our Land*.

[7]. President Bush also documents much of this immigration debate, including how Martínez's plan "conformed to my [Bush's] outline," in his 2010 memoir. See George W. Bush, *Decision Points* (New York: Crown Publishers, 2010), 301-304.

[8]. For more on the U.S. immigrant's relationship with the "American dream," see William A. V. Clark, *Immigrants and the American Dream: Remaking the Middle Class* (New York: Guilford Press, 2003); Jim Cullen, *The American Dream: A Short History of an Idea That Shaped a Nation* (Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press, 2004); Calvin C. Jillson, *Pursuing the American Dream: Opportunity and Exclusion over Four Centuries* (Lawrence: University Press of Kansas, 2004); and Darden Asbury Pyron, *Liberace: An American Boy* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2001).

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