

Commie Book Ban

Vamos a Cuba has become an unlikely political lightning rod

By Rob Jordan

Published: August 10, 2006

On a recent Tuesday evening, as traffic cut through steady rain on SW Seventh Street, about two dozen graying Cuban émigrés gathered in a nondescript room near the airport to plot a new crusade in their eternal war against the ailing Fidel Castro.



Their plan — to pull a children's book called *Vamos a Cuba* from school library shelves across Miami-Dade County — had already attracted national media attention and provoked protests in Cuba. A legal challenge by the American Civil Liberties Union had sparked rumors of a showdown in the nation's highest court. Which was why leaders of the old guard exile community had called this meeting: to ensure a united front at the press conference scheduled for the next morning.



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The press conference — to be held at the Versailles restaurant in Little Havana — would be a carefully managed, media-friendly event. This private strategy session, convened at the tiny headquarters of La Junta Patriótica Cubana, was a more freeform affair. Yes, they were here to discuss the book in question, a vile piece of propaganda. But there were other issues to talk about first.

"Angelina Jolie has a tattoo of Che Guevara ... like Mike Tyson," said Emilio Izquierdo as he shook his head in mild bewilderment.

Izquierdo, a former political prisoner whose inexhaustible hatred for Fidel compelled him to protest the 2001 Latin Grammys, at which Cuban musicians performed, went on: "We're in a war of great magnitude. The United States is changing. We have to take off our shoes at the airport. There are attempted acts of violence against our public transportation." Cubans are under threat, too, he said, stabbing his meaty fingers at the air. "Extreme people on the left, they don't like us because we don't like socialism. People in the extreme right, they don't like us because we don't live in Liberty City, because we created our own economy. We are the only minority that people can say horrible things against."

On this point everyone could agree — the old-timers squeezed into guayaberas, the Bay of Pigs veterans, the politicians, and the enraged ex-kindergarten teachers alike. Miami's Cuban exiles were being overlooked, insulted, persecuted. Once again, they were being forced to rally in their own defense.

Their oppressor is a 32-page book from the *Vamos* series, which had been in Miami-Dade public school libraries for five years before anyone complained.



Jacqueline Carini

Ex-political prisoner Juan Amador (right), the man who sparked the book ban firestorm, with his daughter Yilen. Amador objected to the Spanish-language version of *A Visit to Cuba*



Jacqueline Carini

Outspoken former school board member and state Senate candidate Frank Bolaños (center) called for an immediate ban of *Vamos a Cuba* and has said the issue should be

appealed to the U.S. Supreme Court



Jacqueline Carini

Julio Cabarga, veteran Cuban exile leader, flips through the offending volume

During that time, no one had questioned why *Vamos a Colombia* fails to mention decades of kidnappings by leftist guerrillas or why *Vamos a China* omits any mention of the millions who starved during Mao's Great Leap Forward. But after one parent's initial complaint, critics of *Vamos a Cuba* came out of the woodwork. The book's reference to July 26 as a dance-happy "carnaval" was off-base, critics said, because under Castro, the day had become little more than a joyless, speech-filled commemoration of the revolution. Rock paintings described in the book as 1000 years old actually dated to the Sixties. And as for chicken and rice being the favorite dish in Cuba: How are you going to eat chicken and rice if there's a shortage of both?

Izquierdo, one of several who had called for the meeting, sat at the impromptu dais, a plastic folding table. He was surrounded by a gallery of other exile luminaries, all of them eager to bask in the sudden spotlight of the *Vamos a Cuba* controversy. Miami-Dade school board member and state Senate candidate Frank Bolaños nodded his head occasionally. Activist Ana Margarita, known for having mistakenly married a man later revealed to be a Cuban spy, smiled wanly. Servilo Pérez, a political prisoner for more than twenty years in Cuba, held his head in his hand as he listened. Later they would be joined by Julio Cabarga, a major figure in exile politics since the Seventies and president of the Junta, a group dedicated, in the words of its manifesto, "to the noble endeavor of liberating one of the last holdings of Soviet and Communist imperialism."

As Izquierdo rambled on, cell phones in the audience occasionally broke into frantic Latin dance rhythms, echoing off the room's gray tile floor. Two young girls, daughters of school board candidate Manny Anon, squirmed in the front row until Anon gave them the okay to go outside.

Finally Izquierdo got to the point. He held up the now-infamous cover photo of *Vamos a Cuba*. It showed a group of smiling children dressed in blue-and-white school uniforms, which also serve as uniforms for the Pioneers, Cuba's Communist youth group.

"I don't want to see a photo like this," he said. "It makes my stomach sick."

Juan Amador was also on hand that night. A boyish-looking 36-year-old lunch truck entrepreneur, Amador had given rise to the *Vamos a Cuba* controversy this past spring, after his nine-year-old daughter, a third-grader at Marjory Stoneman Douglas Elementary School, brought home a copy of the book. The simplistic travel book, also published in English, is part of a series meant to introduce kindergarten through second-grade students to life in various countries.

Amador, a former political prisoner in Cuba, saw the book's cover as flagrant propaganda for the Castro regime. Among other passages, Amador pointed to a sentence in the book — "People in Cuba eat, work, and go to school like you do" — as a particularly egregious denial of the political indoctrination, food rationing, and repression that pervade Cuban life.

"I don't want to teach my daughter all the cruel realities of Cuba, but I don't want to lie either," he said recently.

Amador was hardly the first parent to object to a book his child brought home from school. Works such as J.D. Salinger's *The Catcher in the Rye* are frequently challenged. The past few months alone have seen

school district challenges to J.K. Rowling's *Harry Potter and the Half-Blood Prince* in California and *Calvin and Hobbes*, a cartoon collection by Bill Watterson, in Illinois. (On April 4, the day Amador filed his complaint, Miami's national book-reading campaign, the Big Read, opened; the book chosen for mass consumption was Ray Bradbury's novel *Fahrenheit 451*, the story of a future totalitarian state where books are banned and burned by the government.)

Removing a book altogether is another story, said Deborah Stone, deputy director of the American Library Association's Office of Intellectual Freedom. Federal courts have upheld children's rights to access books, except when they are deemed to contain "gross inaccuracies or age-inappropriate subject matter or vocabulary," Stone said. But removal of books is not unheard of: Since 1993, 257 books have been temporarily or permanently banned from school libraries, while 35 have been banned from public libraries since 1995.

Although Miami-Dade hasn't seen a serious challenge to a school book in recent years, there have been plenty of complaints. Janet McAliley, a school board member from 1980 to 1996, says the last major firestorm involving the exile community was in 1984. It concerned a state-mandated high school class about the evils of Communism. Before the class was phased out, its opponents and supporters — including Cuban-born U.S. Rep. Ileana Ros-Lehtinen, then a state representative — took their heated debate to a national audience on *The Phil Donahue Show*.

Amador didn't know any of this when he filed his complaint about *Vamos a Cuba* on April 4. He just wanted to right what he saw as a wrong, by having the book removed from school libraries. Word of the complaint spread quickly in the weeks that followed, and Cuban radio began buzzing about the book.

Two separate review committees, composed of district-appointed educational experts and representatives, judged the book age-appropriate and sufficiently accurate to merit staying on shelves. In most other communities, that would have been enough to end the affair. For Miami's Cuban exiles, these rulings meant only one thing: The battle was on.

As with Elián González, whose image quickly became an icon for many in the long-suffering exile community six years ago, *Vamos a Cuba* morphed overnight from a glorified picture book into a charged talisman, a symbol of *el exilio's* frustrated victimhood.

"They've lost their country, their way of life," observes Uva de Aragón, associate director of the Cuban Research Institute at Florida International University, "and they have failed in the one thing they came to do, which is influence change in Cuba." After all, despite the efforts of the hard-line exile community, the man they call El Tirano has outlasted nine U.S. presidents.

The first to seize the talisman was school board member Frank Bolaños. Within days of Amador's formal complaint, he called for a suspension of the standard review process and an immediate ban of the book. His proposal shifted the debate from a nuanced discussion to a polarizing yes-or-no vote.

When, at the April meeting, school board member Ana Rivas-Logan voted to allow a review process instead of an immediate ban, she found herself targeted by Radio Mambí, a popular station among hard-line exiles. Rivas-Logan, who was born in Nicaragua after her family fled Cuba in 1960, paraphrased one commentator's advice to listeners: "Let's not forget, when it comes to election time, that Ms. Rivas-Logan is Nicaraguan." Other board members who voted to review rather than ban the book were labeled Communist and anti-

Cuban.

Two months later, when the issue came before the board again, Bolaños challenged his colleagues in stark terms. "They will have a choice to either define themselves on the side of truth and with the Cuban community or on the side of lies and against the Cuban community," he said. Board vice president Perla Tabares-Hantman, running for re-election, said she was fulfilling her "duty as a Cuban-American" in voting to ban the book. Board member Marta Pérez, also up for re-election, compared the book to "pornography" and "books about Devil worship," saying there was no place in school libraries for such things.

After Tabares-Hantman and Pérez had weighed in, board member Evelyn Langlieb Greer, appearing exhausted and exasperated, warned of "caving to political imperative" and urged common sense in the wider community. "Your fight is with [Castro]," Greer said to the vocal, exile-filled audience. "Your fight is not with the Miami-Dade County school system over a book for five-year-olds."

Historians chalked up another only-in-Miami moment that day when the school board voted to override the committees' recommendations and ban *Vamos a Cuba*. The board also circumvented its own review process by banning all 24 books in the elementary-level travel series.

Enter stage left: the ACLU and the first major legal battle over book censorship by a U.S. public school system in 24 years.

As political lightning rods go, the 59-year-old Bolaños seems particularly innocuous at first blush. As a teenager, he was president of a countywide social studies club. In college he cofounded FIU's Federation of Cuban Students. He delivers speeches in a monotone and has little talent for small talk. He dresses conservatively, favors cuff links, and wears a careful part in his thick gray hair.

A former Doral community councilman, Bolaños has sat on the school board since Gov. Jeb Bush appointed him in 2001. The seat had been held by Demetrio Pérez Jr. until he was indicted for defrauding a government rent subsidy program. A relative newcomer to the political arena, Bolaños, a Republican, quickly earned a reputation as one of the board's more conservative voices, calling for greater local municipal control of schools and the district's division into smaller units. More recently he announced a run for state Senate in May and has proposed the largest school voucher program in the history of Florida and possibly the nation, while calling for potentially huge cash payouts to private schools and tutors.

Not one to shy away from the limelight, Bolaños has made a practice of appearing on Spanish-language radio shows and holding regular town hall meetings in his district, which includes Doral, Miami Springs, Allapattah, and parts of Hialeah. No one seemed to recognize Bolaños, though, when he recently ducked into a Starbucks in Coral Gables. He wanted to talk about his run for state Senate, and he wanted to talk about his story.

The son of a railroad workers' union leader in Cuba, Bolaños fled the island with his family when he was six. They packed up shortly after guerrilla forces swept into Havana in early 1959 — "the year the world stood still," as Bolaños put it. Through connections at the Ecuadorian embassy, the family flew to Miami by way of Quito. Bolaños would never know Castro's Cuba.

Leaning back in his chair, Bolaños fingered his coffee cup's plastic cover as his eyes roamed the busy shop. While it was true, he said, that he'd grown up in an affluent neighborhood in Cuba and was the descendent of

sugar cane barons, he was quick to add that his mother's family had been poor and his father's election to the national congress had been thwarted both by Batista in 1952 and then by Castro's rise.

Growing up in Miami, Bolaños slowly grew more interested in the country he had left at such a young age. "I think those of us who stay in touch with our roots are refreshed by the more recent arrivals," he said. While running a printing business, he started an anti-Castro magazine called *Krisis*.

As for his position on *Vamos a Cuba*, he insisted it has a simple basis. "It's adding insult to injury to use taxpayer dollars to buy propaganda," he said, repeating his recent mantra. Terms like *censorship* and *banning* have only distorted the real issue.

Whether litigating the issue is a wise use of funds — it is estimated the case will cost the school board up to \$300,000 in legal fees — is beside the point. "Democracy is at work here, and it's working well," he said.

A few days later, Bolaños was not happy with the way democracy had worked: Federal judge Alan Gold had overturned the school board's ban of *Vamos a Cuba*. Bolaños immediately went back on the offensive. He called on the school board to appeal the decision to the U.S. Supreme Court if necessary.

Bolaños's front-and-center stance in the *Vamos a Cuba* debate has made him — and those around him — obvious targets these days.

Witness the tirade launched by NBC 6's Ike Seamans, in the days after Bolaños came out in favor of banning *Vamos a Cuba*. In an e-mail obtained by *New Times*, the veteran correspondent wrote, "It is unbelievable how you pander to the aging and over-the-hill gang in this incredibly biased Cuban-American community. The younger generation of Cuban-Americans could care less and you know it."

Seamans wrote the messages unprovoked, saying he was responding as a citizen, not as a journalist.

He wondered why other immigrant groups have moved beyond the hardships in their home countries while "Cubans here seem to either have no ability or willingness to do so. Instead they make others pay because of the anxiety they feel about the homeland."

This, believe it or not, was Seamans in a diplomatic mood. In another e-mail, he called Bolaños an "absolute idiot ... grubbing for votes," and referred to his press officer, Michael Caputo, as an "insignificant terd [sic]." The latter comment was in response to a Caputo e-mail implying Seamans had lost his colleagues' respect and was surrounded by sycophants as he "preen[ed] and careen[ed] about town."

A political operative and head of his own public relations firm in Miami Beach, Caputo boasts credentials that include work on the presidential campaigns of George Bush Sr. and Jack Kemp, Boris Yeltsin in Russia, and rightist Alfredo Cristiani in El Salvador. So why is Caputo working on the campaign of an aspiring state senator? He says he joined Bolaños's campaign because he admired the candidate for showing "real stones" in taking up the fight against *Vamos a Cuba*.

Killing time outside a Little Havana restaurant, with his candidate still inside, Caputo radiated a focused intensity. The 44-year-old consultant described himself as a "cold warrior" who is also, oddly enough, a Grateful Dead fanatic. He maintained that the book-banning issue has been a "gift" to his candidate. Campaign contributions to Bolaños skyrocketed in the weeks after he took his stance, and droves of

reporters have descended on the relatively unknown politician.

For the opposition — those, like Seamans, who say Bolaños is grandstanding for political gain — Caputo had no patience. People might not want to face this ugly truth, he said, but America and its freedoms are still under attack from an old foe. "The last vestiges of Communism will live and breathe in America. It's in the school system. Some bureaucrat bought [*Vamos a Cuba*] ..." with the intention of tweaking the Cuban exile community, Caputo said as he stabbed the air with an imaginary shiv. "Somebody did this."

What Caputo considers an act of principled self-defense has been largely viewed, outside the exile community, as shameless pandering. *Miami Herald* columnist Leonard Pitts, for instance, decried the creation of an atmosphere "where you can get pelted with batteries for being insufficiently anti-Castro." Ray Taseff, chairman of the ACLU Greater Miami Chapter Legal Panel, called Bolaños's stance "irresponsible. It's demagoguery at its best."

Coky Michel, a Coral Gables Senior High School teacher and Cuban immigrant, put it more succinctly: "These people make me vomit." Michel said she's tired of a vocal and extreme minority speaking for all Cuban-Americans.

As the vitriol has increased, some, like eighteen-year-old Ron Bilbao, have found themselves caught in the ideological crossfire. A senior at South Miami Senior High School and president of the district's student government association, Bilbao was asked to sit on one of the district book review committees. "I hadn't even read the book yet," he recalled recently. "Nobody had even seen it." Unaware of the emotions swirling around *Vamos a Cuba*, Bilbao went to the committee's May meeting in the studios of radio station WLRN expecting a low-key gathering closed to the public. Instead he found himself on a small stage with other committee members, facing an audience and a video camera recording their every word.

"It was pretty frightening," Bilbao said of the meeting, marked by hissing and whispering from an audience of about two dozen, most of them Cuban.

"We were at a conference table and [proponents of the ban] were all around us, and it was a pretty tiny room," Bilbao said. "If you said something that was for keeping the book, they'd whisper 'Communist' in the background." A few times, someone stood up, shouted a profanity, and then left, slamming the door, Bilbao recalled. "Everybody was on edge."

During lunch breaks, audience members approached Bilbao to impress upon him the pain caused by *Vamos a Cuba*. Bilbao, a Venezuelan-American, tried to make clear he had no animus toward the Cuban community. "I sympathize with them, I really do, but at the end of the day, we're talking about a book for elementary school children," Bilbao said, pointing out that the book is not part of any school curriculum and not required reading. "You don't just ban a book because it's painful to you. I don't even know why we're banning books. It's kind of embarrassing. Next thing you know we're going to be talking about segregation in the schools."

Sitting on one of the plastic-covered dining room seats in his Sweetwater home recently, Juan Amador — the man who touched off the *Vamos a Cuba* controversy — said he understood why non-Cubans had trouble understanding his perspective. "If I were a North American, I'd probably say the same thing: 'All this mess for a book.'" The problem, he noted, in rapid-fire Spanish, is that most North Americans can never truly understand what it's like to live in Castro's police state, "a place where you fear to dream."

While his daughter played in her bedroom, meowing loudly like a cat, Amador tried to explain himself by

way of a biography. Born and raised in a little wooden house in central Havana, he quickly found himself ill-suited to Castro's socialist revolution. As a young boy, Amador, tired of constant shortages and of seeing his mother's face tight with worry, began fantasizing about leaving Cuba. At age seventeen, he was caught trying to escape by boat and thrown in jail for nine months. "It was the first time I felt free, because I didn't have anything else to lose," Amador said. As a college student, he was arrested for denouncing the regime and served four more years.

When he was released, Amador found that his friends had deserted him and his family no longer accepted him. Believing he had nowhere else to turn, he finally succeeded in making the dangerous journey across the Florida Straits in 1995, on a raft he had built secretly over several months. But the memories of his childhood will never leave, Amador said, and the longing for home will never ease. "If the regime falls at 6:00, I'll be in Havana by 6:30," he said flatly.

This stubborn alchemy of nostalgia and grievance energizes many Cuban exiles.

"If people could understand what has happened these 47 years, they would understand why [*Vamos a Cuba*] is so offensive to the Cuban community," said Julio Cabarga. "We've been trying to explain for a long time our pain, our hurt."

In addition to serving as president of the Junta, Cabarga is a marine paint salesman. With his impeccably combed jet-black hair, heavy eyelids, and a voice scarred by Marlboro Reds, Cabarga comes across as a bit larger than life, a blend of Ronald Reagan and Jack Palance.

In 1962 a fourteen-year-old Cabarga left Cuba during Operation Pedro Pan — the two-year air evacuation of thousands of children, unaccompanied by their parents — under special visa waivers. Now 58, Cabarga still has trouble talking about the experience without pausing to regain his composure.

During his first four years in the U.S., Cabarga lived with an adoptive family in Prosser, Washington, a small farm town. He spent much of the first year feeling lost, he said, without the words to express himself, without his parents, without anything familiar. He recalled being bored in class one day and opening a textbook to a map of North America. For the first time since leaving Cuba, Cabarga thought about the home where he had grown up, the little town where his grandfather had been mayor. He realized just how far away it all was. "It kind of was devastating," he said.

Nearly five decades after he left Cuba, Cabarga compared *Vamos a Cuba* to a "loaded gun" and said any such text should at least mention Cuba's "good and bad governments." When asked whether children five to seven years old would understand such references, Cabarga took a moment to reflect. "I'm not a child psychologist, and I don't get into that," he said.