

Policy is “White-foot, Black-foot”

by Carl Hiaasen

. . . Under current rules, [called the “wet-foot, dry-foot” policy] Cubans who make land-fall in the United States usually are allowed to stay, while those intercepted before they reach shore are typically sent home. . . .

Like those before it, the Bush administration doesn’t care whether the feet of arriving Haitians are wet or dry. They’re going back, one way or another. . . . No nationality has been more consistently singled out for exclusion [by U.S. immigration policy] than the Haitians.

A prime example is the Department of Homeland Security’s continuing refusal to grant temporary protected status (TPS) to Haitian migrants awaiting deportation hearings.

The TPS program was designed to provide an interim safe haven for undocumented immigrants who would otherwise be sent home to dangerous conditions caused by armed conflict, natural disasters or other extraordinary circumstances.

Haiti is a textbook case for TPS. Lashed by hurricanes, the desperately impoverished nation is again being ravaged by political violence, daily kidnappings and marauding street gangs.

The situation is so perilous that U.S. travelers have been warned to stay away. American Embassy workers are forbidden from going out at night, and their children under age 21 are supposed to return to the United States. . . .

Incredibly, Bush officials insist that migrants from Haiti don’t need protected status. The place is too deadly for tourists and diplomats—but not for the Haitians we’re sending home. . . .

The disparity is painfully glaring here in South Florida, where immigration policy plays out as “white-foot, black-foot.” Boatloads of [lighter-skinned] Cuban migrants are joyously welcomed if they reach shore, but [darker-skinned] Haitians are quietly processed and shipped back.

Officially the U.S. government has explained the double standard by saying that the Cubans are political refugees while the Haitians are fleeing here purely for economic reasons. The two issues are patently inseparable, so the distinction is a sham. Almost everyone who sneaks into this country is seeking the opportunity to make a decent living. Often that requires escaping from inept, crooked or oppressive governments. . . .

Tragically, there isn’t much common sense or decency to be found in the history of how Haitian boat people have been treated. It doesn’t matter whether they land at a bridge or a beach or the steps of the Statue of Liberty. They still can’t get in.

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