June 15, 2010

Open Letter to CNBC:

We, the undersigned former children of Operation Pedro Pan, would like to register our disapproval with the coverage of the Operation Pedro Pan Program in the CNBC documentary entitled: *Escape from Havana: An American Story*. Our objection to the documentary’s content rests on two discernible elements: First, the manipulation of the history of Operation Pedro Pan, resulting from the producers’ heavy reliance on Professor María de los Angeles Torres’ revisionist and antagonistic views towards the Operation. Second, the manipulation of the Operation Pedro Pan story, by means of Silvia Wilhelm’s open advocacy, in order to advance the Cuban Government’s agenda regarding the unconditional lifting of the U.S. embargo and travel restrictions to Cuba.

The CNBC documentary misleads the public into believing that the exodus called “Operation Pedro Pan” was initially conceived, organized, and managed by the CIA “in order to push parents over the edge” by propagating the notion that the Cuban government intended to abolish Patria Potestad (tr. parental rights). Ironically, this is the exact version trumped up and disseminated by the Cuban Intelligence Services’ State Security Center for Historical Research at the Ministry of Interior. And yet nothing could be further from the truth. Had the documentary writers delved themselves into the history of Operation Pedro Pan, they would have found an article entitled “Cuban Refugee Children,” published by Msgr. Bryan O. Walsh in the July/October 1971 edition of the *Journal of Inter-American and World Affairs*. The article describes, in great detail, how both the Catholic Welfare Bureau’s Cuban Children’s Program and Operation Pedro Pan came about independently of each other, and the fortuitous circumstances under which Mr. James Baker, Headmaster of the American Ruston Academy in Havana, and Father Walsh (appointed Monsignor several years later) met for the first time in mid-November 1960 to organize the exodus of 200 students whose parents were involved in the clandestine struggle against the imposition of communism on the island.

From November 26, 1960 to October 22, 1962 over 14,000 children came to the United States under this program. Over time, the children’s exodus would come to be known as Operation Pedro Pan. Parenthetically, contrary to the Cuban government’s persistent claim that the Operation was originally named “Operación Peter Pan” by Politia Grau, the name “Operation Pedro Pan” was coined by Ralph Renick, anchor of Miami’s Wometco Channel 4 News and popularized by Miami Herald’s writer Gene Miller, in a series of articles about the children. Early on during the documentary the producers mischaracterize the program’s origins by inaccurately stating that Mr. Baker went to Washington, D. C. to make arrangements. It is a matter of public record that it was Father Walsh who traveled to the nation’s capital to meet with officials of the Departments of State and Justice, shortly after the break in diplomatic relations in January 3, 1961, in order to examine alternatives for those students who missed out on having their I-20 visas processed by embassy officials.

In the year 2000, during the Elián González affair, the Cuban government launched a vicious disinformation campaign aimed at disparaging Operation Pedro Pan by linking the alleged CIA-fabricated “Patria Potestad” lie to its founding. Aware of the regime’s distortion, Msgr. Walsh, speaking at the Pedro Pan 40th anniversary convocation, held at Barry University in 2001, warned that: “[…]. These facts are important because some revisionist historians and commentators both in the U.S., the U.K. and Cuba have engaged
in an ongoing campaign [to] portray Operation Pedro Pan (not Peter Pan) as a dirty tricks campaign conceived by the CIA to mislead Cuban families and panic them into sending their children abroad.”

As recent as 2009, Fidel Castro, in one of his “Reflexiones,” devoted to the subject of Operation Pedro Pan, continued the assault on the exodus by comparing it to Nazi Germany’s propaganda campaigns and stating: “María de los Angeles Torres, an associate professor of Political Sciences at the DePaul University in Chicago was a Pedro Pan child. Although she is not a revolutionary, she called for the CIA to declassify close to 1,500 documents about Operation Pedro Pan. The CIA has refused to declassify them on the pretext of national security.” Fidel Castro went on to make one of the more disingenuous statements made to date about us: “Each of the 14,000 children involved in that tragedy followed their own traumatic path. They were mostly from middle class families. They were not the children of landowners or the wealthy bourgeoisie; there was no reason why they had to be dragged into that tragedy… None of them required to be saved.” Conveniently, he neglected to mention that his regime closed down the parochial schools they attended, stormed and ransacked many of their houses of worship, outlawed their clubs and organizations, and chastised them for having religious beliefs and middle class values. Self-servingly, he also omitted mentioning the systematic harassment and incarceration of their parents and relatives, the Confiscation of their savings, businesses and properties, and the government takeover of their places of employment.

Regrettably, the documentary’s best effort to depict graphically the many atrocities carried out by the regime during its first three years in power and which prompted the exodus in the first place was obfuscated by the CIA connection hammered by the CNBC producers. The accurate retelling of the story of the children’s exodus should have included a brief account of the many significant political events that unfolded during the twenty two months that it lasted. In the short term, the regime sought to move quickly to exercise absolute control by the ruthless elimination of any actual or potential opposition. For the long term, it set out to create a new political culture, one in which children were to be assigned a critical role. Marxist-Leninist indoctrination of the young generation was deemed crucial for the Revolution to survive well into the future. Five decades of Communist dictatorship, repression, and dramatic escapes by thousands of young Cubans, continue to attest both to the implementation of this strategy and its abject failure.

Carlos Franqui, a close Castro collaborator and known as his minister of propaganda from 1957 until his departure from Cuba in 1968 admitted that there had indeed existed plans to abolish the existing Patria Potestad Law and replace it with one that would give the state physical as well as mental control over the children. In a December 26, 1999, article published by El Nuevo Herald and entitled "In Cuba there is no Patria Potestad," Mr. Franqui, after scrutinizing the 1976 Cuban Constitution's statutes governing parental rights and obligations and the State's relationship to children, concluded that "... In Cuba the Patria Potestad belongs to the State and not to the parents. Enforcement is actually more perverse than the law. Children are separated from their parents and the Castro-dominated state has absolute control over them, beginning from early on with the Children's Circles and all the way through primary education, far-away-from-home boarding schools, youth work centers and compulsory military service, and university enrollment. No one in his right mind would argue that in communist Cuba a parent can exercise the right to educate his own children at his own discretion." It is readily apparent from Mr. Franqui’s observations that the rumored government’s abolition of Patria Potestad and Pedro Pan parents’ concern over it proved to be right after all; even if it took the government 16 years to codify it into law.

Finally, with respect to Mrs. Wilhelm’s views about lifting the U.S. economic embargo and travel restrictions to Cuba, we feel that she is constitutionally entitled to freedom of expression. However, the documentary creates the false impression that she speaks for the Pedro Pan community. In fact, we have always chosen to abstain from any public political discourse as a group, despite the political origins of our exodus.

Preparations are being made to commemorate the 50th anniversary of Operation Pedro Pan, an occasion we want to use to express our deepest gratitude to our parents for the sacrifice they made and the pain they endured in order to save us from the claws of communism, Monsignor Bryan Walsh and the courageous men and women who made our exodus possible and the American people for their unparalleled humanitarianism in our hour of need. We, the men and women who were the children of the exodus, find it ironic that CNBC should voice Silvia Wilhelm’s assertion that we were used as pawns in the Cold War, when it is CNBC that is misusing us.