In this insightful article, Hideaki Kami explores ultimately unsuccessful 1993 negotiations between Cuba and the United States to achieve an “orderly flow of people” between the two longtime adversaries (85). Two previous events cast a long shadow over the talks. The first and most prominent is the Mariel Boatlift, the sudden arrival of over 125,000 Cubans between April and October 1980, which loomed large in the US political imagination and created a strong impetus for screening incoming migrants at the individual level. A second important precursor that informed the tone and substance of the negotiations is the 1984 US-Cuban bilateral agreement, a moment which confirmed mutual interest in “normalization of the relationship in the field of migration,” but which for nearly a decade thereafter both sides lagged in actual implementation (quotation on 95). The fear of another Mariel and a desire to see progress in areas of mutual interest prompted both sides to agree to a series of talks in the second half of 1993.

Kami’s historiographic interventions are multifaceted. First, “Migration Normalcy” details negotiations that feature little, if at all, in current works. Second, using Cuban sources, Kami foregrounds Havana’s perspective on the talks, contributing to our understanding of Cuban diplomacy specifically and of “sending nations’ statecraft” more broadly (87). Ultimately, Kami argues that “Cuban migration diplomacy generally preferred cooperation over confrontation” (86). This framing revises current depictions of the 1994–95 Balsero, or rafter, crisis. In the summer of 1994 Fidel Castro announced that any Cuban who wished to leave could do so, prompting approximately 35,000 to flee in makeshift rafts and other unseaworthy vessels, marking the largest emigration since Mariel. Kami argues that in light of the failed diplomacy in 1993, these events appear not as an inevitable response to economic conditions in Cuba or as a “premeditated” Cuban scheme (88), but instead as the logical, if tragic, result of failed diplomacy. A third contribution of “Migration Normalcy” is to reveal and consider complex questions that require further research. By highlighting events that cannot be fully explained with current evidence, Kami demonstrates that despite the rich scholarship on the topic, we still have much to learn about US-Cuban relations and US foreign policy at the end of the Cold War.  

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The bulk of the article focuses on approximately six pivotal months in 1993. Both sides arrived at an initial round of “exploratory” discussions in early summer with wish-lists (93). Cuban diplomats wanted their northern neighbor to cease the “preferential treatment” that incentivized ongoing departures, especially clandestine flight, and to create more legal opportunities for migration, which would require increasing the total number of available visas. US officials, for their part, had multiple objectives, including most prominently “the return of the so-called ‘excludables’…a group of young and dark-skinned men who arrived during the Mariel boatlift” and were ineligible to remain in the United States (91).

The context for the initial round of talks seemed auspicious. The nature of President Bill Clinton’s relationship with the Cuban American National Foundation (CANF), “the most powerful anti-Castro exile group in Miami,” seemed to open more space for dialogue between Washington and Havana (92). When the White House hosted a “Cuban Independence Day” in May 1993, for example, the CANF was noticeably absent. When officials from the US and Cuba met for their first round of talks, Washington made sure their counterparts were aware of the absence and elaborated on their misgivings about Miami’s role in Cuban-American relations. “Never before had a high-ranking U.S. official like [US deputy assistant secretary of state Robert S.] Gelbard expressed such negative opinions of Miami groups so bluntly in front of Cuban officials,” Kami argues (94). During these initial negotiations, both sides showed flexibility. Cuban officials offered an “unprecedented” proposal (95) that was met with “a critical U.S. concession” (97).

Reasons for optimism abounded. The atmosphere of possibility became more concrete vis-à-vis migration policies during the next round of talks in Atlanta in early September. Cuban diplomats offered a “concrete” 3-point proposal: “Havana would cooperate with Washington on the issue of human trafficking…to increase legal departures, Havana would hand over a list of 500 Cuban citizens whom it believed would meet Washington’s criteria for visa issuances” and in return for Washington’s cooperation “Havana would begin a case-by-case analysis of 200 excludables, currently in US jails but not…on the original [1984] list.” In recognition that the 1984 promises led to little headway and in acknowledgment of the broader context of inconsistency and mistrust, “Havana would assess Washington’s performance” over a six-month period and “if Washington passed the test, Havana would consider accepting more” excludables (99). The US accepted Cuba’s terms, resulting in what Kami describes as “a breakthrough […] no doubt a significant accomplishment” (100). The result of the Atlanta negotiations was thus a meaningful but secret “interim agreement” (100). At least, that is what it was supposed to be.

The tide of US-Cuban migration diplomacy shifted abruptly in September when the Miami Herald published what Kami calls a “sensational report” about what the article dubbed a “new U.S.-Cuban pact” (101). The article erroneously implied that all the concessions came from the Cuban side, got the specific numbers wrong in a way that painted a misleading picture, suggested the agreement was a done deal when in fact it was a short-term test run, and violated an explicit acknowledgement between the plenipotentiaries that there would be “no public announcement of the interim agreement” (102). It is clear, based on Cuban records and subsequent events, that the 1993 talks ultimately failed because of American actions and decisions. Had

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Havana had its way, this short-term classified agreement would have become the basis of a more enduring accord that might have obviated the Balsero crisis entirely. This was not to be.

We do yet have full information about how the costly US about-face came to pass. Because the Miami Herald article was written based on a Justice Department Press release that Kami describes as “confusing and subject to misinterpretation,” he posits that “the conclusive answer may be unavailable until relevant Justice Department records are fully declassified” (102). What is clear is that the article and the attention it received scuttled the negotiations. The fallout was swift. Although Cuban officials refrained from issuing any on-the-record corrections, the episode predictably “stiffened Havana’s reluctance to receive additional Marial excludables” (103).

CANF, for its part, launched an effective “counterattack” and the Clinton administration began to court and cater to Miami’s interests in a variety of small but symbolic ways (104). Once again, Kami concedes that the rationale is “not fully clear,” but he offers “at least three ways to understand” the pivot (105). The first is that on its own the Clinton administration looked ahead to the 1994 and 1996 elections and decided that the risk of alienating voters in Miami was too great. Kami’s second possibility is that CANF “successfully convinced the administration to acknowledge the foundation’s power and leading position in the Cuban American community” (105). The third option for Clinton’s “backpedaling,” Kami suggests, is that the administration “never seriously considered rapprochement with Cuba” and decided that the cost of tolerating “misperception” on this front was too high, thereby prompting the administration to make its intentions crystal clear to both Havana and Miami (105). Certainly, these options are not mutually exclusive.

A fourth option, or at least vital context, is that at the exact time the Clinton administration pivoted on Cuba, relations between the US and Vietnam were thawing considerably. Washington issued a “roadmap” to normal relations in April 1991, and in July 1993, Clinton gave his first public speech on the topic. After the requisite statements on missing American servicemen (POW/MIAs), the president announced that the United States would no longer block international financial institutions from lending to Vietnam, which led to $2 billion dollars in direly needed pledges to Hanoi in the fall. This decision was followed by the lifting of the embargo in February of 1994, the settlement of financial disputes from the Vietnam War in January 1995, and the establishment of formal diplomatic relations in July 1995. In the late 1970s, the Jimmy Carter administration had considered normalization with China and Vietnam but ultimately determined that simultaneous rapprochement was infeasible. In the fall of 1978, Carter decided to suspend US-Vietnamese normalization in favor of moving forward with China. Might Clinton have made a similar determination? Could the president have concluded that simultaneous openings to Havana and Hanoi (though of different degrees) would be too politically costly? Given the progress his predecessors had made in Hanoi and the support of many (though never all) in Congress made Vietnam the more logical choice. This scenario seems plausible, though I am not aware of any definitive evidence. What does seem worth acknowledging is that the “why” Kami finds difficult to fully answer might lay in a combination of the deep history of Washington-Miami-Havana relations and geopolitical considerations outside of US-Cuban relations. This of course lies outside of what could be reasonably addressed in an article, but I hope that it is tackled in a future project.

In more ways than one, “Migration Normalcy” adds to our scholarly knowledge not by providing definitive answers but by provoking compelling questions. This is a meaningful contribution. The insights into Havana’s negotiating positions that Kami provides using Cuban sources provokes multiple questions about

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4 Demmer, After Saigon’s Fall, 77.
US policy, as detailed above. It also invites us to interrogate the concept of normalization itself with greater security.

Although the talks to establish “normal” migration procedures failed, the initial promise of those talks helped fuel progress in other facets of US-Cuban relations. As Kami explains: “the progress in migration talks was so promising that it led to bilateral cooperation in other fields, including anti-drug trafficking,” (101). US officials insisted that these issues were separate from—and by implication less meaningful than—full or real normalization. For example, Kami notes that after the policy about-face, Clinton’s assistant secretary of state for inter-American affairs assured CANF that the US would not “soften U.S. policy toward Cuba” and that US dealings with Havana would “be limited to specific issues, such as migration control, drug interdiction, and enforcement of neutrality laws” (104). In many ways, this bifurcation of “normalization” into disparate parts is reflected in and propelled by scholarly approaches, which often differentiate between “economic normalization” and “political normalization.” While there are meaningful differences between the status of US-Cuban relations in the mid-1990s and full economic and diplomatic relations, as I have argued elsewhere, it is clear that when US officials insist that they are not normalizing relations, their claims often misrepresent the reality.6

While Cuban officials had specific migration-related goals in mind over the course of 1993, policymakers in Havana were also operating with a “desire to make Washington treat Cuba as a sovereign equal” (88). As Kami explains in his conclusion, although the talks failed to produce a migration-related agreement, they helped facilitate success in other areas: “the two countries were advancing various forms of bilateral cooperation, such as coast-guard talks, anti-drug trafficking, and fence-line talks near the U.S. Naval Base at Guantánamo Bay. Contact, compromise, and well-meaning gestures facilitated personal and governmental relationships between the two former Cold War adversaries” (110). To equate these overtures and agreements with full normalization would be inaccurate. To ignore that normalization is a process and these agreements—even failed diplomacy—helped propel normalization, I suggest, would also be mistaken.

Kami’s exploration of three-rounds of US-Cuban talks over the second half of 1993 invites us to rethink our understanding of the Balsero crisis, challenges us to use foreign archives to propel questions about US policy, and, perhaps, to complicate our understanding of failure and normalization as diplomatic concepts. Not bad for a work of less than thirty pages. Well-written and well-researched, this article is both provocative for specialists and accessible to students. I tip my hat to Kami and look forward to his expansion of these ideas in his next book project.

Amanda C. Demmer is an Associate Professor in the history department at Virginia Tech. Her first book, After Saigon’s Fall: Refugees and U.S.-Vietnamese Relations, 1975–2000 was published in 2021 with Cambridge University Press. She is currently developing a new project, tentatively titled America and the World: The Politics of Recognition and Normalization in U.S. History.


6 Demmer, After Saigon’s Fall, 160.