

# Cuban American tapped for key federal position

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**BY ALFONSO CHARDY**  
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**WASHINGTON** - Emilio Gonzalez keeps a 44-year-old slightly frayed piece of paper in his desk: the \$254.93 ticket his parents bought to get the family of four out of Cuba aboard a Spanish passenger ship in 1961.

"I keep it in my drawer as a reminder that I am an immigrant running an immigration service," Gonzalez, 49, says with a tinge of nostalgia.

Gonzalez, a former U.S. Army colonel who until recently lived in Miami, is the newly-appointed director of U.S. Citizenship and Immigration Services. In this post Sept. 11 world, when terrorism remains a top concern for millions of Americans, and many immigrants feel the U.S. welcome mat is being pulled out from under them, Gonzalez has a tough sell.

He's in charge of a Homeland Security agency that oversees delivery of immigration benefits: green cards, work permits, asylum and citizenship.

And if Congress approves a controversial temporary worker program, Gonzalez will manage that, too, for millions of illegal immigrants. As if that weren't difficult enough, Gonzalez was just tapped to be the point man between Homeland Security and Cuban-American members of Congress on Cuba migration policy.

The assignment comes as exiles step up pressure on the White House to change the contentious wet-foot, dry-foot policy, which came under fierce attack after 15 Cuban migrants, rescued at an abandoned bridge in the Florida Keys, were returned to the communist island this year.

Gonzalez was appointed liaison during a March 8 meeting at the White House in which Cuban-American leaders asked the administration to make wet-foot, dry-foot more humane.

U.S. Rep. Ileana Ros-Lehtinen said the exile community is counting on Gonzalez to provide the names and other pertinent information about Cuban migrants caught at sea and facing a return to Cuba "so we could help the rafters' families with their anxieties and questions."

Some of Gonzalez's employees - asylum officers - interview Cuban migrants intercepted at sea to determine whether they should be taken to the U.S. naval base at Guantanamo Bay, Cuba, for possible resettlement in a third country because they would face persecution if returned to Cuba. An implementer and not a policy maker, Gonzalez declined to discuss his views on wet-foot, dry-foot.

Yet his sea voyage to Venezuela as a child, and his family's arrival in the United States as refugees, left their mark on the man he would become - an advocate for immigration, convinced that immigrants make America strong.

"Especially nowadays, with the debates going on in Congress and all of the TV programs that you see, you want to make sure the good news aspect of immigration isn't lost," Gonzalez said recently. "Immigrants are not abstract. Immigrants are what makes this country what it is."

Gonzalez has been traveling around the country attending ceremonies to naturalize American citizens.

At some ceremonies, he has presented special certificates - "American by Choice" awards - to certain immigrants recognizing their achievements.

He gave the first such award to Florida's Republican Cuban-American Sen. Mel Martinez, the only naturalized citizen in the U.S. Senate.

Those who know Gonzalez well, including his former boss in Miami, say he is doubtless prepared to handle tough jobs - including the anticipated temporary worker program.

"If anyone can handle that task, he can," said Al Cardenas, senior partner at Tew Cardenas, a Miami-based law firm that lobbies in Washington. "He has great organizational skills. He doesn't get rattled. He is a focused person."

Cardenas said Gonzalez helped the firm expand its global practice in Latin America. It represents Latin American governments and companies in Washington.

Gonzalez's wife, Gloria Aristigueta, is an elementary and preschool teacher. Their daughters, Victoria, 21, and Gloria, 23, attend Florida International University.

The family could serve as an example of why hundreds of thousands of Cubans fled the island after Fidel Castro seized power in a victorious revolution in 1959.

Anti-Castro refugees saw no future in the communist island and preferred to leave everything behind and go abroad, to give their children an opportunity to prosper.

"I keep our tickets out of Cuba in my desk," Gonzalez said. "Whenever I feel my head getting big, I reach down there."

The Gonzalez family left Cuba on May 8, 1961. About a month before, Cuban leader Fidel Castro for the first time acknowledged publicly that Cuba was a socialist state. Then, Cuban exiles financed by the CIA invaded the island at the Bay of Pigs - but were defeated.

The family, including 4-year-old Emilio and 7-year-old Ileana, boarded the Spanish passenger ship *Satruestegui* and headed to Venezuela where Emilio's mother, Olga Gonzalez, has relatives.

After only a few months in Venezuela, the family headed to the United States.

They landed in Tampa where Emilio Gonzalez Sr. had business associates dating back to his tobacco industry connections in Cuba.

Gonzalez was 9 when his parents became naturalized U.S. citizens at a ceremony in Tampa.

He later attended the University of South Florida, graduating in 1977 with a bachelor's degree in international relations.

Gonzalez also obtained a master's degree in Latin American studies at Tulane University and a PhD in international affairs at the University of Miami.

Gonzalez studied while he served in the U.S. Army for 26 years, with postings around the world.

Eventually he made the rank of colonel, taught at West Point and served as military attache at U.S. embassies in Mexico and El Salvador.

Jaime Suchlicki, a professor of history and director of the University of Miami's Institute for Cuban and Cuban-American Studies, directed Gonzalez's dissertation on the Salvadoran military.

"He had good discipline. A very dedicated student, but he was also an affable guy with a great personality," Suchlicki recalled last year when Gonzalez was tapped for the citizenship post.

Gonzalez also wrote a paper for a University of Miami class titled *The Cuban Connection: Drug Trafficking and the Castro Regime*.

In the 21-page paper, Gonzalez argued that there was enough evidence to conclude that senior Cuban leaders were involved in international drug smuggling. His paper came four years after federal prosecutors had drafted an indictment charging the Cuban government, but it was never filed because prosecutors were split on whether the evidence was solid for a conviction.

In 2000 he began as special assistant to Marine Gen. Peter Pace, then commander-in-chief of the U.S. Southern Command based in Miami. Pace is now chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff in Washington.

In 2002, Gonzalez joined the Bush administration as director for Western Hemisphere affairs at the National Security Council. In that role, Gonzalez handled the Cuba issue at the White House.

Gonzalez hasn't shied away from politics.

During the 2004 presidential race, Gonzalez served as President Bush's campaign advisor and criticized Democratic Party nominee John Kerry, claiming he had little expertise on Latin American topics.

Now, as head of U.S. Citizenship and Immigration Services, Gonzalez says he has four major goals: ending application backlogs by Oct. 1, making the agency more efficient, implementing the temporary worker program if approved and operating within budget.

Fees for green cards and naturalization, among other immigration services, are likely to go up - to prevent a possible budget deficit, he said.

"This is the largest immigration service in the world ... we need to make sure that our costs are reflected in our fees," he said.

Gonzalez insists that the priority for his office, while attempting to reduce backlogs, remains national security first and foremost.

"I firmly believe that you can do things in a timely and secure manner at the same time," Gonzalez said. "But if you come to a point where you can't do it in a timely way then, by God, do it in a secure way."