

Governor Frank White and Fort Chaffee Refugees

Grade Levels: 7-12

Time Period: 1980-1982

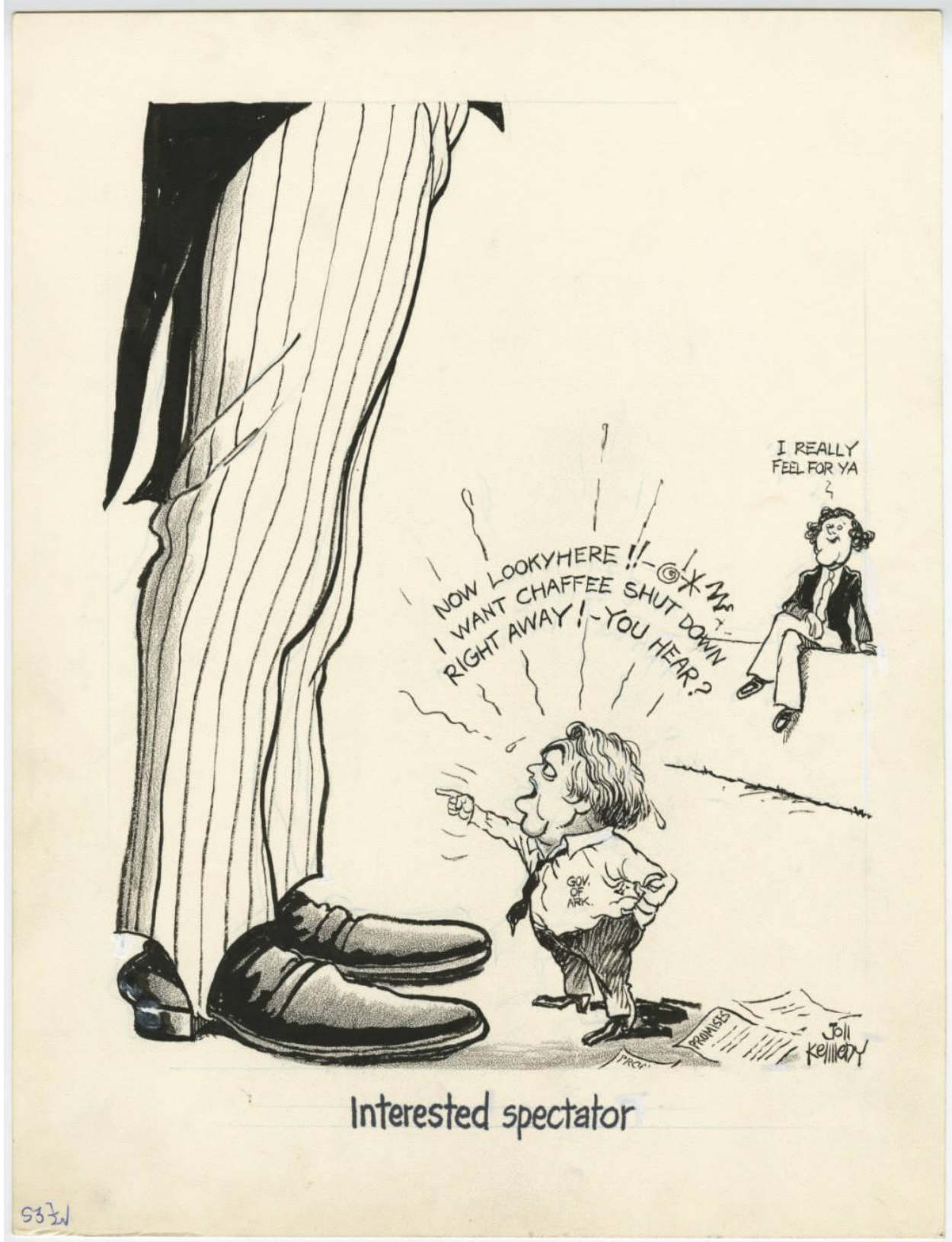
Introduction

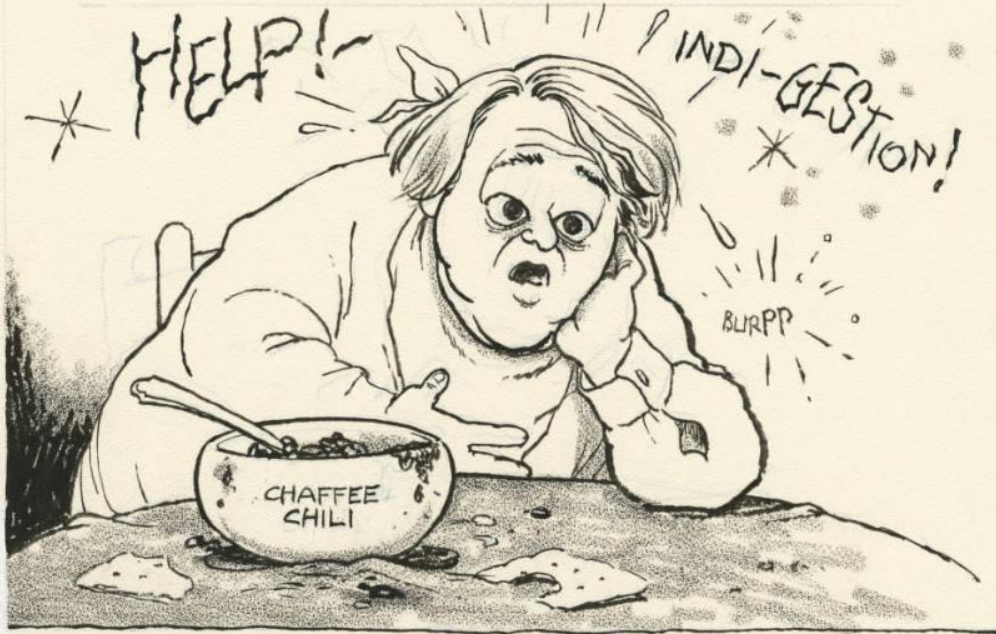
During a six-month period in 1980, approximately 125,000 Cuban refugees left Cuba in a mass exodus. Many left willingly to escape the communist regime but others were forced out, deemed socially undesirable by the Cuban government. The majority of the “Marielitos” as they would become known, left through the port of Mariel and crossed the Straits of Florida to start their new lives in the United States.¹ Almost immediately after refugees arrived, the President Carter administration opened federal detention centers at Fort Eglin, Florida, Fort Indiantown Gap, Pennsylvania, Fort McCoy, Wisconsin, and Fort Chaffee, Arkansas to process and resettle refugees.

The Cuban refugee crisis was heavily politicized during the gubernatorial campaigns of Frank White and Bill Clinton in Arkansas. In 1980, Frank White ran for governor against Bill Clinton who was seeking reelection. At the time, Clinton was under heavy fire over the handling of the Cuban refugee crisis and for raising the price on automobile licenses. White took these two issues and hit Clinton heavily in campaign ads with “Cubans and car tags” as his main attacking points. White also argued that the issues at Fort Chaffee were because Clinton failed to stand up to President Jimmy Carter. The 1980 gubernatorial election ended with White defeating Clinton 435,684 to 403,242.

In February 1981, Governor White met with officials from the new Reagan presidential administration and he imposed a deadline that the Cubans leave Arkansas within six months. White soon realized that the federal government was going to use the federal installation as they saw fit. Four weeks after White’s deadline of August 1, he sent a letter to President Reagan, Vice President George Bush, HHS Secretary Richard Schweiker, and others, asking for some movement with Fort Chaffee.

¹ Stephens, Alexander Maxwell. 2016. “‘I Hope They Don’t Come to Plains’: Race and the Detention of Mariel Cubans, 1980-1981.” University of Georgia.
https://getd.libs.uga.edu/pdfs/stephens_alexander_m_201605_ma.pdf.





Nice to have friends

Source 3

Office of the Governor • State Capitol • Little Rock, Arkansas 72201

May 5, 1981

The Honorable George Bush
Vice President of the United States
The White House
Washington, D.C. 20500

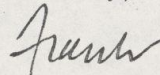
Dear George:

Once again let me encourage you to consider a major relocation of the undesirables at Fort Chaffee back to Cuba. The population is now down to about 2,000, but there are 1,000 that literally nobody wants. It's extremely important that we resolve this issue by July.

You don't know how I appreciate your support and help.

The Reagan budget looks great. You and the President are to be commended on your superb job.

Sincerely,



FRANK WHITE
Governor

FW/slc

Office of the Governor • State Capitol • Little Rock, Arkansas 72201 • 501-371-2345

Source 4



STATE OF ARKANSAS
FRANK WHITE
GOVERNOR

August 27, 1981

The Honorable George Bush
Vice President of the United States
The White House
Washington, D.C. 20530

Dear George:

As you are aware this week marks the end of August, and as we all expected, the pressure is building here in Arkansas for action on Fort Chaffee. The clippings enclosed indicate the viciousness of the news media and the way in which Bill Clinton plans to use this issue.

I cannot over-emphasize the need for movement toward closing Fort Chaffee this week.

It is seriously damaging my political credibility and future.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in cursive script that reads "Frank".

FRANK WHITE
Governor

FW/slc

Enclosures

Source 5



THE VICE PRESIDENT
WASHINGTON

December 10, 1981

The Hon. Frank White
Governor
State Capitol
Little Rock, Arkansas 72201

Dear Frank:

I received your letter of November 30 and will try to be helpful. You have indeed "hung in there" and I am happy that the matter appears to be on its way to final resolution.

Best wishes.

Sincerely,

George Bush

fw

Activity Questions

1. Governor White is talking to Uncle Sam in source 1. Who is Uncle Sam supposed to represent?
2. Who do you think is the person sitting on the wall in source 1 and why might he be saying, "I really feel for ya."?
3. Why is Governor White represented as small and Uncle Sam is represented as large in source 1?
4. What do you think is the meaning of the title of source 1?
5. Describe what is happening in source 2?
6. What problem does the chili represent in source 2?
7. Who is trying to help Governor White in source 2? Do you think they will be successful?
8. What can you conclude about Governor White's progress on Fort Chaffee issues in sources 1-5?
9. Sources 3-5 were not originally available to the public. Do they tell a different or similar story to what you see in sources 1 and 2? Please explain.

Arkansas Social Studies Standards

Arkansas History, Grades 7-8

Strand: Civics and Government

Content Standard 6: Students will analyze the influence of government and politics on social issues

CG.6.AH.7-8.1

Analyze the role of government and public policy on social concerns in Arkansas over time (e.g., unemployment, education, poverty, immigration, culture)

Arkansas History, Grades 9 -12

Strand: Era 6: Modern Era 1968 to Present

Content Standard 6: Students will assess ways that actions of individuals and groups have changed over time and are shaped by the historical context of the Modern Era.

Era6.6.AH.9-12.3

Analyze the effects of conflicts and their resolutions on the citizens of Arkansas (e.g., the draft, Cold War, defense industry, trade, agriculture, voluntary and involuntary immigration)

United States History Since 1890

Era 10: Contemporary United States 1968 to Present

Content Standard 7: Students will analyze domestic and foreign policies of the United States since 1968

Era10.7.USH.1

Examine continuity and change in domestic policies over multiple administrations since 1968 using a variety of primary and secondary sources

Era10.8.U.S.H.2

Analyze the effectiveness of citizens, institutions, and the government in addressing social and economic issues at the local, state, and national levels since 1968 (e.g., environmental concerns, deregulation, unemployment, homelessness, medical care, food insecurity)

Key Terms

Refugee - people who have fled their country to avoid war, persecution, or natural disaster

Migration - movement of people from one area to another

Communism - political and economic doctrine that aims to replace private property and a profit-based economy with public ownership and communal control of at least the major means of production (e.g., mines, mills, and factories) and the natural resources of a society.

More Information

- <https://encyclopediaofarkansas.net/entries/cuban-refugee-crisis-4248/>
- <https://arktimes.com/news/cover-stories/2004/09/23/1980-crisis-at-ft-chaffee>
- <https://fb.watch/cuxNV5ukPk/>