

The 'Sickly Boy' and the 'Real Man': Kennedy, Castro, and Competing Masculinities

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John F. Kennedy was a profoundly insecure individual. Throughout his life, he struggled with illness and a toxic environment created by the male members of his family, including an intense sibling rivalry with his older brother. This caused him to be indefinitely focused on proving himself and his masculinity for the duration of his life, up to and including his presidency. His obsession with appearing masculine in the public eye proved intrinsic in his 1960 presidential victory over Richard M. Nixon, and when the "real man" Fidel Castro emerged from the Cuban Revolution as the leader of a state potentially in the Soviet sphere of influence, Kennedy felt the need to prove that he was capable of besting Castro through the power of his newfound presidential position.

The tense relationship between John F. Kennedy and Fidel Castro was anything but secret. In his short time in office, Kennedy clashed with Castro multiple times, culminating in the October 1962 Cuban Missile Crisis. Kennedy, who had argued in favour of befriending and supporting Castro, felt deeply and personally betrayed when, in April 1961, Castro announced the Cuban Revolution to be a communist one, as there were no attempts from the Castro government to connect with the newly elected Kennedy administration despite Kennedy speaking openly about envisioning a positive relationship with the revolutionary government.¹ This feud between Kennedy and Castro was not just a matter of communism versus capitalism, but a conflict with profound gender implications. Castro, portrayed by the media as a "real man", was a threat to Kennedy's already dismal self-image which stemmed from his failure to adopt the typical 1950s masculine model of maturity, sexual containment within marriage, and the role of men as toiling breadwinners for the family, along with chronic health issues which he struggled with throughout his life.² These health issues caused him to be rejected

1 Kennedy, "A New Attitude in Latin America"; Lars Schoultz, *That Infernal Little Cuban Republic: The United States and the Cuban Revolution* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2009), 82-108.

2 Blair D. Woodard, "Real Men: U.S. Popular Images of Cuban Revolutionary

from the army's Candidate Field School and left him feeling in a constant state of weakness. His insecurity was bolstered by the media's portrayal of him as "thin, slender, and almost boyish."³ Kennedy, the youngest elected president in United States history, who had won the popular vote by a mere 118,000 ballots, felt the need to 'prove' himself by undermining Castro.⁴ He would attempt to do this in the Bay of Pigs invasion, an attempt to reverse Castro's communist revolution. The invasion was a humiliating failure for Kennedy, who took full responsibility for it.⁵ Kennedy's profound insecurity and a deep-seated need to prove himself to the world were major factors that shaped the actions he took against the Castro regime in Cuba.

From a young age, Kennedy struggled with spastic colitis, a chronic lower-back illness. Though he was diagnosed at the age of seventeen, his health issues started when he was just three years old, and he spent much of his childhood indoors due to various ailments.⁶ The colitis never improved throughout his life, despite multiple surgeries and hospitalizations. His physicians opted to give him steroids as treatment, which can be damaging if used long-term. From these treatments, Kennedy developed Addison's disease, making his back issues even worse.⁷ By 1950, he could not put on socks or climb stairs properly and was almost completely immobile, dependent on others for basic actions. He underwent a high-risk low-reward surgery, from which an infection developed. The infection was so serious that he was given his last rites by a Catholic priest.⁸ Remarkably, he recovered within six months, but he remained susceptible to illnesses and infection for close to two years.⁹ Kennedy's health problems were a closely guarded secret, known only to his immediate family and his doctors. He was heavily reliant on painkillers, even during his presidency. These health issues left Kennedy in a constant state of vulnerability and pain. They were the reason he was rejected by the United States Army's Officer

Masculinity, 1957-1965," (unpublished paper, May 25-26, 2012), 8-9; Robert D. Dean, *Imperial Brotherhood: Gender and the Making of Cold War Foreign Policy* (Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 2001), 170-179.

3 Dallek, *John F. Kennedy*, 12.

4 Robert Dallek, *John F. Kennedy* (New York: Oxford University Press USA - OSO, 2011), 18.

5 John F. Kennedy, "News Conference 10" (Kennedy Library, News Conferences Archive, 21 April 1961) Accessed December 4th, 2019.

<https://www.jfklibrary.org/archives/other-resources/john-f-kennedy-press-conferences/news-conference-10>.

6 Ibid., 8.

7 Ibid.

8 Ibid.

9 Ibid.

Candidate School in 1940. He was able to join the Navy in 1941, but only because his father had a relationship with the director of the Office of Naval Intelligence in Washington.¹⁰ The fact that Kennedy needed his father to intervene in and influence his naval application was likely detrimental to his self-image, which was already damaged by his ceaseless illness and struggles to engage in basic movements.

Kennedy's insecurity was only amplified by his relationship with his older brother, Joe Kennedy Jr., whom Kennedy felt was the favourite of his parents. Joe was "strong, bright, dutiful, and athletic—everything one would hope for in a son," whereas Kennedy was "not only frail and sickly but also underachieving and dilatory."¹¹ Their sibling rivalry was worsened by the attitude of his father who insisted that "winning was everything."¹² Every aspect of Kennedy's relationship with his brother was rooted in competition, from school grades to white blood cell counts.¹³ Following Joe Jr.'s death in combat in August 1944, Kennedy became the new legacy-maker of his father, who used his influence and wealth to prop up Kennedy's political career. In his death, Joe Jr. 'won' his sibling rivalry with Kennedy in perpetuity. His strength and brightness were immortalized in his noble death. Kennedy could never live up to his brother, but he spent the rest of his life trying to prove himself to his parents and those around him.

Shortly after Kennedy's election to the U.S. Senate in 1953, the Cuban Revolution began. The revolutionaries did not see victory over the dictatorial Fulgencio Batista until the final day of 1958, while Kennedy was planning his presidential campaign for 1960. The United States reaction to the Cuban revolution began with overwhelming public support for Castro and his rebels. The revolutionaries were portrayed as "real men," fighting for freedom against an oppressive regime.¹⁴ Castro himself was described as the epitome of manliness, due to his thick beard, muscular build, preference for wearing military fatigues, and his signature cigar. His masculine image was marketed to American children, who purchased comic books bearing Castro's face and dressed up as "rebel fighters" in green military fatigues for Halloween.¹⁵ The commercialization of Castro demonstrated that to the American public, Castro was an "acceptable masculine role model" for children.¹⁶ As the Revolution took a more leftist turn in January 1959 with the agrarian

10 James N Giglio, "Growing Up Kennedy: The Role of Medical Ailments in the Life of JFK, 1920-1957," *Journal of Family History* 31, no. 4 (2006): 370.

11 Ibid., 360.

12 Ibid.

13 Ibid., 362, 365.

14 Woodard, "Real Men."

15 Ibid., 8-9.

16 Ibid., 9.

land reform laws, however, the media swiftly changed tactics to portray Castro's masculinity as a threat rather than something admirable.¹⁷

While Kennedy's senatorial career was focused primarily on domestic affairs and foreign affairs in Southeast Asia, there were several occasions where he felt the need to comment on the state of Latin America, especially the state of Cuba. At a democratic dinner in San Juan, Puerto Rico in December of 1958, Kennedy delivered a speech in which he voiced opinions on Latin America that contradicted the policies he would implement come his presidency in 1961. In this speech, he emphasized that Latin American countries should not be regarded "patronizingly" as being in the United States' "back yard," only worthy of attention in times of emergency, upon which marines would be dispatched to intervene.¹⁸ He argued that "if [The United States] persist[s] in believing that all Latin American agitation is Communist-inspired – that every anti-American voice is the voice of Moscow... then the time may come when [Americans] will learn to our dismay that our enemies are not necessarily their enemies and that our concepts of progress are not yet meaningful in their own terms."¹⁹ He specifically acknowledged Cuba, citing the brutality of the Batista regime which the United States government and private sector helped to "sustain."²⁰ He denounced the U.S. government's policies in Cuba stating: "our policy of non-intervention was not only a fiction, but it was also weighted in favour of an oppressive regime whose persecutions and brutalities far exceeded the retributions of the Castro regime."²¹ He called for aid to be sent to Latin American countries in political turmoil in order to keep them away from Soviet influence while maintaining positive relationships with the United States.

Despite Kennedy asserting his eagerness to keep American influence in Cuba through slightly more liberal and aid-driven means, Castro was becoming increasingly anti-American in the final stretch of the Eisenhower administration. Castro realized that too much of Cuba was reliant on the United States and implemented land reforms to target this issue. He began cutting diplomatic ties to the United States in 1960.²²

During the 1960 presidential campaign between himself and Vice President Richard M. Nixon, Kennedy denounced the Eisenhower administration's treatment of Cuba, blaming Castro's Soviet shift on

them and their "softness."²³ Despite Kennedy's insecurities, his campaign was very much focused on bringing masculinity and youth back to the office of the president.²⁴ Though he was physically weak and ill, his campaign advertised the power of his intellect in an attempt to draw the public eye away from his sickly appearance. There was also a ruthless campaign against Nixon to show the public that Kennedy was going to be tough and effective in dealing with opponents, whether they be domestic or foreign. The campaign against Nixon and the Republican Party was based on their supposed femininity and responsibility for "infantilizing" the United States on the world stage.²⁵ Kennedy's campaign aimed to construct an emergency out of a perceived downfall of masculinity in Washington that the campaign argued was leading to faltering power and respect abroad, especially in comparison with the power and respect afforded the Soviet Union.²⁶ To prove that his administration would be different, Kennedy surrounded himself with culturally masculine figures to prop himself up and strengthen the gendered aspects of his campaign.²⁷ By doing this, Kennedy created a public persona whose strength was rooted in stereotypical masculine gender roles of "toughness", intellect, and "vigor."²⁸ In private, however, his life was far outside the normal 1950s American 'masculine' model. He didn't identify with this model privately, but publicly he felt it greatly important that he align his persona with that of the average American male. He married Jacqueline Lee Bouvier at the age of thirty-seven despite enjoying single life. He did so because, as he told a Senate staffer: "I was thirty-seven years old, I wasn't married, and people would think I was queer if I weren't married."²⁹ For politicians, optics are very important; however, Kennedy's devised public persona was so different from himself that it becomes difficult not to argue that his deep-seated insecurity was the reason for him choosing to publicly act as someone else.

In the fourth presidential debate on October 21, 1960, Kennedy robustly proclaimed: "even though [the U.S. ambassadors to Cuba, Arthur Gardner and Earl E. T. Smith] ... warned of Castro, the Marxist influences around Castro, the Communist influences around Castro, both of them have testified ... that in spite of their warnings to the American

17 Ibid., 10.

18 John F. Kennedy, "A New Attitude in Latin America."

19 Kennedy, "A New Attitude in Latin America."

20 Ibid.

21 Ibid.

22 Lars Schoultz, *That Infernal Little Cuban Republic: The United States and the Cuban Revolution* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2009), 82-108.

23 Robert D. Dean, *Imperial Brotherhood*, 169-170.

24 Ibid.

25 Dean, *Imperial Brotherhood*, 169-170.

26 Ibid.; John F. Kennedy, "Opening Statement" (Debate Speech, New York, 21 October 1960), ABC News.

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=LN8F1FGZfzA>.

27 Dean, *Imperial Brotherhood*, 170.

28 Ibid.

29 Ibid., 179.

government, nothing was done.”³⁰ He said this despite being briefed prior to the debate that a plan was being created by the Eisenhower administration to eliminate the Castro regime.³¹ Kennedy’s efforts as a senator to aid the Cuban Revolution were ignored by both the United States and Cuban governments. Castro hadn’t been overlooking Kennedy and not listening to his calls for goodwill. Kennedy interpreted this as a personal slight. This is evident in the drastic shift in his rhetoric towards Cuba, as he spent the rest of the campaign advertising the same policies he had denounced in Puerto Rico in 1958: interventionism, sanctions, and placing emphasis on how close Cuba was to the United States, effectively adopting the “back yard” sentiment he had previously criticized.³²

Following election night 1960, the vote was so close that Nixon did not concede until noon the next day.³³ As the youngest elected president, Kennedy had to prove that he was capable of running the country with the set of skills he acquired over three terms in the House of Representatives and only one term as a senator. He would do this by primarily focusing on foreign policy, determined to fight the Cold War with a new “toughness” and masculinity not seen by the previous administration.³⁴

Kennedy entered the office of the president on January 20, 1961 with his sights set on Cuba. He began officially planning the Bay of Pigs invasion on January 22, less than 48 hours after becoming president.³⁵ Though the Bay of Pigs invasion was a mission inherited from the Eisenhower administration, Kennedy fast-tracked the planning when he took office. The reasons that he chose Cuba as the first place for his administration to proceed with a covert operation were clear: the presence of a communist regime 90 miles off the coast of Florida was flagrant in the shadow of the United States; his desire to show his competence with foreign policy promptly; and, finally, he wanted to assert his dominance over Fidel Castro, the man described as the epitome of masculinity.

30 Kennedy, “Opening Statement.”

31 Jason Colby, “From Sputnik to Cuba” (Lecture, University of Victoria, 7 October 2019).

32 Kennedy, “Opening Statement”; Kennedy, “A New Attitude in Latin America”; Van Gosse, *Where the Boys Are* (New York: Verso, 1993), 7.

33 Dallek, *John F. Kennedy*, 18-19.

34 Thomas Brown, *JFK: History of an Image* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1988), 52.

35 “Memorandum From the Assistant to the Deputy Director (Plans) for Covert Action (Barnes) to Director of Central Intelligence Dulles” (Department of State, INR/IL Historical Files, Cuba Program, 21 January 1961), Accessed 29 November 2019.

<https://history.state.gov/historicaldocuments/frus1961-63v10>;

The meeting was at 10 AM on January 22nd. John F. Kennedy became president on January 20th at 12 PM, less than 48 hours before the meeting.

Since the mission was planned so quickly, in just three months, many of Kennedy’s top officials questioned the likelihood of a successful invasion and there was intense division between the departments of State and Defense.³⁶ Robert McNamara, Kennedy’s Secretary of Defense “questioned whether such a small force could really achieve a worthwhile objective,” to which Admiral A. Burke, Chief of Naval Operations for both Eisenhower and Kennedy replied that the plan would be effective if there was sufficient support for the guerillas. McNamara asserted that “CIA should be told that their plan is not considered to be a good one,” and asked that a new plan be developed.³⁷ In the following months, several plans were introduced and thrown out by Kennedy. Despite the CIA ensuring him on several occasions that even if their plan failed an anti-Castro revolution in Cuba would be sparked, the President remained unsure. The CIA based this information on a report from February of 1961 that cited “diminishing popular support for the Castro government,” and estimated that “fewer than twenty percent of people” supported Castro, and that the majority assumed he would soon fall.³⁸ It is unclear where the information on the report came from, and the accuracy is questionable.

The Bay of Pigs invasion was an astounding failure for the United States, and, perhaps more frustratingly for Kennedy, a massive success for Castro’s Cuba. Within just three days, the invading forces launched from Guatemala and Nicaragua were soundly defeated. The invasion failed for many reasons: the limiting of U.S. air support to half of what was planned; the refusal to deploy American reinforcements; and, perhaps most importantly, the fact that only conceptual elements of the operation were committed to writing, while the details were only discussed orally, leading to disastrous miscommunication during the invasion.³⁹ Kennedy and his “loyalists” were furious.⁴⁰ They blamed the CIA for giving them false information and bad advice, which we now know to be accurate.⁴¹ What we see when we consider the failure of

36 Peter Kornbluh, *Bay of Pigs Declassified: The Secret CIA Report on the Invasion of Cuba* (New York: The New Press, 1998), 285.

37 Naval Intelligence for the Director of Naval Operations, “Editorial Note: Review of record of proceedings related to Cuban Situation,” (28 January 1961. Bumpy Road Materials, Area Files. Naval Historical Center, Washington, D.C., United States) Accessed 29 November 2019.

<https://history.state.gov/historicaldocuments/frus1961-63v10/d32>

38 Kornbluh, *Bay of Pigs Declassified*, 294-295.

39 Don Bohning, *The Castro Obsession: U.S. Covert Operations Against Cuba, 1959-1965* (Washington: Potomac Books, 2005), 51, 255.

40 Ibid., 51; Bohning cites Arthur Schlesinger, Jr. and Theodore Sorensen as the “Kennedy loyalists.”

41 Bohning, *The Castro Obsession*, 51.

the Bay of Pigs invasion is Kennedy's unwillingness to accept responsibility should the operation fail. During planning he wanted it to look as if the United States had no involvement in the invasion so that in the event of failure it could not be traced back to them. When the invasion did fail, he still shifted blame onto others, even though he had not been confident in the invasion plans but approved them anyway. The CIA gave him inaccurate information, which Kennedy evidently sensed during the planning, but he had every opportunity to delay the invasion until a plan with a greater chance of success was introduced. He was simply impatient to overthrow Castro and assert that a young president was capable of being tough and competent in foreign affairs. Instead, he proved his incompetence and isolated an officially communist Cuba which was now more hostile than ever.

On April 21, 1961, Kennedy took sole public responsibility for the failure of the Bay of Pigs invasion. Despite his attempts to keep the United States' involvement in the invasion as little known to the press and public as possible, it was not covered up well. In a news conference, Kennedy made this famous statement:

There's an old saying that victory has 100 fathers and defeat is an orphan...I've said as much as I feel can be usefully said by me in regard to the events of the past few days. Further statements, detailed discussions, are not to conceal responsibility, because I'm the responsible officer of the government, but merely because I, and that is quite obvious, but merely because I do not believe that such a discussion would benefit us during the present difficult situation.⁴²

The failure of the Bay of Pigs invasion destroyed what little self-esteem Kennedy had when he entered the office of the president. The United States, one of the two global superpowers, was bested by a country a fraction of its size. Kennedy was unable to overthrow Castro, a man who epitomized strength and masculinity. Like his brother Joe, Kennedy found in Castro a rival whom he could never seem to beat.

Operation Mongoose, a CIA operation commissioned by the Eisenhower administration and authorized by Kennedy in late 1961, aimed to assassinate Castro in order to cause an internal revolt in Cuba, to undermine his regime.⁴³ This operation also failed in most aspects,

⁴² John F. Kennedy, "News Conference 10."

⁴³ Fabian Escalante, *The Cuba Project: CIA Covert Operations 1959-62* (New York: Ocean Press, 2004), 98-109; "Memorandum from President Kennedy" (30 November 1961. Top Secret, Security, Cuba, Countries Series, President's Office Files. Kennedy Library, Boston, Massachusetts, United States) Accessed 5 December 2019. <https://history.state.gov/historicaldocuments/frus1961-63v10/d278>

as Castro was seemingly always one step ahead of the Americans. The Bay of Pigs and the introduction of Operation Mongoose led to increased tensions between the two nations until they finally reached a head in October of 1962 when a U2 spy plane discovered ballistic missile positions for intermediate and medium-range ballistic missiles in Cuba.⁴⁴ On October 22, Kennedy ordered a naval blockade to go into effect on October 24. The United States was under the impression that missiles were not yet on the island and took provisions to keep them away. It came as a relief to the rest of the world when Khrushchev and Castro agreed to remove all missiles and strategic weapons from Cuba on October 28.⁴⁵ Publicly, this looked like a victory for the United States. Secretly, however, Kennedy had promised Khrushchev that he would remove American missiles that were stationed in Turkey at the time. The resolution of the Cuban Missile Crisis was actually a stalemate, but Kennedy was allowed to claim victory. In taking responsibility for the victory of the Cuban Missile Crisis, Kennedy was finally able to best Castro publicly. Castro's government was still communist and close by, and Kennedy tried to topple the regime until his death, but overall, he was more concerned with his public reputation than Castro's nearby presence. For a moment, Kennedy was victorious over Castro, the epitome of 1950s masculinity. He believed he had singlehandedly stopped nuclear war.

Kennedy's obsession with proving himself by besting Castro came to pass from a multitude of different reasons: from his lifelong illness keeping him physically weak, from his father insisting that "winning was everything," from his inability to best his older brother Joe Jr., and from his slim electoral victory over Richard Nixon. These experiences made Kennedy obsess over masculine gender roles and they became an integral part of his presidential campaign and his public persona. He admitted that he would have remained unmarried if it was socially acceptable for a man to do so. His campaign against Nixon was rooted in creating an emergency out of masculinity being absent from the White House. When Castro, a "real man" became an opponent of the United States despite Kennedy's efforts to befriend him, he saw in Castro an opportunity to prove that he was tough and masculine enough to defeat him. Kennedy immediately began planning for the Bay of Pigs invasion after his inauguration, which ended as a colossal failure. Following this, the CIA continuously attempted to eliminate the Cuban leader in Operation Mongoose. After nearly a year of the CIA achieving nothing, tensions amped up and the Cuban Missile Crisis occurred. Kennedy's public victory over Cuba and communism was

⁴⁴ Escalante, *The Cuba Project*, 177.

⁴⁵ Escalante, *The Cuba Project*, 181.

enough of a victory to ease tensions for a time. He would never fully defeat Castro, however, as he was assassinated on November 22, 1963. Following Lyndon B. Johnson's swearing-in, Operation Mongoose was scrapped and, though the U.S. and Cuba wouldn't rekindle their diplomatic relationship until 2013 under the Obama administration, the relationship between the two countries coexisted relatively uneventfully, making the Cuban-American conflict uniquely Kennedy's.



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