

Media Cold Warriors: How the Operation Pedro Panes Reinforced

Cold War Policies towards Cuba

By Meghan Vail

In *The Lost Apple: Operation Pedro Pan, Cuban Children in the U.S., and the Promise of a Better Future*, political scientist María de los Angeles Torres appropriately situates Cuban children at the heart of U.S. Cold War strategy to destabilize the Fidel Castro regime, undermine the legitimacy of the Cuban revolutionary government, and eliminate once and for all the threat of communism as a viable political movement in the Western Hemisphere. Describing the migration of more than 14,000 Cuban children to the United States in what would be termed by the U.S. media in the early 1960s as “Operation Pedro Pan,”¹ Torres writes, “for the United States, the young refugees were living proof of the horrors of communism, children who had to be saved and brought to freedom” (2). So central were children to U.S. Cold War efforts that Operation Pedro Pan and its successor, the Cuban Children’s Program, departed from traditional U.S. immigration policy. “Never before,” Felix Masud-Piloto explains, “had the United States government funded foster care of refugee children in the United States. Previous child refugee programs had been supported by private organizations, church groups, and individual donations” (40).

“Saving” the children became a *de facto* U.S. foreign policy objective that was marketed not only to Americans, but also to Cuban families. The CIA convinced many parents that they would lose parental authority over their children if the children remained in Cuba (Torres 89-92). This rumor was disseminated through CIA-operated

¹ Or “Operation Peter Pan”, in reference to J.M. Barrie’s work about a boy who flies and never grows up.

Radio Swan and by word of mouth from underground groups, such that “the fear that the government would control the children was persuasive,” (Torres 90) and children were directly implicated in a democratic future for Cuba. *Time Magazine* warned Americans in a 1961 article that “since taking power, Castro ha[d] worked tirelessly to mold his nation's youth into loyal—and militant—Communist cadres. Reading primers assure[d] that the first name youngsters learn[ed] to spell is Fidel or Raúl, that their first animal stories [we]re set on collective farms, [and] that their first bogeymen [we]re Yanqui imperialists” (“Now the Children”).

The U.S. Government’s objective of garnering public support for its Cuba policies in the Cold War period was facilitated by media propaganda stressing the plight of Cuban children under Castro. The use of Cuban children as media pawns can easily be observed in American newspaper articles from the early 1960s that discuss or feature Cuban “refugee” children who immigrated through Operation Pedro Pan.

Although the covert endeavor officially began on December 26, 1960 (“Cuban Refugee Children”), Operation Pedro Pan was initially withheld from the American public in an effort to prevent discovery by the Cuban Government, as well as to avoid backlash against Cuban families whose children had obtained visa waivers to leave. Despite a statement by the chief coordinator of Operation Pedro Pan, Monsignor Bryan Walsh, that “every effort was made during the entire Operation Pedro Pan to keep it secret and to avoid any effort to use it for political propaganda” (“Case of Elian”), U.S. press articles featuring the refugee children are highly politicized and suggestive of the possibility that caring for the immigrant children offered an opportunity for Americans to participate in the national struggle against Castro and communism.

While this paper does not provide a comprehensive examination of Operation Pedro Pan press coverage from the early 1960s, it is worth examining several of these publications in order to understand how the publicity surrounding this underground operation, touted as “the underground railway in the sky” (Miller 7), reflected U.S. policy interests both in overthrowing the Castro regime and in defeating communism. Children of Operation Pedro Pan played a critical role in U.S. media efforts to emphasize the threat posted by other Cold War actors, to exaggerate and criticize social conditions in Cuba under Castro, and to depict the horrors of communism.

In order to understand how U.S. media publications in the early 1960s reflected U.S. policy interests, one must first recall essential U.S. foreign policy objectives concerning Cuba during that time. When the Cuban Revolution succeeded on January 1, 1959, the primary concerns of the Eisenhower administration were the socialist economic initiatives taken by the Castro government, and chief among these, the Agrarian Reform of May 1959. After the United States had enjoyed prosperity from foreign investment under the U.S.-business friendly regime of Fulgencio Batista, the Agrarian Reform was recognized as a precipitating “event that led the U.S. Government to use any and all means to overthrow the new power in Cuba” (“First Agrarian” 153). Eisenhower’s “chief concern was the extent of communist activities in Cuba” (Welch 42) fed by CIA indications that Castro posed a security threat to the United States (Welch 45). The flames of mistrust were fanned by the trade agreement established between Cuba and the Soviet Union in February of 1960, as well as by the nationalization of U.S. companies in Cuba in August of 1960.

Attempts to overthrow the Castro regime through covert military action and assassination were authorized by the Eisenhower administration and continued when John F. Kennedy assumed the presidency in 1961. The Bay of Pigs operation that took place in April of 1961 was planned with the theory that “the revolution would collapse” without Castro (Kornbluh 9). The Bay of Pigs initiative had embodied two central U.S. foreign policy goals: the first, that “the Castro regime should be overthrown. The other was that the political and moral posture of the United States before the world at large should not be impaired” (Kornbluh 13). In the wake of an embarrassing defeat of Cuban exile forces, the United States was awakened to the reality that Castro enjoyed popular support from the Cuban people.

The Bay of Pigs fiasco ultimately contributed to a strengthening of Cuba-Soviet ties through Cuba’s fear of continued U.S. aggression, as well as through the willingness of the Cuban Government to accede to armed protection from the Soviet Union in the form of missiles placed in Cuban territory in late 1962, posing a nuclear threat to the United States. Operation Pedro Pan developed amidst this background of international Cold War conflict and can be understood not only as one in a series of covert attempts to undermine Castro, but also as a State-sponsored, if, like Bay of Pigs, a “technically deniable” (Kornbluh 13), effort to prove the ineffectiveness of communism in the international arena.

When Operation Pedro Pan emerged in the American press in 1962, it appeared in newspapers nationwide and was featured in many local papers that were published by towns and cities that had welcomed the foreign “youngsters” in response to a call for foster homes by the Catholic Welfare Bureau in Miami, the entity that was authorized by

the State Department to carry out the covert endeavor. One of the media sources in which Pedro Panes were most prominently featured was *The Miami Herald*.

In a *Herald* article from August of 1962, 13-year-old Anna María Delgado is depicted as a young refugee whose journey to Miami from her home in Matanzas, Cuba is an escape from “the Russians” as well as the “Africans” who began to attend her school and who are “all over the place,” are “always barefooted,” and who “talk funny.” The reader is invited to sympathize for the child as a consequence of the fear that she experiences in the presences of these intimidating foreigners, among them “Russian soldiers in heavy boots,” a fear that inspires Anna to seek refuge in Miami International Airport (Potts). Unknowingly referring to the buildup of Russian soldiers and the provisions of Soviet war equipment to Cuba in the summer of 1962 (“Russian Presence”), Anna holds symbolic power as an innocent victim of Soviet aggression. Moreover, she can be interpreted as a spokesperson for hawkish Americans seeking justification for military intervention in Cuba.

Another interesting example of U.S. foreign policy propaganda filtered through Operation Pedro Pan and featuring Cold War actors, a *Miami News* article written by Mary Louise Wilkinson in February of 1962 tells the story of several youth who are refugees from a Cuba that is at the mercy of the Soviet Union. Wilkinson writes, “As the Soviet bear [tightens] its stranglehold on the Cuban people...all too often the fathers and mothers have no choice” but to send their children to the United States (3A). The article suggests that Cuba is a puppet of Soviet influence, emphasizing Cuba’s dependency on the Eastern superpower in the wake of the suspension of the U.S. sugar quota in July of 1960, as well as the partial U.S. embargo trade restrictions applied by Eisenhower in

October of that same year (Franklin 26-31). In contrast with Cuba, therefore, the U.S. becomes a place in which children can be adequately provided for.

In addition to the critical portrayal of Cold War actors, a second dominant theme that can be observed in articles featuring Pedro Panes is the portrayal of Cuba as an impoverished country under the leadership of Fidel Castro, who, according to various press sources, is preventing Cuban children from achieving a primary education. While statistics indicate that in 1959, “half of Cuba’s children did not attend school at all” (Gasperini 299), the articles published in 1962 that report a failure on the part of the Castro government to educate children largely neglect to specify that children did have the option to obtain schooling in the wake of the Revolution - albeit no longer in a private educational environment after the Castro government closed the private school system in 1961 (Triay xiii).

A March 1962 article from the *Evansville Press* relates the story of 50 Pedro Panes who are resettled in Indiana after journeying to Miami. The article paints a vivid image of the Cuba that two particular little girls, one arriving in “four thin dresses”,² left behind. In addition to avoiding “the Communists,” the girls are reported to have made the journey both because “they hadn’t seen the inside of a school house since Castro closed the schools” the previous year and because “they were hungry.” Portrayed as helpless and in need, the children are depicted as youngsters full of gratitude for their American rescuers.

In an effort to undermine the integrity of the Castro regime, the news reporter neglects to factually report on other educational initiatives undertaken by the Cuban

² The “thin dresses” are likely a reflection of the Cuban climate but, I argue, can also be understood as an attempt to appeal to the American interpretation of “thin” in this context as connoting poverty.

Government in the aftermath of the revolution, including the 1960-1961 Literacy Campaign to engage urban youth as reading and writing teachers in rural Cuba (Cluster and Hernández 215). Similar to other articles representing a myriad of foreign policy themes, “Cuban Tots” attempts to sensationalize the operation removing children from Cuba by cloaking Operation Pedro Pan and the identities of the minors in secrecy. News reporter Gene Miller writes, “no one is telling how it (the Operation) is done” because “the risk of reprisal is too great.” Concerning the arriving children, he writes, “the names used will not be real” (Miller 7).

This exaggeration of the Cuban social condition under Castro can also be seen in the aforementioned Wilkinson article, which features “pocket-size Cuban refugee” Oscar, whose journey to the United States is a consequence of hunger and the apparent inability of his “Communist-caught parents” to provide for him. “I came here,” Oscar advises, “because my grandmother couldn’t get me anything to eat in Cuba. She’s too old to stand in line.” Despite the historic context of Oscar’s observation, the establishment of a food rationing system in Cuba in March of 1962 due to changes in farm ownership and organization, as well as the U.S. embargo (Alvarez), the pity for Oscar is intended to evoke criticism towards the Cuban Government which, in the U.S. perspective, is responsible for its own economic crisis.

Wilkinson also seeks to elicit pity from the reader by observing that the children with whom she speaks “talk in adult terms about things with which no child should have to contend.” In contrast with the dismal Cuba, the United States is portrayed as a haven for children like Oscar, who is able to have a carefree existence and receive an education at his Kindergarten, where he “...[learns his] ABC’s, lunch[es] at tiny, chin-high tables,

watch[es] television and play[s].” According to the article, Miami is a welcome home for the children refugees like Consuelo, who “...knows she isn’t in Cuba and says she doesn’t want to go back” (Wilkinson 3A).

The most eye-opening element of this article is the politicization of the children’s game ‘Cops and Robbers’³ in which the embodiment of Fidel Castro as a ‘bad guy’ is indicative of a U.S. desire to sell governmental opinion of Castro through Pedro Panes. At play, another Cuban child, 6-year old Pedro (who, incidentally, “insists that it’s pronounced Peter,”) withdraws a toy gun and cries, “Fidel will die when I shoot him. Bam! He’s bad. He shoots Americans. He’d shoot me, too, if I was there.” Oscar, who is also at play with Pedro, “...dashes off momentarily to chase an unseen Communist adversary...” (Wilkinson 3A). Pedro’s incorporation of political aggression in the children’s game can be understood as a tactic not only to reveal contempt for the Castro regime on the part of its own citizens, but also to communicate that Castro’s communist influence has so profoundly affected Cuban youth that even their simple child’s play has not been spared.

A February 1962 article in the *Marathon Keynoter* of Marathon, Florida paints a similar picture of a poverty-stricken, militaristic Cuba under which Cuban children suffer from hunger due to coercive activity on the part of the government, which is depicted as unable to provide for them. The three Pedro Panes featured in the article “...tell of standing in food lines for up to six hours – only to be driven away hungry by armed soldiers.” In addition, the author writes contemptuously, “between the three day intervals they filled in a sketchy diet with “cow” pumpkins, a rather tasteless, gourd-like melon”

³ Traditionally enjoyed as “Cowboys and Indians” by children in Cuba. See Pedro Pan Carlos Eire’s memoir *Waiting for Snow in Havana* in which he references the popular American theme of the cowboy in Cuban culture (p 71).

("Displaced Tots"). The reader is again given no factual context for the alleged plight of the children.

The article also attempts to appeal to conservative Americans intolerant of the newly designated atheistic state of the Cuban Government. In what the author describes as "Communist cunning, carefully employed," the children have recalled for the author an activity administered in their schools in Cuba in which prayers to God for ice cream go unanswered, while prayers to Castro result in a cup of ice cream placed before each student. Only under the guidance of an American guardian, the author argues, will "these Godless thoughts... no doubt soon vanish from the minds of Carlos, Marjorie, and Alicia" ("Displaced Tots").⁴ Cuba, then, becomes a conversion project for the American populace to restore religious observance in Cuba, beginning with the Pedro Panes temporarily sheltered in their care.

Although children of Operation Pedro Pan served as a tool for the U.S. media to criticize the Castro regime for the poor social conditions in Cuba that the United States attributed solely to the regime, not all news articles were embellished as greatly as those that have been cited. From the perspective of U.S. policy towards Cuba, the utility of these and other articles containing criticism of the Cuban Government was that these criticisms were voiced not by Americans, but by (young) Cuban citizens renouncing their own leader. Moreover, the political subtext of many of the articles pandered to the conservative, resident Cuban-American community. An article published by the Diocese of Alexandria, Louisiana featured the perspective of nine young Cuban men who, according to the article, were "made homeless by Communism." The young men echo

⁴ This article is cited from notes I prepared on newspaper clippings that I examined at the Operation Pedro Pan Archives at Barry University in Miami Shores, Florida in June of 2009. I do not possess a hard copy of the actual newspaper article at this time.

U.S governmental opinion of Fidel Castro. “We didn’t know he was such a bad man,” one of the boys states (“Young Cubans Find”).⁵

The children of Operation Pedro Pan play a pivotal role in U.S. media efforts not only to illustrate the threat posed by other Cold War actors and to criticize socioeconomic conditions under the Castro government, but also to provide a condemnation of the tragedy of communism as an international menace. *The Steubenville Register*, a Catholic⁶ publication from Steubenville, Ohio, features a March 1962 article entitled “Cuban Reds Concentrate on Conquering Children” in which the author portrays Cuban children as victims of a governmental campaign to “capture the minds of Cuban children.” The campaign that is referenced by the article refers to the two student groups created to monitor counter-revolutionary activity, the Union of Rebel Pioneers and the Association of Rebel Youths (Conde 30-31). The extent of the educational programs’ influence, however, is greatly exaggerated by the article’s author(s).

Offering no factual, propaganda-free reference to the student organizations, or to the Cuban Government’s literacy campaigns, the author(s) dramatize(s) that “from the moment the Cuban child leaves the cradle until he reaches young manhood, his education is rigidly prescribed by the state.” In the article’s conclusion, Cuba’s Rebel Youth

⁵ It is interesting to pair this publicity of Cuba as a prison-like island from which few could escape in that historic moment not only with the realization of Kennedy’s initial encouragement of illegal Cuban emigration as a destabilizing tactic (Marrawi and Méndez 116), but also with imminent migration restrictions that would soon be imposed upon U.S. citizens by its own government.

⁶ The Catholic Church in the United States, under the authority of the U.S. Department of State, coordinated Operation Pedro Pan through the Catholic Welfare Bureau in Miami. The Bureau arranged for housing, foster care, and social services for Cuban youth in Miami and in 36 states throughout the country (Thomas). Although outside the purview of this paper, the significance of publications such as the *Steubenville Register* is that the Catholic Church in the United States and Cuba was vehemently counter-revolutionary and vocally critical of Castro and communism. Of the Catholic Church in the U.S., Torres explains that “Communism was seen as the antithesis of a Catholic way of life that valued family and private education,” such that “one of the strongest allies of the U.S. government’s fight against communism became the Catholic Church” (36). Within Cuba, Crespo and Marrawi write that “...la Iglesia, al oponerse al proceso transformador revolucionario de la sociedad, asumió una posición de confrontación política no solo con la dirección revolucionaria, sino también con las masas populares” (24).

Association is deprecatingly recognized as one in which, to the apparent detriment of Cuban youth, membership is a matter of ideological achievement, and "...mountainous hatreds are instilled" into the nation's boys and girls ("Cuban Reds"). While not specifically children of the Operation Pedro Pan program, these Cuban children are used to illustrate an explicit link between hatred and communist ideology.

Another article featuring Pedro Panes stresses that the threat of communism is not limited to Cuba and the Soviet Union, but rather has infiltrated the international system. A clipping from the *Miami Daily News* in March of 1962, reporting on the influx of 8,000 Cuban children to Florida through Operation Pedro Pan, asserts that "in all the countries which the Communists have taken over, the hard party corps concentrates on indoctrination of the children on the theory that adults are less likely to accept brainwashing and become Communists" ("Cuban Children Find"). Notably, there is a lack of specificity as to which countries have been "taken over." Of greater significance, however, is the news media's appropriation of the children of Operation Pedro Pan as victims of a virulent communist ideology that is allegedly sweeping the world.

A careful reading of American news publications in the early years of the Cuban Revolution between 1959 and 1962 - years that were characterized by Cold War conflict and competing domestic and foreign policy interests on the part of Cuba, the Soviet Union, and the United States - reveals that the children of Operation Pedro Pan were employed by the United States media as a propaganda tool to emphasize the threat posed by other Cold War actors, to criticize Cuba's socioeconomic conditions attributed to Fidel Castro, and to publicize the horrors of communist ideology that demanded its eradication from the Western Hemisphere. At the hands of the media, the Pedro Panes

ultimately served as a living justification for U.S. foreign policy objectives concerning Cuba and the Soviet Union in one of the most ideologically charged periods of the Cold War.

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