

Media Cold Warriors: How the Pedro Panes Reinforced Cold War Policies toward Cuba

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MEGHAN VAIL, WHO graduated with an MA from LLILAS in 2011, received the award for Best LLILAS Student Paper at the ILASSA31 Conference in February. Her paper is reprinted here in an abridged version. The full-text version with

complete references is available in the LANIC Etext Collection/LLILAS Archive at <http://lanic.utexas.edu/project/etext/>.

In *The Lost Apple: Operation Pedro Pan, Cuban Children in the U.S., and the Promise of a Better Future*, María de los Angeles Torres situates Cuban children at the heart of U.S. Cold War strategy to destabilize the Fidel Castro regime, undermine the Cuban revolutionary government, and eliminate the threat of communism 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).

“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 Radio Swan and by word of mouth from underground groups, such that “the fear that the government would control the children was persuasive” (90). *Time* magazine warned Americans that “since taking power, Castro ha[d] worked tirelessly to mold his nation’s youth into loyal—and militant—Communist cadres ...” (“Now the Children”).

The U.S. government’s objective of garnering public support for its Cuba policies 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 feature Cuban “refugee” children who immigrated through Operation Pedro Pan.

While this paper does not provide a comprehensive examination of Operation Pedro Pan press coverage, it is worth examining several

of these publications in order to understand how the publicity surrounding this underground operation 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 posed by other Cold War actors, to exaggerate and criticize social conditions under Castro, and to depict the horrors of communism.

In order to recognize 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. 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 (45). The flames of mistrust were fanned by the trade agreement established between Cuba and the Soviet Union in February 1960, as well as by the nationalization of U.S. companies in Cuba in August 1960.

Attempts to overthrow the Castro regime through covert military action and assassination were authorized by Eisenhower and continued when John F. Kennedy assumed the presidency in 1961. The Bay of Pigs operation that took place in April 1961 was planned with the theory that “the revolution would collapse” without Castro



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(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” (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 strengthened 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. Operation Pedro Pan developed amid this background of international Cold War conflict and can be understood not only as an attempt 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.

An interesting example of U.S. foreign policy propaganda filtered through Operation Pedro Pan, a *Miami News* article written by Mary Louise Wilkinson in February 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 1960 (Franklin 26–31).

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 Castro’s leadership. A March 1962 article from the *Evansville Press* relates the story of fifty 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, the children are depicted as youngsters full of gratitude for their American rescuers.

In an effort to undermine the Castro regime, the news reporter

neglects to report factually on other educational initiatives undertaken by the Cuban 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, “Cuban Tots” attempts to sensationalize the operation 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” (7).

This exaggeration of the Cuban social conditions 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 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 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 toward the Cuban government which, from the U.S. perspective, is responsible for its own economic crisis.

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, 6-year-old Pedro (who “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 into 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. From the perspective of U.S. policy, 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.

A February 1962 article in the *Marathon Keynoter* of Marathon, Florida, 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

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children have recalled for the author an activity administered in their Cuban schools 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”). 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.

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 communism as an international menace. *The Steubenville Register*, a Catholic⁴ 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).

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 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.

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. ✨

Notes

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

4. With the authority of the U.S. Department of State, the Catholic Welfare Bureau in Miami coordinated Operation Pedro Pan, arranging for housing, foster care, and social services for Cuban youth in Miami and in thirty-six states throughout the country (Thomas). 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. Torres explains, “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).

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LLILAS is pleased to announce the creation of the Alejandro Junco Scholarships for the Study of Social Problems in Mexico. By facilitating collaborative research, this program will shed light on how sectors of society in the U.S. and Mexico approach shared social problems from different perspectives.

Six scholarships of approximately \$3,000 each are available, three for UT students and three for students from Mexican universities, with each UT student paired with a counterpart from Mexico. The teams work in the field for 8–10 weeks during the summer with a private or civil society organization or university on a social problem of significant importance to Mexican society or to bilateral relations between Mexico and the U.S. At the completion of their research, the students meet with media experts in Mexico to discuss dissemination of their findings.

The six recipients of the first Junco Scholarships were, from UT, Leticia Aparicio, Ingrid Haeckel, and Brandon Hunter, and from Mexico, Martin Barrios (Comisión de Derechos del Valle de Tehuacán), Yureli Garcia De La Cruz (Universidad Veracruzana), and Oscar Montiel Torres (CIESAS–Distrito Federal).

The scholarships are funded by noted Mexican journalist Alejandro Junco, a graduate of the University of Texas who has spent his career working to heighten the political awareness of Mexican citizens. He is the publisher of *Reforma*, *Mural*, and *El Norte*, and for his contributions to journalism received UT’s Distinguished Alumnus Award in 2000.