Masculinity as Ideology: John F. Kennedy and the Domestic Politics of Foreign Policy
Author(s): ROBERT D. DEAN
Published by: Oxford University Press
Stable URL: http://www.jstor.org/stable/24913720

JSTOR is a not-for-profit service that helps scholars, researchers, and students discover, use, and build upon a wide range of content in a trusted digital archive. We use information technology and tools to increase productivity and facilitate new forms of scholarship. For more information about JSTOR, please contact support@jstor.org.

Your use of the JSTOR archive indicates your acceptance of the Terms & Conditions of Use, available at http://about.jstor.org/terms

Oxford University Press is collaborating with JSTOR to digitize, preserve and extend access to Diplomatic History
Masculinity as Ideology: 
John F. Kennedy and the Domestic Politics of 
Foreign Policy

We are, I am afraid, in danger of losing something solid at the core. We are losing that Pilgrim and pioneer spirit of initiative and independence - that old-fashioned Spartan devotion to "duty, honor, and country." We don't need that spirit now, we think. Now we have cars to drive and buttons to push and TV to watch - and pre-cooked meals and prefab houses. We stick to the orthodox, to the easy way and the organization man. We take for granted our security, our liberty, and our future - when we cannot take any one of them for granted at all....

I do not say that we have all weakened. There was, in Korea, a young prisoner of war who was singled out of the line-up upon capture and asked his opinion of General Marshall. "General George C. Marshall," he replied, "is a great American soldier." Promptly a rifle butt knocked him to the ground. Then he was stood up again to face his captors - and again he was asked: "What do you think of General Marshall?" And again he gave the same steadfast reply - only this time there was no rifle butt, no punishment at all. They had tested his will, his courage to resist, his manhood - and now they knew where to classify him.

- Senator John F. Kennedy, 1 January 1960

John F. Kennedy's career was premised on an "ideology of masculinity"; he used this ideology to justify his claim to presidential power. Employing culturally resonant images derived from America's republican heritage, Kennedy constructed an aristocratic persona embodying the virtues of the stoic warrior-intellectual. He deployed an image of youth, "vigor," moral courage, and "toughness." Kennedy both shared and exploited popular fears that equated a perceived "crisis" of American masculinity with the decline of American power abroad, using them to frame his presidential campaign and his programs while in office. The United States had "gone soft - physically, mentally, spiritually soft," Kennedy asserted, with the power of the nation threatened by "the slow corrosion of luxury - the slow erosion of our courage" during the preceding eight years of Republican rule. He campaigned for office promising to halt...
America's decline into flabbiness and impotence against the threat of a "ruthless" and expanding Soviet empire.¹

Scholars and journalists have long noted Kennedy's concern with "toughness" and the presentation of a masculine persona. Often, though, it has been treated as a matter of "style" or "personality" noted with amusing anecdotes, and not analyzed as central to the process of domestic and foreign policy decision making. This essay argues that a more complete history of politics and policy demands consideration of gender as a factor in policy reasoning. Internalized ideals of manliness influenced the way leaders perceived threats posed by foreign powers. Fear of the consequences of being judged "unmanly" influenced the reckoning of political costs or benefits associated with possible responses to those threats. In this sense, gender must be understood not as an independent cause of policy decisions, but as part of the very fabric of reasoning employed by officeholders. For Kennedy and his national security managers, self-conceptions of masculine toughness were inseparable from calculations concerning, for instance, the threat of communism in Latin America or the strategic dangers of appeasement in Vietnam. Foreign policy decisions are motivated by a wide array of "objective" factors, but perceptions of objective conditions are always filtered through cultural systems of meaning, including ideologies of gender. Thus President Kennedy and his foreign policy advisers understood and reacted to objective events as embodied men, products of their culture and its gender prescriptions and proscriptions. Because gender is a fundamental element in the makeup of an individual's worldview, the way that powerful men have imagined masculinity is a problem worthy of study by historians of politics and diplomacy.²

---

¹. John F. Kennedy, "Are We Up to the Task?" _The Strategy of Peace_ (New York, 1960), 200. _Freedom of Communications: Final Report of the Committee on Commerce, United States Senate: Part 1, The Speeches, Remarks, Press Conferences, and Statements of Senator John F. Kennedy, August 1 Through November 7, 1960_ (Washington, 1961), 51, 54–55, 259–60, passim. As used in this essay, an "ideology of masculinity" amounts to a cultural system of prescription and proscription; it organizes the "performance" of an individual's role in society and draws boundaries around the social category of manhood. An ideology of masculinity in its prescriptive aspect provides the raw material needed to imagine and construct a narrative identity – the internal story that lends coherence to the self. In its prescriptive aspect, it rules out certain ways of imagining and acting in the world. An ideology of masculinity is, in this sense, a subset of a larger "gender discourse" – a symbolic system of meaning by which social relations of power and privilege are rendered "natural" and transparent by reference to sexual biology, a supposedly fundamental and unquestionable set of relationships. See also Joan W. Scott, "Gender: A Useful Category of Historical Analysis," _American Historical Review_ 91 (December 1986): esp. 1069–70.

Kennedy and the men of his administration acted in a competitive political arena where the legitimacy of leadership was tied to gender along the polarities of "strength" and "weakness." This essay situates Kennedy and his administration within the U.S. domestic Cold War politics of gender and explores how cultural narratives of imperial manhood helped shape Kennedy administration foreign policy innovations like counterinsurgency doctrine and the Peace Corps. Kennedy and many in his administration were shaped by a class-based tradition of "strenuous" manliness; they acted on the public stage during a period of Cold War anxieties about the "decline" of American manhood.

In keeping with his campaign rhetoric, Kennedy surrounded himself with a staff and cabinet composed of exemplars of masculine virtue. Men such as McGeorge Bundy, Robert McNamara, Douglas Dillon, Robert Kennedy, and others were represented as the "best and the brightest" examples of American manhood. Out of the publicity surrounding the recruitment of administration personnel emerged a composite picture of the ideal "New Frontiersman": one who had performed brilliantly as a scholar and athlete at an Ivy League university, who had been decorated for bravery during service as a junior officer in the Second World War, and who had gone on to serve the nation through brilliant "establishment" careers in government, academia, law, and banking.

Kennedy (and the men of his staff) absorbed a particular class-based gender ideology in a series of sex-segregated male institutions that began in childhood and continued throughout their adulthood. "Masculine identities are lived in the flesh, but fashioned in the imagination." Elite boys' boarding schools, Ivy League universities, fraternities and secret societies, elite volunteer military units, urban men's clubs, and "establishment" careers formed the imagination of manhood for the men of Kennedy's administration.

Kennedy, and many of the men of his administration, were brought up in the tradition of the American upper class that forged manhood out of a specific pattern of "ordeals" — the ordeal of boarding school, the ordeal of nature, and

---


1. This list is journalist Joseph Alsop's. See his I've Seen the Best of It: Memoirs (New York, 1992), 442–47. For something of the flavor of the White House publicity surrounding the staffing of the administration see Deane and David Heller, The Kennedy Cabinet: America's Men of Destiny (1961; reprint, Freeport, NY, 1969).

2. The quote is from Graham Dawson, "The Blond Bedouin: Lawrence of Arabia, Imperial Adventure and the Imagining of English-British Masculinity," in Manful Assertions: Masculinities in Britain since 1800, ed. Michael Roper and John Tosh (London, 1991), 118. For the purposes of this essay, I focus on the role of institutions other than the family in the socialization of elite men. For John F. Kennedy, especially, there is a large biographical literature that uses family dynamics to explain his adult"character." See, for example, Thomas C. Reeves, A Question of Character: A Life of John F. Kennedy (New York, 1991); Nigel Hamilton, JFK: Reckless Youth (New York, 1992); and Doris Kearns Goodwin, The Fitzgeralds and the Kennedys (New York, 1987).
the ordeal of battle. Implicit in this stereotyped pattern was an ideal narrative of manhood. This pattern took form in the late nineteenth century, when the United States was beginning to acquire an overseas empire, and its essential elements continued to provide a masculine ideal for upper-class American men through much of the twentieth century.  

At boarding school (modeled on the British public school) boys were immersed in a neo-stoic “cult of manliness.” Toughened by ritual hazing and taught the utility of conformity, they saw the approval and privilege brought by success in competition and learned of the dangers of weakness or effeminacy. Boys were taught to imagine “service” and “sacrifice” to the state as a responsibility and as a chance to make history in the noblest theater for heroic action. They were taught that the United States had an imperial destiny; that the United States faced danger and the possibility of decline; and that it was the responsibility of men with a legitimate claim to social power to harden their bodies and discipline their minds to realize their own destiny as men while serving the state.  

The ordeal of battle occupied a large place in the imagination of an ideal masculinity. The foreign policy establishment of the Kennedy administration was a direct descendant of the upper-class cult of imperial manhood expressed in the Plattsburg preparedness movement of 1913–1917, with a genealogy traceable through figures such as Henry Stimson, John J. McCloy, and William and McGeorge Bundy. The creation and reproduction of a community of Spartan warrior-heroes promised individual and collective redemption from the effeminate temptations of materialism and promised to bring the post-1898 imperial project into conformity with the republican ideals of manly civic virtue, service, and sacrifice drummed into boys at Groton, Choate, St. Paul’s, and elsewhere. War gave members of a privileged class the opportunity to demonstrate their toughness and courage, to test their endurance, to acquire gravitas and banish the “weightlessness” of privilege. It validated these men’s claims to leadership by connecting their experience with the legacy of America’s soldier-statesmen.  

There was, however, no glory in simply becoming the cannon fodder of an industrial war, especially after the mechanized slaughter in the trenches of World War I. From Theodore Roosevelt’s Rough Riders of the Spanish-Ameri-
can War or the Lafayette Escadrille of the First World War to John Kennedy's PT-boat service in the Second, to create a heroic self-identifying narrative demanded hazardous volunteer service in an elite unit. The construction of masculine heroism required scope for individual risk, initiative, action, and command. The majority of President Kennedy's appointees had served as junior officers in elite units – as OSS operatives, as commando leaders, in submarines, in the Marine Corps, or in other service more glamorous than the regular army.

During the late 1940s and the 1950s as an anti-Communist countersubversive crusade swept the nation, these virile young patricians began their civilian careers in service to the state. The purges of the Red Scare provided prescriptive lessons in the politics and ideology of masculinity. Conservative Republicans attacked the patrician foreign policy establishment by labeling them as effete homosexual Communist sympathizers subverting America from within. In the terms of the sexualized discourse of the Red Scare, "sympathy" with communism was seamlessly and automatically equated with weakness and "sex perversion"; political and sexual crimes were conflated. An institutional purge of homosexuals in the State Department and other government agencies offered suspicious countersubversives further "proof" of elite conspiracies, linked in their minds to Alger Hiss and "rings" of traitors operating out of Foggy Bottom.

The men who later served Kennedy remembered the lessons of the Red Scare and the purges of government and academia. They understood the attacks by the "primitives," as Dean Acheson called them, to be attacks on class privilege and the internationalist assumptions that underlay their tradition of service to the state. The homosexuals in government issue, attacks on the "lavender lads" in the State Department, did not represent a peripheral irrationality by unsophisticated provincials. Instead, it represented a systematic attack on the political legitimacy of the privileged managers of America's empire through an assault on their manhood. To be tarred with the label of...
“weakness,” of being an “unmanly” man, was one part of a process of banishment from a place in the system. To lose that place meant a kind of social death and a loss of masculinity itself; it meant the loss of any opportunity to “make history,” to win glory in contest with other men. It was an ejection from the theater of masculine power.

Kennedy’s men were all touched by the purges and loyalty mania in some way. Some were close to those purged by means of sexual blackmail. A few gave legal counsel to “innocents” accused of political crimes or sexual “deviance.” Some were targets themselves, because of their loyalty to other patricians accused of subversion. Some publicly denounced the chilling effect of the loyalty crusade while acting to remove from their institutional bureaucracies people fingered by the FBI.10

The most dramatic manifestations of the congressional antisubversive crusade ended with Senator Joseph McCarthy’s (R-WI) censure in 1954. But U.S. political and cultural discourse in the second half of the 1950s still manifested a deep concern with the relationship of gender order to political, economic, and social order. Political intellectuals and pundits of other sorts manifested anxieties about the “decline” of masculinity and evidence of worrisome changes in the relations between the sexes. Arthur Schlesinger, Jr., lamented: “Women seem an expanding, aggressive force, seizing new domains like a conquering army, while men, more and more on the defensive, are hardly able to hold their own and gratefully accept assignments from their new rulers.” Schlesinger found in such changes an explanation for the disturbing “sexual ambiguity” of the age. It was “no accident,” he argued, “that homosexuality . . . should be enjoying a cultural boom new in our history.”

Commentators linked changes in the American economy to these unsettling threats to masculinity. They bemoaned the emergence of a new breed of feminized, conformist “organization men” and the growth of a debilitating consumerism sapping the American will to resist Communist encroachment around the world. In this view, the rugged individualism of America’s pioneer heritage had been replaced by “other-directed” white-collar,
middle-class men ensconced in secure but unchallenging slots in large corporations and other bureaucracies — pushing paper rather than hewing an empire from the wilderness.  

While sociologists bewailed the “softness” of men setting their compass by the collective whims and demands of bureaucratic life, many journalists, psychiatrists, and cultural commentators identified another (and perhaps related) source of trouble: smothering “Moms” as agents of effeminizing weakness and decline. Philip Wylie’s wartime characterization of “Moms” as parasitic creatures infantilizing America with their economic and emotional demands became part of the narrative iconography of the 1950s. Represented as powerful figures controlling a “matriarchy,” women, in the shape of “Moms,” were held responsible for a variety of evils besetting American men and American society, including (but not limited to) immaturity, impotence, homosexuality, unfitness for the military draft, isolationism, materialism, consumerism, and susceptibility to various forms of totalitarianism.  

Overtly or covertly these postwar cultural critics harked back to America’s neostoic republican ideological heritage. The problem of virtue, the central term of republican discourse, lay at the heart of the new jeremiads. Critics as diverse as David Riesman, William Whyte, Arthur Schlesinger, Jr., Vance Packard, and even Betty Friedan lamented the decline of American society from earlier values of frugality, individualism, self-denial and struggle on behalf of society. Plaints about “Momism,” the organization man, and “sexual ambiguity” revolved around fears of infantile regression in a society under threat from external enemies and internal weakness. Just as the revolutionary forefathers had lamented the “Elegance, Luxury, and Effeminacy” that threatened the “great, manly, and warlike virtues” of the new republican society, so Vance Packard’s best-selling book warned of “such traits as pleasure-mindedness, 

---

12. Two important sociological texts forming part of this discourse on declining manhood include David Riesman, The Lonely Crowd (New Haven, 1950); and William W. Whyte, The Organization Man (New York, 1956).  
14. For a useful discussion of the intertwining of gendered republicanism with liberalism in American political thought see Mark E. Kann, On the Man Question: Gender and Civic Virtue in America
self-indulgence, materialism, and passivity" eroding the national character. The “trend to hedonism,” Packard declared, “represents regress.”

Kennedy and the “vital center” liberals promised to combat these ominous trends toward regression, to defend imperial and domestic boundaries. Schlesinger’s manifesto of the late 1940s set the tone for liberal claims to manly political legitimacy. The Vital Center placed the “new virility” of liberal anti-communism at the heart of his narrative of political heroism. Sometimes allied with a “tougher breed” of aristocrat, the manly pragmatic liberal avoided on one hand the appeasement and the “emasculated” political energies of the ruling “plutocracy” (that is, businessmen of new entrepreneurial wealth) and the utopian sentimentality of left-wing progressives on the other.

By the late 1950s, Schlesinger warned that America’s regressive trend toward consumption and materialism weakened it in the “grim and unending contest with communism.” The feminized and infantilized culture of the United States could be identified by its pervasive “self-absorption.” “The symptomatic drug of our age is the tranquilizer,” worried Schlesinger. Self-indulgent Moms and organization men threatened the U.S. imperial project by their diversion of American strength into luxury consumption: “By the early ‘60s the Soviet Union . . . will have a superiority in the thrust of its missiles and in the penetration of outer space.” The luxury and abundance of American consumer goods for individual gratification at the expense of public resources for defense had ominous implications, Schlesinger warned. “Let no one forget that through history this condition has led to the fall of empires.”

Popular fears of a feminized, luxury-loving, and declining American “manhood” intersected with fears of the waning of American hegemony over the “developing nations.” These anxieties were clearly expressed in the best-selling novel of 1958, The Ugly American, and in its enthusiastic public reception. The novel, by William Lederer, a naval officer, and Eugene Burdick, a political scientist, has been compared to Uncle Tom’s Cabin and The Jungle in its importance as a work of fiction catalyzing American political debate. A jeremiad endorsed by Lederer’s friend Philip Wylie, The Ugly American warned that masculine republican virtue was the first line of defense against Communist subversion around the world. Serialized in the Saturday Evening Post and a Book-of-the-Month Club selection, it achieved immediate and widespread


popularity. The novel remained on best-seller lists for seventy-eight weeks and sold nearly five million copies.\(^7\)

Lederer and Burdick harbored ambitions to influence then current “foreign aid debates” that they believed made a “perfect backdrop” for the release of the novel. They rushed the completion of *The Ugly American* to get the serialization “on the stands a month or two after congress reconvene[d].” Deliberately controversial, the book provoked widespread alarm about the U.S. foreign aid program. Its prescriptions helped shape both the rhetoric and the legislation of many congressmen. By early 1959, Lederer boasted to his former commander that there were “twenty-one pieces of legislation being introduced into the Congress which include the words ‘The Ugly American.’”\(^8\)

In the Senate, John F. Kennedy found *The Ugly American* congruent with his calls for a tougher, smarter policy of confrontation with the Communists in postcolonial regions. As an aspiring presidential candidate, Kennedy valued the popular book’s ideological buttress to his political exhortations. He had a copy sent to each member of the Senate. It offered a “script” celebrating masculine heroism and struggle that Kennedy found congenial, loosely based on the adventures of American imperial operatives like the CIA’s Edward Lansdale, navy doctor Lieutenant Tom Dooley, and William Lederer himself.

Lederer and Burdick drew upon and further promoted Lansdale’s carefully constructed mythic reputation as a covert miracle worker fighting Asian communism. By borrowing from the lives of Lansdale, Dooley, and other recognizable figures, they made individually heroic solutions in America’s contest with communism seem plausible. Lederer saw himself as a friend and ally of Lansdale “in harmony” with the CIA operative: “our job in Asia is not a matter of money or hordes of people. It only requires a small number of highly trained or skilled guys.” An admirer of Lansdale, Lederer also saw himself as one of the adventurous imperial operatives defending American interests in Southeast Asia. Admiral Felix Stump, commander of the Pacific fleet, had given Lederer a variety of political assignments in the region, including the 1954 loan of the captain’s services to Allen Dulles of the CIA “in connection with [a] special project” in Indochina. Lederer once boasted to a friend that his tasks involved “some of the blinkingest cloak and dagger stuff.” “The adventures,” he confided,

---

were "hazardous enough to be exhilarating and exciting," but the "state of sloth" of overseas U.S. personnel "depressed the hell out of" him.¹⁹

Lederer believed that his experience made him an expert in counterinsurgency, psychological warfare, and "nation-building." *The Ugly American* was a mass-market expression of Lederer's thwarted ambition to join the ranks of counterinsurgency defense intellectuals at CIA-sponsored think tanks like MIT's Center for International Studies (CENIS) to help in "developing a system of mass producing a crowd of 'poor men's Lansdales.'"²⁰ *The Ugly American* helped shape Kennedy's campaign rhetoric, and its themes were reflected in the foreign policy of his administration with programs like the U.S. Army Special Forces, "counterinsurgency" doctrine, covert warfare against Cuba, and the Peace Corps.

*The Ugly American* consisted of a series of fictional cautionary tales warning of defeat in "bits and fragments" facing the United States in confrontations with the Soviets around the postcolonial imperial periphery. Lederer and Burdick portrayed arrogant overseas American diplomats and foreign aid bureaucrats as soft, lazy men, ignorant of the local languages, huddling in their enclaves enjoying a comfortable lifestyle of colonial privilege, vulnerable to the seduc-


tions of the orient. In the meantime, wily and tough Communists were out in the villages of Southeast Asia winning converts to their cause and winning small anticolonial "brushfire wars." Salvation lay in the few hard, bright, committed American men willing to sacrifice ease and complacency by beating the Communists at their own game.

The heroes of *The Ugly American* were of two varieties. Colonel Hillandale, an idealized but thinly disguised depiction of the real buccaneering CIA psywarrior, Edward Lansdale, and Tex Wolchek, a decorated paratrooper wise in the ways of guerrilla warfare, represent the incarnation of middle-class martial virtue and initiative. Father Finian resembled the real Dr. Tom Dooley, a Catholic anti-Communist humanitarian (and, ironically, closeted homosexual and occasional functionary for the CIA). The eponymous "ugly" American Homer Atkins, engineer, inventor, and self-made millionaire, brought the blessings of Yankee technology to the natives. Together they represented the "tough" spirituality and productive generosity of American manhood on a mission into the wilderness. All were distinguished by their frontier skills, their fluency in the indigenous languages, and their willingness and ability to undergo the rigors of working and fighting alongside the natives far from the decadent enclaves of the American embassies and colonial administrations.

Gilbert MacWhite, a Princeton-educated, "hard and muscular," "tough-minded" eastern patrician diplomat, tied together these two aspects of America's special imperial mission in Asia. Inspired by establishment figures like Charles E. Bohlen and George Kennan, the fictional ambassador MacWhite

21. William Lederer first encountered Lieutenant (j.g.) Tom Dooley in 1955 in Haiphong. Dooley operated a clinic as part of the U.S. Navy's "Operation Passage to Freedom," the relocation of North Vietnamese Catholics to the newly created South Vietnam under Diem. Lederer, in his capacity as public affairs aide to Admiral Felix Stump, encouraged Dooley to keep a diary of his experiences. After a nine-month period of supervising the treatment of hundreds of thousands of refugees, Dooley left on one of the last American ships out of Haiphong. Dooley was decorated by President Diem (the citation "inspired" and written by Edward Lansdale) and received the Legion of Merit from the U.S. Navy. He then joined Lederer in Hawaii for help writing his soon-to-be-famous book *Deliver Us From Evil* (1956), replete with fabricated atrocity stories illustrating the tyrannical cruelty and sadism of the godless North Vietnamese regime. The young naval hero soon became a media star, delivering his anti-Communist message in a lecture tour across the United States. During this first period of fame Dooley became acquainted with Cardinal Spellman and Senator John F. Kennedy. However, not long afterward Dooley's navy career abruptly ended with an undesirable discharge. Dooley was homosexual, and the Office of Naval Intelligence had conducted an undercover investigation of his sex life using paid informants in the course of the surveillance. The navy did not want to reveal publicly the "perversion" of its most famous young hero, so Dooley announced his resignation to return to Southeast Asia to continue his humanitarian anti-Communist crusade; he also made propaganda appearances under the aegis of the American Friends of Vietnam and served as an informant for the CIA in Laos. For a comprehensive biography of Dooley see James T. Fisher, *Dr. America: The Lives of Thomas A. Dooley, 1927–1956* (Amherst, 1997); see also Randy Shilts, *Conduct Unbecoming Gays and Lesbians in the Military* (New York, 1993), 22–27, 517–21, 715–36; Fisher, *The Catholic Counterculture in America* (Chapel Hill, 1989), 140–83; Will Brownell, "The Vietnam Lobby: The Americans Who Lobbied for a Free and Independent South Vietnam in the 1940s and 1950s" (Ph.D. diss., Columbia University, 1993), 289–92; and Thomas A. Dooley, *Deliver Us From Evil* (New York, 1956).
was an exception to the political hacks and conformist bureaucrats that otherwise represented the overseas foreign service. His character represented a manly bureaucrat, tough, intelligent, and not bound by tradition or enfeebled by luxury. By virtue of his office he was positioned to recognize and lead the “tiny handful of effective men” he encountered in Southeast Asia. Burdick and Lederer suggested that militarized middle-class American heroism in the persons of Hillandale and Wolchek, allied with the austere service and sacrifice of Father Finian and Homer Atkins, all under the orchestration of a virile aristocratic establishment bureaucrat like MacWhite, could make formidable inroads against Communist encroachments in the Third World.

Chastened by his own brief lapse of vigilance early in his tenure as ambassador to the fictional nation of Sarkhan, MacWhite forsook the comfort of the embassy and sought hands-on lessons in Third World counterinsurgency and economic development. He traveled to the Philippines, scene of a recent “victory” over Communist insurgents, to consult with national hero Ramón Magsaysay (protégé of Hillandale/Lansdale). He ventured to the front lines in Vietnam. There MacWhite prepared to parachute into the besieged French stronghold of Dien Bien Phu for firsthand lessons in anti-Communist warfare. Only the last-minute news of the defeat of the French garrison prevented MacWhite from making the drop. There, on the tarmac, he met Major Wolchek, an American military observer assigned to a French unit. Wolchek, the battle-scared son of Lithuanian immigrants, discovered that MacWhite “understood tactics and fighting.” Together, the patrician and the first-generation Texan turned the guerrilla war doctrines of Mao against the Viet Minh, demonstrating to a skeptical and tradition-bound French officer the virtues of guerrilla-style counterinsurgency operations.

From Colonel Hillandale, MacWhite learned that to succeed in the struggle for the hearts and minds of Southeast Asians, Americans must understand and manipulate the cultural belief systems of the contested populations: “Every person and every nation has a key which will open their hearts. If you use the right key, you can maneuver any person or any nation any way you want.” For the nation of Sarkhan, Hillandale told MacWhite, the key was “astrology and palmistry.” The war with the Communists required guile, intelligence, and unorthodox methods. For Lederer and Burdick, forging the new American imperial masculinity demanded fieldwork. Through a renunciation of Western colonial privilege and European contempt for other cultures one might discover the “key” to American influence over Southeast Asian politics.

---

22. Lederer, who met Ambassador Charles Bohlen in 1957 when Bohlen had been recalled from Moscow and assigned to Manila, wrote to a friend, “What a joy it would be to operate with somebody of his nature.” See William Lederer to Roy Essoyan, 22 August 1957, Lederer Papers.

23. Edward Lansdale did, in fact, attempt to influence Southeast Asian politics by manipulating indigenous leaders’ beliefs in “the effects of wizardry, prophecy, spiritualism, astrology, palmistry, phrenology, necromancy, geomancy, numerology, animistic taboos, and subtle mesmerism,” inspired, it seems, by “that basic textbook in counterespionage in this [Asian] part of the world.
From Homer Atkins, MacWhite learned the value of small-scale, hands-on, economic development work. He espoused the values of the republican small-producer of American myth and abhorred wasteful large-scale foreign aid spending. Atkins showed that big projects — military highways, dams, and industrial infrastructure — did not improve the lives of Southeast Asian peasants, but were merely tools of corrupt, self-aggrandizing, and feminized bureaucratic elites. The homespun manliness of Atkins, who attended high-level embassy meetings dressed in “a rough khaki shirt, khaki pants, and old Marine field boots,” with “the smell of the jungle about him,” contrasted with the effete “Vietnamese, French, or American” bureaucrats, all of whom “smelled of aftershave lotion.” MacWhite rescued Atkins from the hostility and indifference of the foreign aid bureaucrats, putting him to work in Sarkhan tutoring the natives on the blessings of Yankee inventiveness and small-scale free-enterprise capitalism.

It was effeminate bureaucratic weakness that undermined the effectiveness of MacWhite and his alliance of “tough and hard” Americans. The flawed Americans of The Ugly American posed a threat to U.S. interests in Asia. One danger lay in the physical, intellectual, and spiritual mediocrity of characters like Louis Sears, Joe Bing and George Swift. Lederer and Burdick portrayed these pathetic villains as “fat,” “ostentatious,” “inside dopester,” organization men of the foreign policy bureaucracies. Unmanned by luxury and colonial privilege, they were unwilling and unable to perform the feats of will, courage, and vigilance demanded by the threat of Communist subversion in Asia, failing even to perceive the “silent desperation” of the conflict. Obstructing the few “effective men” at every turn, they presided over a system so removed from austere masculine virtue that it would recruit for overseas duty a twenty-eight-year-old “girl” like the character Marie Macintosh. Echoing the 1950s era “Momism” representation of women as agents of debilitating consumerism and luxury, the authors depicted Marie Macintosh as a sexually frustrated, “drab” woman “who needed a husband” and as leading a dull cheeseparing life as a stenographer in Washington. By joining the Foreign Service she compensated for her lack of a husband to provide her with luxury goods. At her post at a Southeast Asian embassy, she reveled in the luxury and “incestuous” social privilege provided by the U.S. government: personal servants, duty-free goods and liquor, subsidized housing, an unceasing round of parties for which, despite her former drabness, she was in demand.

Women’s sexuality, too, threatened America’s imperial interests. Even men who prided themselves on their “tough-mindedness” might fail to properly

'Kim,' by Rudyard Kipling. For example, in 1967 he recommended that the U.S. Mission in Saigon compile a list of “personal soothsayers and astrologers who service leading Vietnamese personalities” and to subject the soothsayers to “certain influences” to further U.S. aims. Ed Lansdale memorandum to Ambassador Bunker and members, U.S. Mission Council, June 1968, and Ed Lansdale memorandum to Ambassador Bunker, 18 May 1967, box 62, Lansdale Papers.
defend boundaries when weakened by the seductive sexual machinations of the (Communist) female Other. The character Captain Boning stood as a cautionary figure, to show that good intentions and a superficial adherence to masculine austerity were not enough in the desperate struggle against a protean, engulfing enemy. Seduced by a Moscow-trained female agent, the debilitated Captain Boning botched a delicate diplomatic assignment. His failure prevented the United States from getting permission to contain communism by placing nuclear weapons on our Asian allies' soil. Thus, Lederer and Burdick warned, women could subvert the imperial project from two directions: from within, as indulgent luxury-loving "Moms," and from without, as alien sexual temptresses.

The authors depicted the patrician MacWhite and his "tough and hard" middle-class allies struggling bravely but, in the end, vainly against the complacency of the bureaucrats. MacWhite attempted to remake the American presence in Sarkhan to match an ideal of masculine rigor and austerity, eliminating the debilitating corruptions of luxury, "softness," and mediocrity. Lederer and Burdick ended their jeremiad on an alarming note. Ambassador MacWhite resigned out of principle, unable to conform to the demands of a business-as-usual State Department, only to be replaced by a particularly loathsome "organization man."

As John Hellmann has argued, The Ugly American was enormously popular in part because it was a reworking of American frontier myth, full of the archetypes of self-reliant pioneers bringing civilization to a "wilderness" while in competition with both savages and corrupt European colonialism. The ideological appropriation of frontier myth and archetype to legitimate "aristocratic" leadership has a long history in American politics. Theodore Roosevelt provides perhaps the most obvious example. Through the manipulation of cultural symbols and ideologies of gender, aristocrats like Roosevelt, and later Kennedy, "sought to affirm an organic and legitimating connection between their own privileged state of wealth, power, and knowledge and an original 'democracy' in which such privilege was unknown."

The images of The Ugly American served Kennedy's effort to establish such a legitimating connection, meshing as they did with his self-presentation as youthful war-hero and defender of America's new postcolonial empire. The Ugly American expressed a range of idealized identity-narratives for the generation of middle- and upper-class American men who came of age as junior officers during World War II. It depicted an anti-Communist alliance of heroic American men bound together by virtue across the old divisions of class and ethnicity. With the ghosts of the American "success" against the Huks in the

Philippines, and that of the British against a Communist insurgency in Malaya, hovering over the narrative, *The Ugly American* also popularized notions about development and counterinsurgency current in the academic-policy world of the 1950s. Perhaps this partly accounts for its favorable reception by some groups of Washington policymakers, despite its marked shortcomings as literature. The book's pervasive influence—in it became a Hollywood movie in 1963—reinforced Kennedy's call to mobilize men for strenuous engagement in global struggle.25

Lederer and Burdick's crudely crafted tales encapsulated the widespread fears of vital center liberals that American men were becoming effeminate and "soft" and that imperial decline must inevitably follow. Kennedy both shared such fears and exploited them politically. During the campaign, *The Ugly American* provided Kennedy with a ready-made popular critique of Eisenhower-era Third World foreign policy, coded in gender and class terms. After the election, it reflected and embodied ideas about foreign aid and counterinsurgency current with Kennedy and many of his advisers and, in some sense, validated the orchestration of Kennedy's post-colonial imperial foreign policy. While William Lederer never remotely approached a role as a member of Kennedy's inner circle of advisers, some among Kennedy's staff cultivated the author. During the first year of the new administration, Arthur Schlesinger, Jr., flattered him with the prediction that Lederer's latest book (*A Nation of Sheep*) "should have an atomic effect" at the White House. Schlesinger invited him to the White House and introduced him to the president. Lederer sent Kennedy's assistant memos outlining strategies for counterinsurgency programs in Southeast Asia.26

Kennedy's upper-class and "aristocratic" identity-narrative differed in many respects from the middle-class masculine ideal of the 1950s, with its emphasis

25. Arthur M. Schlesinger, Jr., *Robert Kennedy and His Times* (New York, 1979), 495–98. Burdick was a political scientist at University of California-Berkeley, and also a decorated junior officer of World War II and a Rhodes Scholar. *The Ugly American*, screen story and screenplay by Stewart Stern, prod. and dir. George Englund, Universal Pictures, 1965. It should be noted that the screenplay took great liberties with the (cinematically intractable) vignettes that composed the novel. The characters of Gilbert MacWhite (played by Marlon Brando) and Homer Atkins were retained in name, but were changed in ways that fundamentally altered their significance as bearers of ideological meaning.

on “maturity,” sexual “containment” within marriage, and the role of men as toiling breadwinners for the family. Kennedy was equipped with an elite ideology of masculinity, focused on heroic deeds of masculine will and courage in the “public” sphere and masculine sexual privilege and power in the “private” sphere. He imagined the ideal as one resembling a kind of classical Greek masculinity: “full use of your powers along lines of excellence,” an agon of physical, mental, spiritual striving. Despite his “aristocratic” imagination of masculinity, because of his role as a public political figure he responded defensively to the proscriptive strength of Cold War gender norms. Kennedy married at age thirty-seven, only because, he told one of his Senate staffers, “I was thirty-seven years old, I wasn’t married, and people would think I was queer if I weren’t married.”

Kennedy used his presentation of self, his political speech and acts, to mediate ideological contradictions between upper-class and middle-class constructions of masculinity. He worked to construct a politically useful heroic narrative fashioned from the elements common to the upper-class imagination of manhood yet resonant with the cultural “texts” shared by the mass of American voters. In political speeches Kennedy repeatedly invoked the names of aristocratic statesmen and soldiers, from Thomas Jefferson and John Quincy Adams to Theodore Roosevelt and Winston Churchill. Each he represented as an exemplar of will, intellect, courage, and strength in defense of “freedom.” Kennedy rhetorically joined a central myth of American history and character, the “Pilgrim and pioneer spirit of initiative and independence” with the patrician boarding-school worship of stoic service to the state, “that old-fashioned Spartan devotion to ‘duty, honor, and country.’” With frequent allusions to imperial Athens, Rome, and Britain, Kennedy displayed his boarding-school erudition, identifying himself with a tradition of heroic aristocrats struggling to preserve empire against decline. He claimed a special “historical view of the United States and of its relations through the world” that suited him to lead a twentieth-century democratic postcolonial empire.


28. For example see Kennedy, Strategy, 45, 88, 195, 201, 215; Freedom of Communications: Final Report of the Committee on Commerce, United States Senate; Part III, The Joint Appearances of Senator John F. Kennedy and Vice President Richard M. Nixon and Other 1960 Campaign Presentations (Washington, 1961), 56, 112, 140, 272, 278; Freedom of Communications: Part I, Speeches of Kennedy, 812. By comparison: Nixon made only one allusion to Winston Churchill during the campaign and referred to Theodore Roosevelt to Western audiences on a few occasions as the Republican progenitor of dams and water projects. Nixon’s main historical argument was that the contemporary Democratic party had abandoned the honorable traditions of individualism and small government represented by “Jefferson, Jackson, and Wilson” only to be captured by the “radical federalists” Galbraith,
Kennedy shared the anxieties of many pundits about the feminization of middle-class white-collar manhood, seeing in it one aspect of a general threat to America's global dominance. He exploited such anxieties politically. Kennedy's campaign rhetoric linked the Eisenhower administration to a supposed alarming decline of American prestige and power in the world, without directly attacking the fatherly and still-popular figure of the president. Kennedy depicted the Eisenhower administration as a cumbersome bureaucracy, staffed by shortsighted bean-counting businessmen, apathetic or hostile to service in the government and eagerly "awaiting their own return to private industry." The years since 1953 had been years of "drift and impotency," "the years the locusts have eaten," Kennedy asserted, using a phrase of Winston Churchill's to establish a parallel between the imperial fortunes of the United States, then facing the Soviet Union, and those of Britain facing Nazi Germany before the Second World War. "And these too, were precious years, vital years, to the greatness of our nation, as the thirties were to Great Britain. For on the other side of the globe another great power was not standing still and she was not looking back and she was not drifting in doubt. The Soviet Union needed these years to catch up with us, to surpass us, to take away from us our prestige and our influence and even our power in the world community."29

In his presidential campaign speeches he cast Richard Nixon as a stand-in for Eisenhower, as an example of the organization man "experienced in policies of retreat, defeat, and weakness" who had "presided . . . over the decline of our national security." Nixon, Kennedy argued, had revealed the impotence of a feminized luxury-worship during his famous confrontation with the Soviet premier in 1959: "And in the Soviet Union, he argued with Mr. Khrushchev in the kitchen, pointing out that while we might be behind in space, we were certainly ahead in color television. Mr. Nixon may be very experienced in kitchen debates. So are a great many other married men I know. But does anyone think for one moment that Mr. Khrushchev's determination to 'bury' us was slowed down one iota by all these arguments and debates?" In this way, Kennedy implicitly condemned his opponent's culturally and ideologically inappropriate association of masculine public power with the private sphere of women. Kennedy managed to construe Nixon as an emasculated husband espousing the consumerism of "Moms," portraying the vice president doing so from within the kitchen, a woman's space. While Nixon attempted to represent the abundance of American consumer appliances as symbols of national strength and prosperity, Kennedy implied that such indulgence made the

---

United States more vulnerable to the militarized regimentation and discipline of the Soviets. Kennedy offered a contrasting picture of his own commitment to manly austerity and potency: “I would rather take my television black and white and have the largest rockets in the world.”

With Democrats still smarting from Republican political attacks on the Truman administration’s foreign policy, Kennedy used similar tactics against the Eisenhower administration. He charged Republicans with the failure to avert a threatening “missile gap” relative to the Soviets. He held Eisenhower and Nixon responsible for the “loss” of Cuba to communism. He argued that administration policy had left the United States unable to confront the Soviets on the contested margins of the stalemated Cold War by an excessive (and not credible) reliance on the threat of nuclear war, a threat that could not “prevent the Communists from nibbling away at the fringe of the Free World's territory and strength” with “‘brush-fire’ peripheral wars.”

Kennedy subscribed to cyclical and organic theories of national power; nations grew strong in their youth and declined with age, just as men’s bodies did. Influenced in his youth by Oswald Spengler and Homer Lea, among others, Kennedy retained the conviction that the European empires were degenerate and declining and that Asia represented a threatening “wave of the future.” Global contest in a bipolar world required the United States to “demonstrate to a watching world that we are on the march, that we have not passed our peak, . . . that the Communist system is old and tired, that the Communist system is on the way down, that here in the United States we are still experiencing high noon.”

As a corollary to the proposition that nations and empires were like men’s bodies in their life cycles of growth and decay, Kennedy held the conviction that men’s bodies represented the incarnation of the state. The president-elect issued an exhortation to the strenuous life in December 1960 in the pages of Sports Illustrated, paraphrasing British public school imperial mythology for “democratic” consumption in the United States:

the harsh fact of the matter is that there is also an increasingly large number of young Americans who are neglecting their bodies—their physical fitness is not what it should be—who are getting soft. And such softness on the part of individual citizens can help to strip and destroy the vitality of a nation... Throughout our history we have been challenged to armed conflict by

---

nations which sought to destroy our independence or threaten our freedom. The young men of America have risen to such occasions giving themselves freely to the rigors and hardships of warfare. But the stamina and strength which the defense of liberty requires are not the product of a few weeks' basic training or a month's conditioning. These only come from bodies which have been conditioned by a lifetime of participation in sports and interest in physical activity. Our struggles against aggressors throughout our history have been won on the playgrounds and corner lots and fields of America. Thus in a very real and immediate sense, our growing softness, our increasing lack of physical fitness, is a menace to our security.55

As president, Kennedy identified his own body with the state. Paradoxically, his severe, crippling health problems made it impossible to act out fully the cultural script dictated by his own ideology of masculinity. He compensated with a variety of strategies. Publicly, Kennedy used a fictive narrative of athletic and war injuries to explain what were actually congenital maladies. Privately, as a senator, and then within a White House circle of those “in the know,” Kennedy expressed masculine privilege and power with an exaggerated campaign of sexual conquest; this was perhaps in part a compensation for the failure of his body to support other expressions of male prowess demanded by his own ideals of manhood. As president, Kennedy always cast himself as the embodiment of a national struggle against the Soviets, who in this drama were embodied in Nikita Khrushchev. For the one-on-one contest with Khrushchev at the Vienna summit in 1961, while suffering severe pain from an aggravation of his chronic back problem, Kennedy resorted to a drug-induced manly vigor by receiving, in addition to his regular procaine treatments, injections of “amphetamines, steroids, hormones, and animal organ cells,” administered by Max (“Dr. Feelgood”) Jacobson.54

Kennedy often employed a related strategy by mobilizing other men's bodies as surrogates for his own in the political drama. This answered both to his own prescriptions about masculine leadership and to proscriptive accusations of weakness in foreign policy. As president, Kennedy repeatedly created scenarios for the ritual enactment of physical ordeals as tests of manhood by putting other men's bodies into motion. This was evident in fifty-mile hikes instigated by the president as a “test of commitment to the New Frontier.” Kennedy mobilized U.S. Marines and White House staffers, cabinet members and Supreme Court justices, his relatives, and close friends. Following these public examples of

ritual “sacrifice,” “around the country citizens started off on fifty-mile walks of their own,” presumably gratifying Kennedy with the success of his dramatization of physical ordeal.35 Other programs of the Kennedy administration, such as the Green Berets or the Peace Corps, replicated on a grander scale a pattern of upper-class ritual ordeals (for example, boarding school and university athletics, elite military service, adventurous struggle against nature) that Kennedy and others of his class systematically used to construct and validate manhood. Kennedy’s counterinsurgency initiatives and the new Peace Corps agency provided a public forum for the display of male bodies in action and struggle. In addition to everything else that they were, these programs served an ideological function, illustrating a congruence of the power of the state with the power of male bodies. In his calls to mobilize men’s bodies for service to the state, Kennedy drew upon cultural materials that were consonant with his “aristocratic” ideology of masculinity and that meshed with the anxieties of a national constituency.

From the earliest days of the Kennedy administration, the president began a paradoxical attempt to incorporate individual antibureaucratic masculine heroism into the structure of the foreign policy bureaucracy through the development of a counterinsurgency doctrine and apparatus. Kennedy surrounded himself with “tough” patrician bureaucrats, erstwhile guerrillas and junior officers of World War II now in the roles of foreign policy advisers and functionaries, and a few favored heroic generals. Galvanized by the heroic revolutionary counternarratives of Mao, Lin Piao, Che Guevara, and Khrushchev, Kennedy charged his men with finding a way to make American power credible and effective in Third World hot spots like Laos, Vietnam, and Cuba.36

Kennedy blamed the Republicans for the “loss of Cuba,” but he inherited from Eisenhower a half-baked secret CIA operation to invade Cuba and overthrow Fidel Castro. The new president gave the go-ahead for the “covert” assault, revealingly labeled “Operation Castration” by his in-house adviser Arthur Schlesinger, Jr.37 The invasion failed dismally in the glare of worldwide publicity. The “humiliation” of the Bay of Pigs was closely followed by a bruising encounter with Khrushchev at the Vienna summit in the summer of 1961. After these setbacks, Kennedy felt the need to demonstrate his “guts” to the Soviet leader and to the American electorate. The president created the Special Group (Counterinsurgency) and the Special Group (Augmented),


36. See D. Michael Shafer, Deadly Paradigms: The Failure of U.S. Counterinsurgency Policy (Princeton, 1988), 107–10, on the narrative structure created by the Communist revolutionary “theorists” and their focus on themselves as “vanguard of the people,” catalyst for the inevitable unfolding of history as revolution.

37. Arthur Schlesinger, Jr., memorandum for the president, 10 April, 1961, Schlesinger Papers, box WH-5. It should be noted that the patrician liberal Democrat (and Groton “Old Boy”) Richard Bissell was in charge of the CIA planning of the invasion.
bureaucratic committees formed to mobilize men's bodies in heroic combat against subversion around the world. He assigned his brother Robert, the attorney general, to the committees as a spur to action. The Special Groups recapitulated the ideological relations of class and masculinity limned in *The Ugly American*. "Tough" patrician bureaucrats like McGeorge Bundy, Roswell Gilpatric, or Averell Harriman orchestrated the actions of the professional middle-class operatives and functionaries. This was clearly exemplified in the assignment of Edward Lansdale to counterinsurgency planning in Vietnam, and his appointment in late 1961 to head a program of covert warfare, sabotage, and attempted assassination directed at Cuba and Fidel Castro, code-named "Operation MONGOOSE." This apparent interplay of life and art was, perhaps, founded less on the spellbinding prose of Lederer and Burdick than on the intersection of Kennedy's heroic masculine identity-narrative, the prescriptive imperatives of the domestic politics of foreign policy, and the glorious quasi-public legend surrounding Edward Lansdale's adventures.38

MONGOOSE operated in secret, with a domestic political payoff awaiting a successful result from the actions of Lansdale's swashbuckling guerrilla-spy-gangster myrmidons: the murder of Castro, or the collapse of his regime. More publicly, Kennedy embraced the heroism of the "man with the rifle" as part of the counterinsurgency-development dialectic. One widely publicized Kennedy innovation that came to symbolize his reinvigoration of national purpose

---

38. Beschloss, *Crisis Years*, 225, 297, 375–77; Roswell L. Gilpatric, oral history interview by Dennis J. O'Brien, 5 May 1970, pp. 8–9, 36, 99–100, JFKL. Michael V. Forrestal, interviewed by Jean Stein, *American Journey: The Times of Robert Kennedy*, ed. George Plimpton (New York, 1970), 205–7; McGeorge Bundy memorandum for the attorney general, 14 March, 1963, National Security File, box 319, Meetings and Memos, JFKL; Michael V. Forrestal memorandum for W. Averell Harriman, 20 May, 1963, NSF, box 319, M and M. See also memorandum of MONGOOSE Meeting, 4 October 1962, doc. 1520, in *The Cuban Missile Crisis, 1962*, National Security Archive, Washington, DC (Alexandria, VA, 1990). This document reveals that Robert Kennedy expressed the president's "dissatisfaction in the sabotage field," because "nothing was moving forward"; after "a sharp exchange" with the members of the Special Group (Augmented), "General Lansdale's authority over the entire MONGOOSE operation" was "clarified." Kennedy was so enamored of the legend of anti-bureaucratic derring-do surrounding Lansdale that early in his administration he wanted Lansdale as ambassador to South Vietnam, or failing that, as chief of the Military Assistance and Advisory Group to Saigon. Lansdale's appointment was blocked by Secretary of State Dean Rusk and Secretary of Defense Robert McNamara (men of middle-class origin recruited into the administration through the certification of patrician wise man Robert Lovett), who were not so taken with Lansdale's style. Because of their opposition, and despite his "empathy" with the patrician Roswell Gilpatric (deputy secretary of defense), Lansdale found himself increasingly cut off from policy on Vietnam. Kennedy continued as a patron of Lansdale, who he apparently admiringly regarded as the "American counterpart of Ian Fleming's fictional character James Bond." Lansdale continued cooking up elaborate psywar schemes and sabotage and assassination plots for MONGOOSE until Desmond FitzGerald took over Kennedy administration efforts to eliminate Castro in 1963. See Currey, *Unquiet American*, 227–30, 236–36; Samuel Halpern, "Revisiting the Cuban Missile Crisis," *Society for Historians of American Foreign Relations Newsletter* 24 (December 1993): 22; General Lansdale memorandum to General Johnson, Subject: Illumination by Submarine, 15 October 1962, and memorandum for the record, Minutes of the Meeting of the Special Group (Augmented) on Operation Mongoose, 26 October 1962, Mandatory Review Case NLK-90-51, JFKL.
and resolve was his resurrection of the U.S. Army Special Forces. Through his patronage, President Kennedy became closely identified with the Green Berets, depicted as young American supermen possessed of hard bodies and tough minds. The Green Berets were intended as a big part of Kennedy’s answer to Khrushchev’s provocative endorsement of “wars of colonial liberation.” The Green Berets were elite volunteers, “Harvard Ph.D.s of the Special Warfare Art” supposedly versed in “special weapons,” in the guerrilla war doctrines of Mao, in foreign languages and medical skills; they were warriors able to challenge Communist guerrillas anywhere in the world on their own terms. Kennedy devoted close attention to the new counterinsurgency warriors he had conjured up by personally supervising the selection of new military equipment with which to arm them: canvas sneakers with steel plates to protect against bamboo spikes, lighter field radios, new rifles, more helicopters.39

Another guerrilla hero became one of Kennedy's favorite counterinsurgency strategists. Roger Hilsman lacked the public fame of Lansdale, but he embodied the narrative elements of masculine heroism and possessed institutional credentials as a warrior-intellectual. Hilsman, director of the State Department's Bureau of Intelligence and Research, was a West Point graduate. He had been wounded during World War II while serving with Merrill's Marauders; he then commanded an OSS guerrilla unit against the Japanese in Burma. After the war he served in several OSS or CIA intelligence posts before resigning from the military to earn a Yale Ph.D. in political science. Hilsman attracted the president's favor with his calls for counterguerrilla squads led by "men of courage and great skill" based on his OSS experience in Burma. After Kennedy read Hilsman's speech "Internal War: The New Communist Tactic" in the Marine Corps Gazette, Hilsman became a significant figure in American policy toward Vietnam; he was one of the architects of the "strategic hamlet" program and a proponent of the U.S.-sponsored coup that toppled the Diem government in 1963.40

With the president's urging, planning for counterinsurgency proliferated. A string of National Security Action Memoranda issued forth from the meetings of Kennedy's high-level antiguerilla theorists, designed to prod recalcitrant military and civilian bureaucrats into compliance with the new doctrines of personalized, one-on-one heroism. The air force and the navy, attached to traditions of massive high-technology firepower, got on the bandwagon with the Air Commandos and Sea, Air, Land Teams (SEALs). In early 1962 the president authorized NSAM 131, mandating the creation of counterinsurgency courses in the war colleges and throughout the military and civilian foreign policy bureaucracies. As the "capstone of the educational pyramid," the foreign service established an ongoing "Interdepartmental Seminar" in which antiguerilla luminaries like Edward Lansdale, Walt W. Rostow, and Robert Kennedy sermonized high-level diplomats. The Kennedy administration took special pains to inculcate masculine martial competence and vigilance in that bastion of effete pomposity, the State Department. New Frontier diplomats were emphatically not going to be "cookie pushers," as George Ball, Kennedy's undersecretary of state, later explained: "There was a time when every Ambas-

sador about to go abroad ... even if he were to go to the Court of St. James’s ... was supposed to spend three months going to counter-insurgency school – just in case some activity developed in Green Park.”

The image of the heroic “unconventional warrior” fit Kennedy’s deeply held ideal of masculine competence, strength, and courage. His commitment to counterinsurgency was also politically expedient. It offered domestic constituencies an aggressive response to Communist subversion of U.S. client governments without the apparent costs or dangers of using a conscript army for full-scale conventional warfare in tropical jungles. In combination with the kind of psychological warfare and economic development efforts popularized by *The Ugly American*, counterinsurgency implicitly promised to bring the U.S. mission to Vietnam into conformity with mythic ideals of republican manhood deeply rooted in elite American political culture. Counterinsurgency became a kind of bureaucratic cult in the Kennedy administration, serving as an institutional expression of the masculine ideals embraced by the president and many members of his national security staff. This idealized narrative had profound foreign policy consequences. Kennedy vastly increased the commitment of American military advisers to Vietnam during his term (from approximately seven hundred to more than sixteen thousand by November 1963), predicated on the utility of counterinsurgency as a component of “nation-building.”

The development side of the counterinsurgency-development dialectic came to be symbolized in the eyes of the domestic constituency by another Kennedy administration innovation to mobilize men’s bodies in service to U.S. global interests, the Peace Corps. Kennedy adopted the “Peace Corps” proposal in the waning days of the 1960 presidential campaign, partly as an act of political opportunism and partly as a call for effort and sacrifice in the global contest with Soviet communism. Americans, Kennedy argued, “shuddered at the examples in *The Ugly American.*” For U.S. world power to “survive the modern techniques of conquest,” our overseas personnel “must do a better job.”

On the other side of the globe, diplomats skilled in the languages and customs of the nation to whom they are accredited – teachers, doctors, technicians, and experts desperately needed in a dozen fields by underdeveloped nations – are pouring forth from Moscow to advance the cause of world communism... Already Asia has more of these Soviet than American technicians – and Africa may by this time. Russian diplomats are the first to arrive, the first to offer aid... They know the country, they speak the language – and in Guinea, Ghana, Laos and all over the globe they are working fast and effectively. Missiles and arms cannot stop them – neither can American dollars. They can only be countered by Americans equally skilled and equally dedicated.

Masculinity as Ideology : 53

The peace corps proposal was politically opportunistic because Kennedy had little real interest in it. A "peace corps" did not really fit Kennedy's imagination of masculine heroism, focused as it was on the existential drama of life and death in confrontation with other men. More pragmatically, Kennedy was reluctant to be too closely associated with risky liberal initiatives that might make him vulnerable to attacks from the Right. However, the Peace Corps offered some tangible political benefits. The idea was popular with the Stevenson wing of the Democratic party and presented a way to mend fences. After the election Kennedy appointed his brother-in-law, Sargent Shriver, as head of the new agency and left him to fend for himself in extracting permanent funding from Congress.

Facing ambivalence, or, at best, benign neglect, from his patron in the White House and the need to convince Congress to pass appropriations to fund the Peace Corps, Shriver mobilized a public relations campaign to capitalize on the heroic "New Frontier" image associated with President Kennedy. Eugene Burdick's endorsement of the Peace Corps had been reported by newspaper wire services shortly before election day. Shriver promoted the Peace Corps by using arguments and images much like those employed by Lederer and Burdick in The Ugly American to criticize the U.S. foreign policy bureaucracy. Shriver and the men around him represented their new agency as a kind of "anti-bureaucracy" staffed by vigorous, decisive men, circumventing the tradition-bound red tape of Washington to create a dynamic volunteer organization to wage peace around the world and to rehabilitate America's shaky image in the "underdeveloped" nations. Shriver needed to sell the Peace Corps to JFK, to the American public, and to many conservative congressmen who looked on it with suspicion as a potential haven for "beatniks and draft dodgers."

Shriver was himself a product of Eastern boarding schools (Canterbury, a Catholic version), Yale and Yale Law School, and military service in an elite unit during World War II. He shared with Kennedy many of the prescriptive assumptions about masculinity common to the Eastern establishment. Shriver exhibited the Kennedy concern with "toughness." (Shriver always wore his submarine service pin on his lapel as public proof of courage in war.) Given the militarized political culture of the Cold War, with virtually all political actors of both parties striving to demonstrate "strength" against foreign and domestic enemies, Shriver carefully deployed a Kennedy-style ideology of masculinity to promote the Peace Corps. Furthermore, attaching an image of manly vigor


This content downloaded from 192.231.59.35 on Thu, 09 Nov 2017 21:59:51 UTC
All use subject to http://about.jstor.org/terms
In 1961 and 1962 paperback editions of *The Ugly American* used a jacket blurb to associate the best-selling novel with the creation of Kennedy’s Peace Corps.

and engagement to the new agency was as important to internal administration politics as it was to more public efforts to garner support. Within some inner circles of the White House staff Shriver was derisively known as “the boy scout” or the Kennedy “family Communist” because of his idealistic liberalism. Shriver’s experience as a talent scout for the president-elect had provided a lesson in Kennedy’s preference for “toughness” as an attribute in administration
Masculinity as Ideology: 55

personnel. He understood that for the Peace Corps to succeed he needed to publicize on two fronts its conformity to Cold War masculine ideals: publicly, to win the approval of Congress and the voters, and to administration insiders to win the patronage of the president and his staff.44

Conceived by its original congressional sponsors as “the moral equivalent of war,” the Peace Corps provided a public theater of masculinity for left-leaning liberal internationalists in the Democratic administration. Women, of course, did serve in significant numbers as Peace Corps Volunteers. However, their very presence in the organization was a matter of controversy among many members of the overwhelmingly male Washington staff. Women’s sexuality was seen as a potentially dangerous and disrupting influence on men in remote outposts, causing projects to fail “because of the romantic temptations involved.” (The pregnancy of one unmarried volunteer led a Washington staffer to suggest, during an “emergency meeting” called to discuss the issue, that they “can’ women Volunteers altogether.”)45

Anxiety over women’s passions and appetites and their potential to disrupt civic order has a long history in the republican political tradition. The solution for the Washington staff of the Peace Corps was to demand that women adhere to an updated version of female republican virtue, that they act as “functional auxiliaries to the commonwealth.” Official policy discouraged the recruitment of married couples as volunteers. The wives of overseas staff were carefully instructed in the presentation of an image of austerity, to avoid the taint of “Momism” by association with the luxurious indulgence of neo-imperial privilege. The lack of ostentation by Peace Corps wives was intended as a visible contrast with the social life of the embassies and foreign aid bureaucracies.46

Despite the sometimes uneasy presence of women in the organization, Shriver and the Washington staff represented the Peace Corps as a bastion of


45. Occasionally the Peace Corps served as a theater of last resort for liberals squeezed out of the White House foreign policy apparatus; Dick Goodwin, removed from proximity to the president in 1962, resolved that he was not “going to let them cut off [his] balls” and was welcomed into the Peace Corps as personal assistant to Sargent Shriver, replicating in some ways his former relation to Kennedy. Goodwin, Remembering America, 216. Charles E. Wingenbach, The Peace Corps – Who, How, and Where (New York, 1963), 64–67; Coates Redmon, Come as You Are: The Peace Corps Story (San Diego, 1986), 96–97.

46. Kann, On the Man Question, 75; Wingenbach, The Peace Corps, 65; memorandum, “Orientation for Peace Corps Staff Wives,” 2 July 1962, Gerald W. Bush Papers, box 6, JFKL. This brief discussion does not begin to explore the complexity and variety of women’s experience in the Peace Corps, or the ramifications of that experience to the women’s movement in the later 1960s, all of which lie outside the scope of this study. However, it is worth quoting Betty Harris (founder of Ms. magazine) on her experience as deputy associate director of the Office of Peace Corps Volunteers: “People ask me, how did I get involved in the women’s movement? I tell them: at the Peace Corps. For the first time, I had come to realize fully the very discriminatory nature of men’s attitudes toward women.” Redmon, Come as You Are, 97.
masculine virtues and modern pioneer spirit. They publicized the Peace Corps as an elite volunteer unit like the Green Berets, with standards so high that only 10 percent of applicants were accepted. The rigorous selection process continued; 22 percent of the initial recruits were rejected during training. Shriver promised that danger, adventure, and sacrifice awaited volunteers. But the Peace Corps would not provide comfort or refuge for draft evaders: "This won't be a moonlight cruise on the Amazon. The military life may not only be more glamorous, but it could be safer." 47

The bodies of the recruits were hardened and their resolve tested by ritual ordeal at one of two jungle "boot camps" in Puerto Rico. Shriver and his staff created the camps with the help of consultants from the British Outward Bound Schools, whose principles, according to one student, were derived "from Plato, Sparta in its heyday, from Lord Baden-Powell, the founder of the Boy Scouts, and from the British public school system." Volunteers at the training camps were roused at 5:00 A.M. to a round of calisthenics. They ran through obstacle courses, jogged, and rappelled down the face of a dam; they were bound hand and foot and tossed into rivers or "grubby pools" as lessons in "drownproofing." Visiting Peace Corps staffers were expected to undergo these rigors alongside the volunteer-trainees. William Sloane Coffin, former Yale chaplain and director of the first of the camps, justified this compulsory immersion in the strenuous life with words that might have come from the lips of Theodore Roosevelt: "We will use physical training as a vehicle to measure a man's stamina, courage, and resourcefulness." 48

The volunteers received special training in the language and customs of their assigned destinations. They were to serve an overseas tour of two years, living austerely in villages and barrios. The Peace Corps provided another opportunity to toughen the youth of the nation, to strengthen the body politic, by sacrificing the effeminate luxury of American material consumption in a global struggle for hearts and minds. Shriver spelled this out in a draft article submitted to Foreign Affairs:

Our own Peace Corps Volunteers are being changed in other ways than in the acquisition of languages and expertise. They will be coming home augmented in maturity and reoriented in outlook toward life and work. Like many other Americans, I have wondered whether our contemporary society, with its emphasis on the organizational man and the easy life, can continue

48. Rice, Bold Experiment, 153-74; Renate Wilson, Inside Outward Bound (Charlotte, NC, 1981), 9; Redmon, Come as You Are, 58. Brainchild of Kurt Hahn, the founder and headmaster of the public school Gordonstoun, the Outward Bound Schools began in Britain during World War II as an effort to "re-masculinize" soft British (working-class) youth. Apparently, one intent of the schools was to expose working-class males to the kinds of stoic physical and moral ordeals upper-class boys experienced in public school. See Wilson, Inside, 7-34; and J. M. Hogan, Impelled into Experiences: The Story of the Outward Bound Schools (Wakefield, Yorkshire, 1968).
to produce the self-reliance, initiative and independence we consider our heritage. We have been in danger of losing ourselves among the motorized toothbrushes, tranquilizers and television commercials. Will Durant once observed that nations are born stoic and die epicurean; we have been in danger of this happening to us. The Peace Corps is truly a new frontier in the sense that it provides the challenge to self-reliance and independent action which the vanished frontier once provided on our own continent. Sharing in other countries' progress helps us to re-discover ourselves at home.49

The selection of volunteers who were to embody these stoic virtues was a sensitive political issue. Shriver had a prominent psychologist (with experience selecting naval pilots during World War II) prepare a screening test to weed out undesirable recruits at the outset. Lyndon Johnson, collaring Shriver to offer advice on the selection process, recommended, “Do it like I did the Texas Youth Conservation Corps. Keep out the three Cs . . . the communists, the consumptives, and the cocksuckers.” Homosexuality, linked with subversion, communism, and disease in the political discourse of the day, was incompatible with the masculine ideology deployed to legitimate the Peace Corps in the eyes of hawkish critics. In the first batch of trainees at Iowa State University a “confessed” homosexual was rooted out by the FBI, and, in the euphemism favored by the administration, “deselected.” With the memory of the counterperversion and countersubversion crusades of the preceding decade still alive, Shriver had his overseas and Washington staff vetted by the FBI to prevent vulnerability on the “security” issue.50

Shriver recruited Peace Corps administrators with care. He used them in the campaign to sell the Peace Corps to the public and to President Kennedy. They, too, were exemplars of masculinity. Shriver churned out press releases announcing each new acquisition. They were young, successful, and athletic with commendable (and much-touted) war records. Some were clearly liberals – but the kind of virile red-blooded liberal who could go six rounds with Sugar Ray Robinson and coach the University of Michigan boxing team or who could speak Nepali and walk 360 miles across Kashmir on an expedition to climb K2. They were depicted as men committed to service and sacrifice,

---

49. R. Sargent Shriver, “The Peace Corps’ First Two Years,” draft article submitted to Foreign Affairs, 14 May 1963, p. 28, President’s Office Files (POF), box 86, JFKL.
abandoning lucrative careers for long hours and low pay, compensated by the challenge and creative ferment of the Peace Corps.\textsuperscript{51}

Sensitive to accusations that theirs was an organization of “fuzzy-minded visionaries” or “Boy Scouts,” Shriver and his antibureaucratic bureaucrats responded by representing themselves as steely pragmatists. The Peace Corps would not fall into the trap of wasteful foreign aid spending deplored in The Ugly American. To ensure that Peace Corps programs were truly “effective,” Shriver created a system to recruit temporary outside “evaluators” of overseas projects. Here again the ubiquitous influence of Lederer and Burdick, propagandists of austere masculine struggle, became directly visible.\textsuperscript{52}

In early 1962, with reputations as Cold War foreign aid experts, Lederer and Burdick volunteered their services as evaluators of Peace Corps projects. Lederer later recalled that before offering his services to Shriver, he had “just walked all over the Philippines” where he saw the failure of early Peace Corps programs. Imperial privilege, luxury, and ignorance again threatened to subvert U.S. efforts. American volunteers “were not used to having two or three servants.” Their presence was wasteful because “they didn’t speak the dialect” and “all they were doing was teaching English” rather than getting their hands dirty with small-scale economic development. Shriver and his associate director William Haddad gladly employed the famous authors, seeking answers “to the challenges posed by The Ugly American.”\textsuperscript{53}

Lederer remained mindful of the potential role of the Peace Corps in the Cold War. During a stint evaluating the effectiveness of a PC training program at Hilo, Hawaii, Lederer trotted out his counterinsurgency and psychological warfare expertise for the benefit of volunteer trainees bound for the Philippines. Drawing on his familiarity with the works of Mao, Lenin, and other examples of revolutionary doctrine, the old Asia hand “put on a demonstration of how a Communist would answer the questions of a group of PC volunteers.” The “extremely impressive” performance, Lederer asserted, “seemed to have an electrifying effect on the trainees.” He recommended that the Peace Corps “build such discussion into the program, with however, the cautionary note added that it takes an extremely skillful person to handle the role of the Communist.” Lederer’s tutelage of the volunteers included “morale” building “lectures on trade unions, Soviet International politics and Soviet Internal Politics.” He apparently believed that his work for the Peace Corps offered


\textsuperscript{52} Rice, Bold Experiment, 155, 195, 207.

another small way to act on his old ambition of “mass producing a crowd of poor men’s Lansdales” to fight communism in Asia.54

Shriver used Lederer’s and Burdick’s reputations as hard-headed foreign aid experts to lend legitimacy to his new organization, but he did not stop there. He peppered the president with missives and press clippings illustrating his organization’s visible conformity to masculine ideals of “toughness” and its success in publicizing that message. “How’s this for carrying out your instructions to create a New Frontier image abroad?” Shriver inquired, as he forwarded a newspaper report of the near success a Yale-educated volunteer had in a recent “Thai-style boxing” charity match by fighting his Thai opponent to a draw. “Peace Corps’ Honor Upheld in Fifty Mile Hike” boasted a “weekly summary of Peace Corps activities” sent to the president. The exemplary toughness of the volunteers went beyond extraordinary feats of pugilism and peregrination. Shriver boasted to his boss of the willing self-denial practiced by the volunteers, a ritual asceticism congenial to the tastes of one bred on the manly boarding school ideology of service and sacrifice: “They’re sleeping on cots, eating the food – 3 times a day – at a cost of 5 pesos (75 cents). They are in towns where no North Americans are living or have lived.”55

Kennedy embraced the Peace Corps as its political success became evident; he made public appearances in the Rose Garden to send off volunteers on overseas assignments. In speeches he began to assert for the Peace Corps a role in the management of America’s unique postcolonial empire. It would help solve problems identified in The Ugly American. Former volunteers could provide an experienced pool of talent for the foreign service, untainted by the arrogant and hidebound traditions of the “striped pants diplomat.” The president encouraged the infusion of vigorous youth into stuffy, slow-to-change foreign relations bureaucracies. Executive order 1103 of April 1963 mandated the “non-competitive appointment” of former volunteers.56

Shriver and his associates encouraged Kennedy and the public to see the Peace Corps as a new and uniquely effective tool of policy in the global contest with the Soviets. The Peace Corps operated with “freedom and energy of autonomy” independent of the ossified foreign aid bureaucracies. Shriver courted neutralist or “pro-Soviet” heads of state in Africa and Indonesia with offers of Peace Corps projects. After a meeting with Sekou Touré of Guinea, Shriver boasted to the president of the potential utility of the Peace Corps as

a weapon in his Third World rivalry with Khrushchev: “Here we have an opportunity to move a country from an apparently clear Bloc orientation to a position of neutrality or even of orientation to the West.”

During a trip to South America, Shriver reported the return from Moscow of “the leading Commie in Colombia . . . accompanied by 280 Colombian students.” He counseled the president that to counter this subversive influence the Peace Corps should plan to expand the number of volunteers to five hundred; doing so would place volunteers in at least half of the twelve hundred Colombian towns with a population between three and ten thousand. Later, with a ploy reminiscent of Edward Lansdale’s cross-cultural proselytizing, Shriver claimed credit for new policy openings to Southeast Asia. By sending Peace Corps Volunteers as “athletic instructors” to Sukarno’s Indonesia, where “athletics is a matter of national pride and importance,” Shriver hoped to woo the Indonesian leader away from his “pro-Soviet” stance. He boasted to the president, and later the press, that Sukarno invited the Peace Corps to become the first “operating agency of the U.S. Government to start work” in Indonesia since Kennedy had become president.

Despite Shriver’s eagerness to illustrate the Peace Corps’ value in the overarching ideological contest between American “freedom” and Soviet communism, he refused to let the agency become a crudely wielded tool of direct American imperialism. He believed that the example of the volunteers’ altruism, hardihood, and manly engagement in practical day-to-day struggle on behalf of the world’s poor would answer the question “Is America qualified to lead the free world?” with a ringing affirmative. He saw danger to the new agency in any attempt by the United States to insert Peace Corps personnel and programs anywhere in the world without a wholehearted invitation from the host country. Therefore, Shriver took pains to ensure that the Peace Corps would maintain its “independence of strategic concerns.” Anyone tainted by association with the CIA was persona non grata. Shriver used his privileged access to the president to prevent CIA officials from surreptitiously “trying to stick fellows into the Peace Corps” as trainees. Secretary of State Dean Rusk issued directives barring overseas personnel from attempts to recruit volunteers for intelligence functions or any employment on behalf of the agencies controlled by the U.S. embassies: “The Peace Corps is not an instrument of foreign policy because to make it so would rob it of its contribution to foreign policy. . . . The Peace Corps is an opportunity for the nations of the world to learn what America is all about.”

---

The hard-boiled Cold Warriors in the national security apparatus usually did not find this proscription too onerous because of the small size and (in their eyes) relative insignificance of the new agency. Nonetheless, some of Kennedy’s bureaucratic warriors occasionally resented the Peace Corps’ partial sequestration from the great game of empire. For them, the seemingly quixotic renunciation of any advantage, however small, in the global rivalry with communism was foolish idealism, a weakness that showed a deplorable lack of team spirit. “Shouldn’t we quash this nonsense that PC independent of US policy interest?” one national security staff bureaucrat tersely complained to his boss McGeorge Bundy. “Both AID and State want Peace Corps in Algeria,” he asserted, asking Bundy to apply pressure to the unresponsive agency director by arguing that the issue personally concerned the president. “Shriver needs a gentle straightening out,” he counseled.60

Bundy agreed that a large American presence in newly independent Algeria was desirable and that Peace Corps assistance on AID projects would further that end. He urged Shriver to forswear an aversion to “nasty international political considerations” and pitch in to advance U.S. strategic goals in Africa. An “entirely accidental benefit,” Bundy added, was the “mildly irritating” effect the Peace Corps presence in Algeria would have on “some of those in Europe who are giving us the most trouble at the moment,” referring to the de Gaulle government.61

Shriver remained obdurate; in the absence of an Algerian request for Peace Corps assistance, he refused to impose the Peace Corps upon an unwilling or indifferent Algerian government. He retained his original conviction that his agency could best serve America’s global mission by its public example of moral and physical strenuousness. Shriver saw challenges to the legitimacy of U.S. “leadership” from rivals abroad and a feminized and decadent culture of consumption at home as threats that must be answered. “Nikita Khrushchev is not alone in doubting the fibre of modern Americans,” Shriver warned. “This is a question asked all around the world.”62 For Kennedy’s Peace Corps director, the political uses of highly visible masculine virtue—the example of American “stamina” and “sacrifice” in service to altruistic ideals—outweighed the marginal benefits of the realpolitik skulduggery favored by the national security bureaucrats.

The Kennedy administration politically exploited widespread elite fears of creeping “luxury” and “softness” among American men, seen as debilitating weaknesses in the grim national struggle with global communism. In his rhetoric and in his policy, Kennedy cast himself as one of a “tougher breed” of


60. HH5 memorandum to McGB, 18 January 1963, NSF, box 284 (emphasis in original).
62. Shriver, Commencement Address, Notre Dame, 4 June 1961, NSF, box 284.
natural aristocrat dedicated to preserving U.S. power in the world. He rhetorically linked his counterinsurgency and foreign assistance policy initiatives with the prescriptions of *The Ugly American*, sharing its vision of reinvigorated masculine virtue as a bulwark against the decline of empire. Such narratives tied fashionable ideas about counterinsurgency and modernization theory to central American myths of manly republican virtue.

Kennedy's heroic new initiatives were a response to domestic political challenges, as well as to the perceived challenge of "world communism." They represented an effort to link administration policy to unquestionable and "natural" American male virtues: physical strength, force of will, adventurous bravery, technical competence, and frontier independence. Counterinsurgency and the Green Berets promised an aggressive response to the perceived threat of Soviet-inspired "wars of liberation" around the periphery of the empire. By fighting "brushfire wars" in places like South Vietnam or by sponsoring covert schemes to overthrow or assassinate Fidel Castro, Kennedy tried to answer those domestic critics who challenged his political legitimacy by labeling him a "weak sister." Such risky confrontations also stemmed from his own concerns that powerful foreign rivals like Soviet Premier Khrushchev be convinced of his "guts" and his willingness to defend the boundaries of "the free world." To answer liberal critics, the Peace Corps provided a counterpoint to Kennedy's emphasis on military confrontation. It offered Americans a crucible in which idealistic youth would forge manhood in service to progressive, anti-Communist, postcolonial "nation-building." The Peace Corps promised to advance American interests by example of virtue rather than costly large-scale foreign aid.

Counterinsurgency, the Peace Corps, and even the President's Council on Physical Fitness served the ideological needs of Kennedy and his staff while fitting their own identity-narratives of elite masculinity. These programs symbolically linked the stoic manly values of the boarding school ideology of masculinity with the frontier virtues that presumably made America powerful. Kennedy identified the strength of male bodies with the strength of the state. His programs offered solutions to a perceived crisis of masculinity at home and to the threatening encroachments of a rival empire abroad.

---