JFK Steals Fidel Castro's Thunder After the Bay of Pig's Invasion

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ABSTRACT: Public relations is as important in politics as in other contexts. As part of the on-going fight against communism last century, the U.S. provided support for Cuban exiles in their attempt to retake their country from Fidel Castro in 1961. This invasion failed completely, threatening America's reputation. Anticipating an attack from Castro President John F. Kennedy quickly gave a speech enacting image repair that took the wind out of Castro's sails, stealing his thunder. Castro's speech on American aggression, two days later, failed to damage America's prestige as much as Castro probably hoped. This episode clearly illustrates the strategy of "stealing thunder" in a political context.

Keywords: Political Image Repair; Stealing Thunder; JFK; Bay of Pigs

1. Introduction

America's war on communism raged for decades. Korea had been a prominent battleground in the 1950s and the Vietnam War loomed large in the 1970s. In between, the U.S. opposed communist rule in nearby Cuba. Fidel Castro led the 26th of July Movement which overthrew the Cuban government: President Fulgencio Batista fled the country on January 1, 1959. In the wake of this revolution President Dwight Eisenhower approved a plan to help Cuban exiles in their attempt retake Cuba by providing arms and training. President John F. Kennedy continued this policy of helping Cuban exiles depose Castro. The exiles invaded Cuba on April 17, 1961 at the Bay of Pigs. The invasion was defeated decisively in two days on April 19 (for background on the Bay of Pigs invasion, see Carradice, 2018; Higgins, 1987; or Rasenberger, 2011).

An important part of the context of the Bay of Pigs invasion was the U2 spy plane incident the year before. On May 1, 1960, American pilot Francis Gary Powers was shot down while flying a spy plane (a U2) over the Soviet Union. When Soviet Premier Nikita Khrushchev announced that an American plane had been shot down over Soviet land, he initially withheld the fact that they captured both the pilot and the cameras in the plane. The United States quickly offered a defense (apologia) that claimed that the aircraft was a weather plane that had accidentally strayed off course, not a spy plane. After Eisenhower's initial denial of spying, the Soviets pointed to the cameras in the airplane and Khrushchev "used a variety of antapologia strategies. . . to strengthen [his] attack on the United States and to weaken the U.S. apologia (Stein, 2008, p. 23). For example, Khrushchev declared that "The persons involved in this piratical flight could not think of anything other than the stupid version that this was a weather aircraft" (Stein, p. 24). Surely Eisenhower did not like the implication that he was stupid. It was hardly shocking that the U.S. flew spy planes; nevertheless Eisenhower looked foolish when he tried to claim that the U2 was merely a weather plane. This recent episode may have served as a precautionary tale when President Kennedy was confronted by the failed invasion of Cuba.

This essay investigates Kennedy's defense of the Bay of Pigs disaster. It argues that JFK tried to weaken the attack that surely would come from Castro on the failed invasion (see, e.g., Benoit, 2015a on pre-emptive image repair). This essay examines the President's rhetoric as an instance of political image repair with special attention to "stealing thunder."

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2. Image Repair Discourse

Face, image, or reputation is important to humans (Benoit, 1995, 2015a). Politicians, like other people and organizations, rely on good public relations (see, e.g., Benoit, 2006a, 2006b, 2014, 2016, 2017a, 2017b, 2019, 2021; Benoit & Henson, 2008; Benoit, Gullifor, & Panici, 1991; Blaney & Benoit, 2001). Image repair discourse, or apologia, is designed to respond to accusations or suspicions of wrong-doing. These accusations are comprised of two elements, blame and offensiveness (Pomerantz, 1978). Ryan (1982, 1988) made plain the relationship between attack and defense, arguing that kategoria and apologia should be conceptualized as a "speech set" so that appreciating a defense requires understanding the attack that prompted this apologia. Benoit articulated the theory of Image Repair Discourse (Benoit, 1995, 1997, 2013, 2015a, 2015b, 2016, 2017a, 2020, 2021). Some defensive strategies (e.g, denial, evade responsibility) concern blame whereas others (reduce offensiveness) address offensiveness. Benoit (2022) added two new strategies to the list of image repair options, both versions of denial: deflect attention (look over there instead of here) and straw denial (formerly known as a "straw man" argument). Table 1 lists the strategies of image repair and provides examples of each one.

Table 1. Strategies for Image Repair/Apologia

Denial		
Simple Denial	Accused did not perform act	Tylenol did not poison capsules
Shift Blame	Another performed act	"Madman" poisoned capsules
Deflect Attention	Redirect attention elsewhere	What about Benghazi?
Straw Denial	Deny different attack	"You stole from me." "I never stole from your mother."
Evade Responsibility		
Provocation	Responded to act of another	Firm left state when taxes increased
Defeasibility	Lack of information/ability	Meeting missed because not told of changed time
Accident	Mishap	Tree fell during storm, damaging car
Good Intentions	Meant well	Sears wanted to make good auto repair
Reduce Offensiveness		
Bolstering	Stress accused's good qualities	Exxon: swift, competent clean-up
Minimization	Act not serious	Exxon: few animals killed by oil spill
Differentiation	Act less offensive than similar acts	I did not steal your phone; borrowed without your permission
Transcendence	More important values	Stole food for hungry child
Attack Accuser	Source of attack not credible or Attacker deserved consequences	Accusations are from fake news
Compensation	Gift to victim	Free desert if waiter spilled food
Corrective Action	Plans to solve/prevent recurrence of problem	AT&T spent billions to improve service
Mortification	Apologize	Sorry I spilled coffee on you

Derived from: Benoit (1995, 1997, 2015a, 2021).

3. Stealing Thunder

The concept of "stealing thunder" refers to a message which reveals the existence of a problem before others have an opportunity to attack the wrong-doer (this concept relates to inoculation theory, which concerns attempts to reduce the impact of persuasive attacks before they are made: McGuire, 1961, 1964; see also Banas & Rains, 2010; Benoit, 1991; Compton, 2013; Pfau, 1997). Wigley (2011) compared two political scandals and two celebrity scandals. In the political scandals (Governor Eliot Spitzer, who stonewalled accusations, compared with Governor David Patterson, who employed stealing thunder), the politician who stole thunder was the target of fewer negative stories than the other politician. In the celebrity scandals (David Letterman, who used stealing thunder, and Tiger Woods, who delayed his apology) no significant difference occurred in the number of unfavorable stories. Arpan and Roskos-Ewoldsen (2005) examined reactions to corporate instances of stealing thunder. An organization that revealed a crisis was evaluated as more credible than one that made no such admission; higher credibility led to perceptions that the crisis was less severe (cf. Arpan & Pompper, 2003). Fennis and Stroebe (2014) reported that self-disclosure of a negative event yielded greater trust for the organization that disclosure from third parties. This concept has also been investigated in courtroom communication (Dolnik, Case, & Williams, 2003; Williams, Bourgeois, & Croyle, 1993; Williams & Dolnik, 2001).

4. JFK Steals Thunder from Castro

President Kennedy gave a speech immediately after the Bay of Pigs fiasco (all quotations from this speech are taken from Kennedy, 1961). His image repair discourse relied on three key strategies: simple denial, deflect attention, and bolstering. Each strategy will be discussed in turn.

4a. Simple Denial

Kennedy explained that he wanted to "discuss briefly at this time the recent events in Cuba." This acknowledged the disastrous invasion without dwelling on the details of the event. The President forcefully denied that the American armed forces had intervened in Cuba at the Bay of Pigs: "Any unilateral American intervention, in the absence of an external attack upon ourselves or an ally, would have been contrary to our traditions and to our international obligations." Notice that Kennedy did not deny that the U.S. had supported the invasion of Cuba (supplying arms or training), only that our armed forces had not intervened in Cuba.

4b. Deflect Attention

Kennedy alluded to armed incursions into other countries by the Soviet Union: "We do not intend to be lectured on 'intervention' by those who character was stamped for all time on the bloody streets of Budapest?" Russia invaded Hungary in 1956 ("Hungarian Revolution," 2021). At this point in time Khruschev had not criticized Kennedy for the Bay of Pigs invasion, so this utterance should not be considered to be an instance of attack accuser. Rather, it was an attempt to deflect attention away from the U.S. and the Bay of Pigs, an example of "Whataboutism" (Benoit, 2021): "But what about the bloody streets of Budapest?" Kennedy extended this idea, declaring that this was "not the first time that Communist tanks have rolled over gallant men and women fighting to redeem the independence of their homeland." Kennedy did not identify specific instances, but in fact Russia had invaded Poland in 1939, the Baltic States in 1940, and Finland in 1940 ("Military Occupations," 2021). This statement could have refocused attention away from the Bay of Pigs fiasco to past Russian aggression.

4c. Bolstering

Kennedy mentioned that the U.S. was "a great democracy." He said that the U.S. "Will not hesitate in meeting its primary obligations which are to the security of our nation!" The President also declared his ideals, asserting that "we must build a hemisphere where freedom can flourish." These statements worked together to reinforce America's reputation.

5. Conclusion and Implications

As could be expected, Fidel Castro gave a speech denouncing U.S. aggression on April 23, 1961 (Castro, 1961). However, Kennedy had already undercut Castro's attack by giving a speech to defend America's image and steal Castro's thunder. He acknowledged the Bay of Pigs invasion while denying that American armed forces had intervened in Cuba. Even if people were aware of U.S. support, such assistance contrasts sharply with the images of Soviet tanks and bloody streets provided in the President's use of deflect attention. Kennedy also bolstered his country's image. This was a well-conceived image repair effort. This case study illustrates how the concept of stealing thunder, developed initially for use in corporate image repair, can be useful in a political context. It also illustrates the use of one of the strategies recently added to Image Repair Theory: deflect attention (also known as "whataboutism"). The U.S. did have egg on its face from the disastrous Bay of Pigs invasion; nevertheless, Kennedy came out of it looking better than Eisenhower

in the recent U2 fiasco. It points out how Kennedy's use of deflect attention (to Soviet tanks and bloody streets) worked well with his denial of direct intervention by U.S. troops.

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