

A NOTE ON NORMAN MAILER'S "THE LAST NIGHT"

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MAILER'S ONLY SCIENCE FICTION STORY (with the exception of "The Martian Invasion," which he wrote when he was 10) was written in late 1962, and appeared in *Esquire's* December 1963 issue. It is the last short story that he wrote. The impetus for the story was the Cuban Missile Crisis of October 1962, which is borne out by his statement preceding its 1966 reprinting in *Cannibals and Christians*. It is further reinforced by a plot of "prophetic fiction," as he describes it, which imagines what might have occurred if Premier Khrushchev had not backed down and removed Russia's nuclear-tipped warheads from Cuba: an environmental cataclysm that makes Earth inhabitable. Before the showdown between Premier Khrushchev and President Kennedy, Mailer's early enthusiasm for JFK had been diminished by the President's disastrous indecisiveness during another crisis a year earlier, the CIA-sponsored, failed invasion of Cuba (The Bay of Pigs). But the "iron nerve" displayed by JFK in the nuclear poker game with Khrushchev reestablished Mailer's profound admiration for the risk-taking President, and gave him the opportunity to explore the psychology of a hero ready to die in a nuclear war. Mailer's unnamed President in the short story displays the same cool determination as JFK.

In the mid-1990s, Mailer and his wife, Norris Church, reworked "The Last Night" into a screenplay which he at first planned to re-title "1999," but decided against it feeling that comparisons with George Orwell's *1984* would be inevitable and invidious. The screenplay remains unpublished. Mailer's incisive comments in his prefatory note before the original story on the nature of successful film treatments would be a worthy addition to the reading lists for film-writing courses.