



Kennedy and the Bay of Pigs

It was almost four o'clock in the morning, but sleep was impossible. Still wearing white tie and tails from the annual congressional reception, President Kennedy walked alone around the quiet White House grounds. A few hours earlier advisers had told him that the force of Cuban exiles attacking at the Bay of Pigs was doomed without military assistance from the United States. But Kennedy feared that such assistance might prompt the Soviet Union to move on Berlin, might even start a chain of events that would lead to World War III. So the President had refused to intervene, knowing that his refusal meant capture or death for some 1400 brave men.

Watching his slow, silent walk, one aide said to another, "He must be the loneliest man in the world tonight."¹ A few days earlier, Kennedy voiced the question that had plagued him during that long night: "How could I have been so stupid, to let them go ahead?"²

The CIA Starts Planning

When Fidel Castro overthrew the US-aligned Batista regime and established his own Communist-affiliated government in Cuba in 1959, reactions in the United States government were mixed. Analysts in the Central Intelligence Agency (CIA) repeatedly said that Castro enjoyed massive popular support. But two high-ranking American officials disagreed. CIA Director Allen Dulles, brother of the late, influential Secretary of State and possessed in his own right of a formidable reputation in intelligence, foresaw massive counter-revolutionary violence. "Blood will flow in the streets," he predicted.³ Simultaneously, Vice President Richard M. Nixon, who in April

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had declared Castro to be either “incredibly naive about communism or under Communist discipline,” decided it was the latter.⁴ During 1959 someone, possibly Nixon, came up with the idea of using Cuban exiles to unseat Castro. By the end of the year Dulles had come to embrace the idea. CIA planning began.⁵

At a January 18, 1960, CIA meeting, the first anti-Castro plan emerged. It bore little resemblance to the final blueprint. At this stage the ambition was a small one: to train and deploy a cadre of under thirty Cuban exiles, who would join the anti-Castro underground and precipitate a “typical Latin political upheaval.”⁶ The CIA had some experience in the area, having engineered the 1954 Guatemalan coup with a force of 150 exiles. Overthrowing Castro, planners believed would be no more difficult. When asked to describe the plan, one CIA official said, “The Guatemalan scenario.”⁷

A short time later the scale of the proposed operation changed: it was the first of many such changes. President Dwight D. Eisenhower, who knew nothing of the planning already underway, told Dulles to draw up an anti-Castro program. The response, far more ambitious than the original plan, called for the formation of a Cuban government-in-exile, “a powerful propaganda offensive,” a “covert intelligence and action organization” in Cuba, and “a paramilitary force outside of Cuba for future guerrilla action.”⁸ The paramilitary force was to be made up of small cadres of exiles, recruited and trained by the CIA, who would be sneaked into Cuba to “organize, train and lead resistance forces.”⁹ It could be ready for deployment in six to eight months claimed Richard Bissell, the CIA deputy director for plans. On March 17, Eisenhower okayed the proposal.

Under Bissell’s watchful eye initial steps proceeded quickly. Forming a government-in-exile required bringing together the multitude of anti-Castro groups around Miami—over a hundred in all.¹⁰ In June, the CIA succeeded in getting the five leading groups to unite into a single organization. Guatemalan President Miguel Ydigoras Fuentes was persuaded to permit the CIA to establish a guerrilla training camp in his country. In July the first exiles began to arrive, recruited from Florida and Central America by the CIA.

But progress seemed unduly slow to Eisenhower. At one point the President told Dulles and Bissell, “Boys, if you don’t intend to go through with this, let’s stop talking about it.”¹¹ Frequently the President seemed bored by the whole project. Only in August did he approve a \$13 million budget. He also okayed the use of Defense Department personnel, but with the explicit understanding that no Americans would take part in combat.

By the fall the initial guerrilla infiltration concept was losing its appeal. There never was, in Bissell’s words, “a command and control net, a true organized underground in Cuba. Because there was no underground ... it was unfeasible largely to infiltrate either [the] supplies or people” necessary to bolster the disorganized resistance groups.¹² Meanwhile, Castro had been moving

closer to the Soviet Union, and Soviet arms were strengthening his hold on the island. The CIA concluded that unseating Castro would require more than the deployment of isolated guerrilla groups. It was going to take direct military action.

The CIA's plans had always called for a small invasion to "detonate a guerrilla resistance," but by mid-November Bissell had decided "that if there was to be any chance of success, we would have to place main reliance on the landing force, and only minor reliance on any resistance force."¹³ He therefore ordered the project officer in Guatemala to reduce the guerrilla teams in training to only 60 of the more than 400 recruits and to initiate conventional military training for the rest of them. Since the change in plans was felt by Bissell to be minor and "internal," he didn't bother to consult the President about it at the time.¹⁴

Shortly after, Nixon's bid to succeed Eisenhower in the presidency was narrowly defeated by the Democratic candidate, John F. Kennedy. President-elect Kennedy's first substantive announcement was of his intention to reappoint Dulles and FBI Director J. Edgar Hoover, two great Republican names, signifying bipartisanship.

Kennedy first heard of the proposed Cuban project on November 18, 1960, 10 days after his election. Eleven days later he received a full briefing from Dulles and Bissell. The President-elect felt it inappropriate and unwise to commit himself to the outgoing administration's policies until he had full responsibility, but he listened with interest and approval to what he viewed as a contingency plan.¹⁵ Two days after meeting with Kennedy, Dulles briefed Eisenhower for the first time on the "new paramilitary concept." Eisenhower reportedly expressed his support and urged that the project be "expedited."¹⁶

On December 8, the CIA explained the new plan to the Special Group (a secret interdepartmental committee of the outgoing administration charged with overseeing CIA activities). Agency representatives proposed a sudden shoreline attack on Cuba by between 600 and 750 exiles. Air strikes, they said, would eliminate the Cuban Air Force; further bombing and propaganda would add to the Cuban leadership's confusion. According to the CIA plan, the heavily armed invaders would then only have to hold their own and wait for anti-Castro activists and sizable defections from Cuba's militia to tip the balance against Castro.¹⁷

In the hectic weeks of the transition, following the December 8 meeting of the Special Group, the CIA's plans for an invasion of Cuba proceeded largely without executive supervision. Though the Eisenhower Administration did take the public step in its last days in office of severing diplomatic relations with Cuba, it chose to defer all consideration of a covert operation to the incoming government. At a White House transition meeting January 19, the day before Kennedy's inauguration, Eisenhower told the President-elect that the anti-Castro plan was proceeding well. It would be the new administration's responsibility, Ike added, to do "whatever is necessary" to see it through.¹⁸ But Kennedy and his advisers were largely occupied with ensuring a smooth transition

of power. Left to its own devices, early in January the CIA planning group selected the city of Trinidad as the most promising landing site and began work on a detailed operating plan. Meanwhile, the exile brigade grew to 800 or 900 men and recruitment accelerated.

Kennedy Comes In

The Kennedy team swept into Washington in an atmosphere that presidential aide Arthur Schlesinger, Jr. accurately characterized as euphoric. "The new frontiersmen," it seemed to Schlesinger and his compatriots, "carried a thrust of action and purpose wherever they went," bringing with them "the ideas of national reconstruction and reform which had been germinating under the surface of a decade of inaction." A new generation was taking charge, they declared, and new policies and procedures would be necessary. McGeorge Bundy, the President's advisor for national security affairs, for example, was occupied with "dismantling the elaborate national security apparatus," which Kennedy believed had grown under his predecessor into "a ponderous system of boards, staffs and interdepartmental committees." The youthful President desired a more flexible and informal set of arrangements.¹⁹

The early months of the administration were a whirl of activity. In his first ninety days in office, Kennedy addressed 39 written calls to Congress for legislation, met with ten prominent foreign leaders—including Macmillan of Britain and Adenauer of Germany—held nine press conferences, oversaw the change of leadership in the regulatory agencies, and initiated such major projects as the Alliance for Progress and the Peace Corps.²⁰ In the midst of this pressing agenda sat the question of the CIA's plan to invade Cuba.

The invasion plan had already developed complications. In January the Joint Chiefs of Staff had embarked on their own anti-Castro plan. Unaware of the existing CIA project, the Chiefs appointed a committee "to study in general hypothetical terms what might be done to unseat Castro."²¹ Two days after the inauguration, Brigadier General David W. Gray briefed the new President and his top officials on the committee's stark findings: unseating Castro would definitely require United States backing. A week later Dulles and Bissell counterfired by presenting their more optimistic assessment of the success of a covert invasion along the lines of the CIA plan. After "considerable discussion" Kennedy authorized the "continuation and accentuation" of the CIA's current preparatory activities (propaganda, political action and sabotage), and called on the Joint Chiefs of Staff to review the agency's invasion plan.²²

To a special committee of the JCS, headed by General Gray, CIA men explained what was called the "Trinidad plan." The plan called for an amphibious landing at dawn at Trinidad, a city thought to be rife with anti-Castro sentiment. Castro's Air Force would be put out of commission by pre-invasion air strikes. Paratroops would land in the surrounding hills. Disenchanted locals and guerrillas from the nearby Escambray Mountains would immediately rush to join the brigade. A provisional government would then be flown in and, after 10 days or two weeks would be

recognized by the United States. US aid (though not military aid) would quickly follow. From there, the CIA believed, it would be only a matter of time until the Castro regime collapsed.

On February 3, the Chiefs submitted their report to the President. Although General Gray's committee, shocked by the CIA group's apparent lack of organization, had given the Joint Chiefs a somewhat pessimistic evaluation of the plan's chances of success, these doubts were muted in the final JCS report.²³ The Chiefs continued to operate under the Eisenhower policy-making structure in which their designated role was "briefing officers" rather than advisers; since this was clearly the CIA's operation, it would be impertinent to offer opinions unless they were specifically requested.²⁴ The result of the JCS concern not to overstep the bounds of their mandate was a reserved by seemingly favorable evaluation.

The "ultimate success" of the invasion, they wrote, "depended upon political factors, i.e., a sizeable popular uprising or substantial follow-on forces." Noting that their assessment was based on "second- and third-hand reports" of the combat ability of the trainees, the Chiefs recommended further study. But their bottom line was more favorable than that of the Gray Committee. Overt United States participation, it seemed, might not be necessary after all.

Despite the shortcomings pointed out in the assessment, the Joint Chiefs of Staff consider that timely execution of this plan has a fair chance of ultimate success and, even if it does not achieve immediately the full results desired, could contribute to the eventual overthrow of the Castro regime.²⁵

General Gray later argued that the committee meant to sound cautious. "We thought other people would think that 'a fair chance' would mean 'not too good.'"²⁶ But to members of the new administration, not understanding the military's self-imposed restraint, the Chiefs' lack of criticism seemed like an endorsement of the CIA plan. Kennedy, therefore, gave the CIA the go-ahead to continue preparations for the invasion. Still, he cautiously told Bissell, "Dick, remember I reserve the right to cancel this right to the end."²⁷

On February 24, the Chiefs sent representatives to see the training firsthand. Three officers spent four days inspecting the Guatemalan training camp of Brigade 2506 (recruit number 2506 had fallen down a hill and died; his compatriots decided to honor him by giving the group his number).²⁸ The officers came away more concerned about security than about training procedures. Both the Guatemalan military camp and a Nicaraguan flight-training camp were open secrets in Latin America. Indeed, the *New York Times* in January had revealed in painfully accurate detail both the location and strength of the Guatemalan camp. In addition, a *Time* magazine article of the same month had disclosed the CIA's role in financing the Cuban political front in Miami.²⁹

As a result of all of these leaks, the inspection team calculated the odds against the attack surprising Castro as about 85 to 15. And without surprise, they reported, the effort would be a failure—a single plane with .50 caliber machine guns could sink most of the brigade ships.³⁰ But the Joint Chiefs apparently didn't believe this was a serious danger. In their report to the President, they again hedged but were relatively optimistic.

... the plan could be expected to achieve initial success. Ultimate success will depend on the extent to which the initial assault serves as a catalyst for further action on the part of anti-Castro elements throughout Cuba.³¹

The JCS was not alone in discounting the effect of the many breaches of security that would punctuate the operation. Almost all officials in Washington clung to the belief that the legal fiction that this was an independent Cuban action could be maintained. (Richard Bissell later cited this "self delusion" as a principle reason for the invasion's failure, suggesting that as a result "the argument was [not] made that this is now a very public business, and we'd better treat it as such, and either cancel it if we can't stand the publicity, or else do some of the things that will increase the chances of success if we are going to go forward with it.")³²

As the Kennedy Administration entered its second month in office, the momentum behind the CIA's plan to invade Cuba built. In early March Guatemalan President Ydigoras asked for a guarantee that the brigade would be out of his country by the end of April. At a March 11 Cabinet meeting Dulles told Kennedy there was really only one place to put the brigade—Cuba:

Don't forget that we have a disposal problem. If we have to take these men out of Guatemala, we will have to transfer them to the United States, and we can't have them wandering around the country telling everyone what they have been doing.³³

Kennedy saw an even more serious problem: "If we decided now to call the whole thing off," he told an aide, "I don't know if we could go down there and take the guns away from them."³⁴

In addition, the CIA reported that the brigade's morale had peaked and added, according to Schlesinger, that "further postponement would risk demoralization."³⁵ Moreover, the Guatemalan rainy season was coming. When it hit, brigade training would have to halt. Finally, the CIA reported that Castro would soon receive Soviet-built jets. When that happened, a small amphibious landing would be suicidal. "After June 1 it would take the United States Marines and Air Force to overthrow Castro," Schlesinger recalled the prevailing view. "If a purely Cuban invasion were ever to take place, it had to take place in the next few weeks."³⁶

Under the weight of all the arguments favoring early launching of the brigade, Kennedy gave the operation a green light. But, he said, the attendant political risk had to be minimized. He agreed with the State Department that the Trinidad plan was "too spectacular ... too much like a World War II invasion."³⁷ Therefore, he ordered the CIA to locate a "quieter" invasion target. At the State Department's recommendation, the President added the additional requirement that the new landing site must have an airstrip capable of handling B-26 air support operations.³⁸

Over the next few days the CIA group worked feverishly to find a target with the desired characteristics. On March 14 it proposed three possible landing sites, recommending the Zapata area surrounding Cochin Bay (the Bay of Pigs) as the most favorable. The JCS, who reviewed the CIA plan that day, concurred that the Bay of Pigs was the best of the new sites. Their continued preference for the Trinidad plan over all of the alternatives, however, seems to have been overlooked by the senior civilian officials who received their report.³⁹

On March 15 Kennedy okayed the Bay of Pigs plan with a few minor adjustments to "reduce the noise level." Further, he insisted that the United States would not militarily intervene regardless of the consequences. And he demanded that the plan be drawn so as to permit him to cancel the mission up to twenty-four hours before the landing. He withheld final approval.⁴⁰

In that and subsequent meetings, no one pointed out to Kennedy and his advisers a major drawback of the Bay of Pigs landing site. One of the strongest arguments all along had been that the plan simply couldn't fail—that, if Castro responded with more military strength than anticipated, the brigade could "melt into the mountains" and join existing guerrilla forces. But the Bay of Pigs was surrounded by swamps. The mountains were eighty miles away.

Opponents of Invasion

A number of President Kennedy's advisers had been disturbed by the scope of the CIA's invasion plans when they first learned of them in the early months of 1961, but most of their concerns either were not expressed to the President or reached him in a substantially diluted form. The earliest argument against the Cuban operation came at the beginning of February from Arthur Schlesinger. He wrote a memo urging the President to abandon the plan to overthrow Castro because of the harmful effects it would have on the new administration's image abroad.⁴¹ Schlesinger, however, had little standing in the administration, having only just been named to the vaguely defined post of "special assistant" to the President. As he himself observed, a college professor fresh to government would not hope to carry much weight against the opinions of the CIA and the Joint Chiefs of Staff. To pursue his objections would only have gained him a "name as a nuisance."⁴² Therefore, after making his appeal, he lapsed into uncomfortable silence.

In late March Under Secretary of State Chester Bowles learned about the Cuban invasion plan for the first time, when he sat in for Secretary of State Rusk at a planning meeting. Bowles was

shocked by what he heard and, after consulting with some of his close associates, sought to convince Rusk that the State Department should take a stand against the invasion. The landing, Bowles argued in a harsh memo to Rusk, was not only morally and legally questionable, it was also impractical. Delivering the memo to Rusk, he told the Secretary, "I think you can kill this thing if you stand firm on it. But if you can't, I want to see the President."⁴³

Bowles's plea fell on deaf ears. At planning meetings the Secretary of State continued to listen "inscrutably" and offered only "gentle warnings about possible excesses."⁴⁴ Rusk's silence is hard to fathom, but his response when Bowles continued to press him on the Cuban issue, that it wasn't "going to amount to anything," suggests that he may have believed that Kennedy had sufficiently reduced the American role in the operation to remove the threat of political fallout.⁴⁵ Moreover, sensitive to the fact that the State Department was viewed by many in the White House as stuffy and bureaucratic in comparison to the more responsive CIA, Rusk may have feared that his open opposition to the invasion plan would label him "soft" or "undaring."⁴⁶

Meanwhile, although the invasion date (originally set at April 5) was rapidly approaching and White House meetings on the landing plans were being held every two or three days, the President himself continued to display signs of skepticism. At a March 29 meeting Kennedy expressed concern that the landing might complicate sensitive negotiations with the Soviet Union. He still felt that the "noise level" was too great. And he pressed Bissell on the CIA's assumption that the Cuban populace would side with the brigade. Bissell insisted that the brigade could count on the "active support" of a quarter of the Cuban populace. But Kennedy moved the invasion date from April 5 to April 10 (it was later moved back still further, to April 17), and still withheld his final approval.⁴⁷

These hesitations encouraged the invasion's opponents in their hopes that the President would cancel the operation or at least severely reduce its scope.⁴⁸ But the pressure of pre-invasion preparations and the certainty of Dulles and Bissell in their plan were creating an almost unstoppable momentum. Dulles at one point told Kennedy,

I stood right there at Ike's desk and told him I was certain our Guatemalan operation would succeed, and, Mr. President, the prospects for this plan are even better than they were for that one.⁴⁹

Dulles's insistence was a strong influence; Kennedy said later "Dulles is a legendary figure and it's hard to operate with legendary figures."⁵⁰ The young President was up against another powerful legend as well. When Kennedy sometimes seemed uncertain, Dulles would remind the President of his predecessor's support for the landing and ask him if he was going to be "any less anti-Communist than Eisenhower."⁵¹

As the planning pushed relentlessly forward, however, an unexpected and potentially influential critic spoke up. Through newspaper accounts—which, for a supposedly secret project, were alarmingly frequent and complete—Senator J. William Fulbright, chairman of the Foreign Relations Committee, had learned of the plan. On March 30 he handed Kennedy a lengthy memo. The invasion would be illegal and immoral, Fulbright wrote. The United States would be revealed as the perpetrator. Moreover, the plan might entail far greater costs than the administration had bargained for.

The prospect must also be faced that an invasion of Cuba by exiles would encounter formidable resistance which the exiles, by themselves, might not be able to overcome. The question would then arise of whether the United States would be willing to let the enterprise fail (in the probably futile hope of concealing the US role) or whether the United States would respond with progressive assistance as necessary to insure success.⁵²

“The Castro regime,” Fulbright concluded, “is a thorn in the flesh; but it is not a dagger in the heart.”⁵³ President Kennedy read the memo, but offered no response. Fulbright did not press the matter, feeling it would be rude, and believing, in any event, that the President must have strong doubts of his own about the invasion.⁵⁴

A few days later, on April 4, the President invited the senator to present his objections at a planning meeting that evening. After Bissell had brought the group up to date on combat preparations, Fulbright summarized the main points he had made in his memo. It was, according to Schlesinger, “a brave, old-fashioned American speech ... [which] left everyone in the room, except me and perhaps the President, wholly unmoved.”⁵⁵ When Fulbright concluded, Kennedy, rather than initiating a discussion on the Senator’s views, began immediately to poll his advisors in a manner suggesting that he wanted their overall assessment of the invasion plan; a “yes or no” answer. A number of participants were frustrated by the meeting’s format, and several felt that it was just a show for Fulbright’s benefit. It seemed that this was not “the time or place to penetrate anything,” one participant later observed. No one voted no, including several men who later claimed to have had serious doubts.⁵⁶ Although President Kennedy still did not commit himself to the invasion, Schlesinger viewed the meeting as “climactic.”⁵⁷

The opinions of several junior officials, including Schlesinger, were not solicited during the meeting. Afterward, however, Kennedy took Schlesinger aside and asked his thoughts. Though he had thought of little else in the past few weeks, Schlesinger was dismayed at having to present his argument unrehearsed. He told the President that he opposed the invasion and quickly tried to summarize his reasons, but he believed his explanation came off hurried and disorderly. So, the next morning Schlesinger arrived at his office at 6:30 to write a more clearly thought-out argument against the invasion to present to Kennedy before the normal schedule of daily events began.

His major objections were two:

- a) No matter how “Cuban” the equipment and personnel, the US will be held accountable for the operation, and our prestige will be committed to its successes ...
- b) Since the Castro regime is presumably too strong to be toppled by a single landing, the operation will turn into a protracted civil conflict.⁵⁸

Should the conflict continue, Schlesinger wrote, “pressures will build up which will make it politically hard to resist the demands to send in the Marines.”⁵⁹ Whether failure or success, Schlesinger added, the operation would endanger the image of the United States as a reasonable and honest power.⁶⁰

Even Schlesinger was to acknowledge later, however, that this memo, like the one he had written in February, represented the easy way out. It looked good on the record, but the few timid questions he had raised, and his arguments about “intangibles—the moral position of the United States, the reputation of the President, ... ‘world public opinion’ ... “ stood little chance of tipping the balance against the judgments of the director of the CIA, the Secretary of State, and the Secretary of Defense, that the operation would succeed in smoothly clearing US waters of a Soviet client state.⁶¹ Thus, like the Fulbright memo, Schlesinger’s appeal was read in the Oval Office, but its specific objections were never discussed. Kennedy’s only reply to Schlesinger was, “You know, I’ve reserved the right to stop this thing up to 24 hours before the landing. In the meantime, I’m just trying to make some sense out of it. We’ll just have to see.”⁶²

“One of Our Greatest Assets”

The United National General Assembly was scheduled to debate Cuban allegations of American aggression in mid-April. Kennedy therefore ordered that Adlai Stevenson, US ambassador to the UN, be completely informed about the plan. Stevenson, a former governor of Illinois, had twice been Democratic candidate for President and still possessed a following as well as genuine eloquence. “The integrity and credibility of Adlai Stevenson constitute one of our greatest assets,” Kennedy told Schlesinger. “I don’t want anything to be done which might jeopardize that.”⁶³ Schlesinger and another aide, Tracy Barnes, briefed Stevenson on April 8. Taken aback, Stevenson replied:

Look, I don’t like this. If I were calling the shots, I wouldn’t do it. But this is Kennedy’s show. All I ask is three things: First, don’t do anything till the Assembly adjourns. Second, nobody leaves from US territory. Third, no American participation.⁶⁴

Schlesinger and Barnes – their presentation “probably unduly vague” gave Stevenson the impression that at least the first of his requests would be honored.⁶⁵

Back in Washington that afternoon, Schlesinger found Kennedy leaning toward a “go” decision. The current plan, Kennedy said, seemed to have a strong chance of success. And since the landing force could “melt into the mountains” if things went wrong, a failure would not be all that costly. Besides, he added, “If we have to get rid of these 800 men, it is much better to dump them in Cuba than in the United States, especially if that is where they want to go.”⁶⁶

The President’s brother, Attorney General Robert Kennedy, learned about the plan only the week before the landing. As he remembered later:

Dick Bissell at Jack’s instructions came over to the Department of Justice and briefed me. He told me at the time that the chances of success were about two out of three and that failure was almost impossible because ... even if the force was not successful in its initial objective of establishing a beachhead, the men could become guerrillas and, therefore, couldn’t be wiped out and would be a major ... thorn in the side of Castro.⁶⁷

On April 11, when Robert Kennedy learned of Schlesinger’s doubts, the Attorney General was unsympathetic. “You may be right and you may be wrong,” he told Schlesinger, “but the President has made up his mind. Don’t push it any further. Now is the time for everyone to help him all they can.”⁶⁸

The admonition was probably unnecessary. Schlesinger had begun to reconcile himself to the mission. Now he tried to do what he could to minimize its risks. The day before being lectured by Robert Kennedy, Schlesinger had given the President a memo along those lines. He suggested that, to minimize the political danger, Kennedy remove himself from the decision and subsequent cover-up.

When lies must be told, they should be told by subordinate officials. At no point should the President be asked to lend himself to the cover operation. For this reason, there seems to be merit in Secretary Rusk’s suggestion that someone other than the President make the final decision and do so in his absence – someone whose head can later be placed on the block if things go terribly wrong.⁶⁹

The recommendation was apparently not seriously considered.

But another of Schlesinger's recommendations received a more favorable hearing. Schlesinger urged that the Cuban leadership-in-exile be made to understand that the United States would not under any circumstances intervene militarily.

We must tell the Revolutionary Council that it cannot expect immediate US recognition; that recognition will come only when they have a better than 50-50 chance of winning under their own steam; that this is a fight which Cubans will have in essence to win for themselves.⁷⁰

Kennedy agreed. Two days later he told a press conference:

There will not be, under any conditions, an intervention in Cuba by the United States Armed Forces ... The basic issue in Cuba is not one between the United States and Cuba. It is between the Cubans themselves.⁷¹

It never occurred to the exile leaders and their CIA liaison that the President might be telling the truth. They were confident that the United States would intervene if necessary. Kennedy's statement, they thought, was "a superb effort in misdirection."⁷²

That afternoon, Kennedy dispatched Schlesinger and Adolf Berle, Franklin Roosevelt's assistant secretary of state for Latin American affairs (a Kennedy family friend now serving as a high-level adviser), to ensure that the exile leaders understood. Clearly, they did not understand. The provisional president of the group, Jose Miro Cardona, "displayed resistance and incredulity at the statement that no United States troops would be used," Schlesinger wrote.⁷³ The two emissaries were unable to convince him that the US would not get involved. The aides reported back to Kennedy, who told Bissell that the mission was off unless the exiles accepted the US position. Bissell sent an emissary of his own to Miro, who finally professed to understand and agree to the terms, but the emissary was unconvinced of Miro's sincerity.

Final Preparations

On April 13, four days before the scheduled invasion, Kennedy received a report praising the brigade's preparedness. Written by Jack Hawkins, an experienced Marine colonel, the report was, Robert Kennedy said later, "the most instrumental paper in convincing the President to go ahead."⁷⁴ The colonel wrote:

My observations have increased my confidence in the ability of this force to accomplish not only initial combat missions but also the ultimate objective, the overthrow of Castro. The Brigade and battalion commanders now know all details of the plan and are enthusiastic. These officers

are young, vigorous, intelligent and motivated by a fanatic urge to begin battle ...

[T]hey have supreme confidence they will win against whatever Castro has to offer.

I share their confidence.⁷⁵

It subsequently turned out that the Cubans' confidence was based on a good deal of CIA misinformation. Brigade members were told that they constituted only a small part of the total landing force; that the Cuban underground would destroy bridges throughout the island and call a general strike; that hundreds of guerrillas would rush to join them.⁷⁶ Further, they were told that once the beachhead was secured the United States would help assure victory.

...the United States would recognize the Cuban government-in-arms and assist it with whatever might be necessary to overthrow Castro. American ships would be standing near Cuban waters so help would not be unnecessarily delayed.⁷⁷

One advisor told the excited exiles that they probably wouldn't need American assistance at all.

You will be so strong, you will be getting so many people to your side, that you won't want to wait for us. You will put your hands out, turn left, and go straight into Havana.⁷⁸

But Kennedy had no inkling of this. He had only the laudatory Hawkins report. Still withholding final approval, Kennedy okayed the initial air strike on April 14. But he told Bissell to shrink the strike to a "minimal" scale. Bissell, left to himself to define minimal, decided to send six planes. The original plan had called for sixteen.⁷⁹

The air strike had long been controversial and uncertain. Significant resistance from the Cuban Air Force would clearly doom the landing force. To reduce or eliminate the danger, Bissell, Dulles, and the Joint Chiefs favored a single, massive air strike to coincide with the brigade's landing. Rusk argued that such a strike would look too American. He preferred to hold off any air strike until the invaders had secured an air strip from which strikes could appear to be launched. But that, the JCS and the CIA countered, would leave the brigade vulnerable to air attack for hours, maybe days. In that case, a memo warned, "we will be courting disaster."⁸⁰

A compromise was finally reached. A strike two days before the landing would knock out most of Cuba's air power. Immediately thereafter, a Cuban pretending to be a defector from the Cuban Air Force would land in Miami and claim to have done the damage. "No one supposed that

the cover story would hold up very long," wrote Schlesinger, but it would only have to hold up for the two days before the landing took place.⁸¹ Concurrent with the landing, a second air strike would be launched. In the confusion, maybe no one would notice that the invaders hadn't gained an air strip. It was not a satisfactory compromise for anyone concerned. The Chiefs and Bissell felt that the initial strike would tip Castro off without eliminating his air power, thereby forfeiting the valuable element of surprise and gaining little in return. Rusk felt that the defector cover story was transparent.

The first, reduced strike went off as scheduled. Returning to their Nicaraguan air base, the exile pilots bragged about the heavy damage they had inflicted. Meanwhile the bogus Cuban defector landed in Miami and claimed credit for the strike. As proof, he pointed to bullet holes in his plane (carefully shot by the pilot and his CIA associates). But a *Life* magazine reported inspected the plane closely and found the damage to be trivial. Moreover, he discovered that the gun muzzles were taped shut. The guns and bomb bays obviously hadn't been used in at least six months. In addition, the plane had a metal nose. All of Cuba's planes had plastic noses. Only hours old, the cover story was already beginning to come apart.⁸²

Kennedy Cancels the Airstrike

The United Nations debate on alleged American aggression toward Cuba had been scheduled for April 17. But the Cuban ambassador insisted on April 15 that the United States was behind that day's air strike; so the Cuban issue was put on the agenda for that afternoon. In preparation, Ambassador Stevenson and his staff checked with the State Department. State checked with the CIA and came back with a definitive answer: the strike was the work of a genuine Cuban defector. Stevenson announced that in the UN.

Meanwhile, U-2 overflights showed that the air strike had been far less successful than the pilots had claimed. Only five of Cuba's twenty-nine planes were definitely out of commission.⁸³

On April 16, the cover story by now completely unraveled, Stevenson learned he had been misled. Furious, he sent a top-secret telegram to Secretary of State Rusk.

1. Greatly disturbed by clear indication ... that bombing incidents in Cuba on Saturday were launched in part at least from outside Cuba.
2. I had definite impression ... that no action would be taken which could give us political difficulty during current UN debate. This raid, if such it was, if exposed will gravely alter whole atmosphere in GA [General Assembly] ...

3. I do not understand how we could let such attack take place two days before debate on Cuban issue in GA. Nor can I understand, if we could not prevent such outside attack from taking place at this time, why I could not have been warned and provided prepared material with which to defend US ...
4. There is gravest risk of another U-2 disaster in such uncoordinated action.⁸⁴

Rusk talked to Stevenson and concluded that the collapse of the cover story had seriously harmed US credibility. Another air strike would cause much more substantial credibility damage. Accordingly, he concluded, the second strike would have to be postponed. A few hours earlier Kennedy had given the mission his final approval. Now, Rusk called with his recommendation. Reluctantly, Kennedy agreed to hold off on the second strike until it could realistically appear to have come from the beachhead itself—leaving the brigade vulnerable to air attack in the interim.⁸⁵

Operations officers at the CIA were stunned by the change in plans. Dulles had left earlier that day to fulfill a long-arranged speaking engagement in Puerto Rico. General Charles Cabell, in charge during Dulles's absence, joined Bissell in a strong protest to Rusk. The Secretary called the President and recited the CIA case for reinstating the strike, adding, "But I am still recommending, in view of what's going on in New York, that we cancel." Kennedy concurred.⁸⁶

Back at CIA headquarters it was clear to military advisers that the mission was lost. Colonel Hawkins, the Marine who had praised the brigade's combat readiness to Kennedy, screamed at Cabell, "This is criminally negligent!" General Gray, who had run the JCS's study of the CIA plan, said flatly, "There goes your operation." Cabell, unable to sleep from worry, finally visited Rusk again at about 4 a.m. Rusk had Cabell present his argument by phone to the President. Again, Kennedy refused.⁸⁷

On the ships, brigade members tried to rest before the landing. One of them wrote in his diary:

Final briefing said opposition would be weak as there were only about 5,000 militia anywhere in the area. The local populace would come in and we could expect large defections to us from the militia. All this bucked us up immensely. Men talked as it is were over and won and how splendid to be back in Havana. Myself, I wondered; I had a slightly sinking feeling about the battle ahead. I kept thinking: someone is going to be killed.⁸⁸

The Battle

Problems arose before the brigade ever hit the beach. When one exile tried out the deck-mounted machine gun, the weld broke and the firing mechanism stuck. The twenty men relaxing on the deck below scattered wildly, but one was killed and two were wounded, one of them seriously. The ship broke radio silence to call for help. Hours later an American destroyer pulled alongside and took aboard the two wounded men. Morale, sagging badly after the shooting, began to climb with the sighting of the American ship. "Everybody felt confident we were not alone," remembered one brigade officer.⁸⁹

In the early hours of April 17 the brigade ships pulled alongside the Cuban boat. The first landing party headed in to place flashing marker lights along the beach to guide the landing. But one of the lights shorted and suddenly started flashing before they reached the beach. A Cuban militia patrol saw the light and arrived just after the party landed. Brigade members riddled the militia jeep with bullets, killing its two occupants but also alerting others in the area. A militia truck stopped nearby and some twenty-five men got out and began walking around. The brigade party again opened fire, but some of the militia men this time escaped. The landing party nervously finished placing the marker lights, and the full-scale landing began.⁹⁰

As the landing proceeded, Grayston Lynch, a CIA agent with the brigade, received an urgent message from Washington: "Castro still has operational aircraft. Expect you to be hit at dawn. Unload all troops and supplies and take ships to sea as soon as possible."⁹¹ Lynch wasn't concerned. He assumed that the second air strike had missed a plane or two, and that Washington was just being cautious. No one had told him that the whole strike had been canceled.

Lynch had more immediate concerns: time after time, CIA intelligence reports were turning out to be completely wrong. The CIA had said that the beach would be dark; instead it was brightly illuminated by vapor lights. The CIA had said that there was no communications equipment near the beach; the landing party found a deserted radio base, its equipment still running. The CIA had said that the lighter patches on aerial photographs of the bay were seaweed and cloud reflections; they turned out to be coral reefs, on which several landing boats foundered and sank, leaving their hapless occupants to swim to shore unaided.⁹²

The invasion got off to a disastrous start. As predicted, five Castro jets struck hard at daybreak. The planes—including T-33 jet trainers, considered irrelevant in planning—proved awesomely destructive. By 9:30 the ships containing most of the brigade's communications equipment, medical supplies, and ammunition were at the bottom of the bay. Panicking, the commanders of the two surviving ships steamed away from Cuban waters. One was 110 miles south of Cuba. The other traveled 218 miles before being caught and sent back.⁹³

Meanwhile, Cuban tanks reached the beachhead well before anyone had thought possible. The invaders managed to capture two tanks, but they didn't know how to use them. So, in the words of one brigade member, "what might have been valuable additions to our armament were set on fire and destroyed."⁹⁴

Perhaps most importantly, the predicted uprising of the Cuban populace simply never came to pass. The Cuban underground hadn't been informed of the invasion date. As President Kennedy said later, "Everybody in Miami knew exactly when those poor fellows were going to hit the beaches, but the only people in Cuba who knew it were the ones who were working in Castro's office."⁹⁵ In addition, Cuban police, with unanticipated efficiency, arrested everyone remotely suspected of underground activity. In Havana alone, 200,000 people were herded into theaters and auditoriums.⁹⁶

Defeat

In Washington, the Cabinet Room was turned into a command post, complete with maps and movable model ships. Kennedy and his advisors tried to keep abreast of fast-breaking developments, but it was hopeless; information reaching the White House was always five to seven hours old.⁹⁷

Kennedy's military advisers recommended a greater military commitment as the only way to save American prestige. But Kennedy disagreed. "What is prestige?" he asked.

Is it the shadow of power or the substance of power? We are going to work on the substance of power. No doubt we will be kicked in the can for the next couple of weeks, but that won't affect the main business.⁹⁸

When word came that Castro had dispatched 20,000 troops, complete with tanks and artillery, to surround the brigade, some of Kennedy's military advisers began to doubt that even a substantial American military commitment could save the situation. "It wasn't just the question of committing the US forces and saving the war," one of them said later. "It was a question of whether or not the Navy could save it if you sent them."⁹⁹

Kennedy, still in white tie from an earlier congressional reception, met with advisors for three tense hours that night. The President rejected one recommendation after another. He wouldn't order American jets to quickly clear away Cuban air power. He wouldn't order American jets to fly over Cuba as a silent show of strength. When Admiral Arleigh Burke suggested moving in a destroyer to wipe out the Cuban tanks with artillery fire, Kennedy snapped: "

Burke, I don't want the United States involved in this."

"Hell, Mr. President," replied Burke, "but we are involved."¹⁰⁰

But Kennedy stood firm against any open involvement. Earlier that day he had received a polite but threatening note from Soviet Premier Nikita Khrushchev. "We will extend to the Cuban people and its Government all the necessary aid for the repulse of the armed attack on Cuba," Khrushchev had written. "We are sincerely interested in the relaxation of international tension, but if others go in for its aggravation, then we will answer them in full measure."¹⁰¹ Further American intervention, Kennedy feared, could set off Soviet action in Berlin.

The President did, however, authorize a small covert action in aid of the foundering brigade. He permitted four unmarked American jets to provide cover for a B-26 attack launched from Nicaragua, but the American jets were not to initiate combat. It was hoped that their presence alone would scare the Cubans out of attacking the vulnerable B-26's.¹⁰²

But the brigade pilots in Nicaragua didn't know about the protective air cover. Many of them had gone as long as 48 hours without rest. Many more were dejected and angry, having watched Cuban Air Force jets shoot down one brigade plane after another. Several refused to go out on another mission. Without consulting the President, Bissell okayed a major change in plans: the Americans who had trained brigade pilots would themselves fly a mission. They flew, but proved little better than their students at maneuvering the slow B-26s to evade Cuba's jets. When the engagement ended, four B-26s had been shot down. Four Americans and several brigade members were dead. An hour later, the American jet cover arrived. The order from Washington had apparently been delayed.¹⁰³ (Schlesinger, among others, claims that the delay was due to someone's confusion about the Nicaraguan and Cuban time zones.¹⁰⁴ In his extensively researched account, Wyden blames a decoding delay.)¹⁰⁵

The brigade fought well against the Cuban military. One study estimated that brigade members inflicted ten times as many casualties as they suffered.¹⁰⁶ But Cuba had 20,000 troops to the brigade's 1400. By the second day after the landing the exiles began to run out of ammunition. As the brigade collapsed in confusion, a commander shouted, "Every man for himself!"¹⁰⁷ A few men tried to retreat by small boats, while others took off along the beach or headed into the swamps. But almost all of them were quickly captured by Cuban government troops.

Epilogue

Kennedy authorized substantial involvement in a rescue attempt. American destroyers combed the waters off the beach while American planes, with orders to fire if fired upon, flew overhead. To Schlesinger, it seemed that "Kennedy was prepared to run more risks to take the men off the beaches than to put them there."¹⁰⁸ Two dozen brigade members were rescued.

But 114 exiles had died in the attack, and 1,189 remained in Castro's hands.¹⁰⁹ Castro demanded a ransom of \$62 million for their return. He ultimately accepted \$53 million in food and drugs, raised privately at the behest of Robert Kennedy. In late December the brigade reassembled in Miami's Orange Bowl and presented their flag to President Kennedy. "I can assure you," Kennedy shouted to loud applause, "that this flag will be returned to this Brigade in a free Havana."¹¹⁰ (Fourteen years later, brigade members had to sue to get their flag back. It was being kept in a crate in the Kennedy Library in Waltham, Massachusetts.)

Although Kennedy later eased Dulles and Bissell out of the CIA, he publicly accepted full responsibility for the fiasco. He told a press conference, "There's an old saying that victory has a hundred fathers and defeat is an orphan. . . . I'm the responsible officer of the government that is quite obvious."¹¹²

To his close aides Kennedy speculated on the cause of the failure. "If someone comes in to tell me this or that about the minimum wage bill, I have no hesitation in overruling them," he told Schlesinger. "But you always assume that the military and intelligence people have some secret still not available to ordinary mortals."¹¹³ General MacArthur told Kennedy he was lucky to have learned to be skeptical of military advice through such a small-scale mistake.¹¹⁴ Kennedy seemed to agree. In a philosophical tone, he said to his friend Ben Bradlee, "Presumably I was to learn these lessons some time, and maybe better sooner than later."¹¹⁵

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The declassified portions of the report prepared for President Kennedy immediately following the failure of the Bay of Pigs invasion. Includes a narrative of the development of the CIA's plan, which was the final report of the committee, as well as the minutes of the committee's meetings. The narrative provides a useful factual framework, and the minutes of the meetings provide some insights into the thoughts of some of the key participants in the operation.

Wyden, Peter. *The Bay of Pigs: The Untold Story.* New York: Simon and Schuster, 1980.

Based on very extensive research, this book seems to provide the most authoritative account of the invasion's planning and implementation, although the account itself is weak on chronology and rather journalistic. The information, however, is all there.

Schlesinger, Arthur M., Jr. *A Thousand Days: John F. Kennedy in the White House.* New York: Fawcett Premier Books, 1965.

As history this book needs to be taken with a grain of salt. As an eye witness account of the atmosphere in the White House it is invaluable. Schlesinger provides a detailed and quite accurate account of the Bay of Pigs invasion planning during the early months of the Kennedy Administration. Perhaps because of his opposition to the invasion, Schlesinger stresses Kennedy's skepticism about the plan more than the other available sources.

APPENDIX A

Chronology of the Bay of Pigs

1960

- January 18 The CIA begins planning anti-Castro operations.
- Late January President Eisenhower tells CIA Director Allen Dulles to draw up an anti-Castro "program."
- March 17 Eisenhower approves a four-point plan of action against Cuba drawn up by CIA Deputy Director for Plans Richard Bissell and a paramilitary staff he has assembled. Plan calls for: creation of a Cuban opposition outside Cuba, development of means of mass communications to Cuban people and a massive propaganda campaign, creation of a covert intelligence and action organization in Cuba, and the development of a paramilitary force outside Cuba for guerrilla action.
- June At the CIA's urging the 'Frente Revolucionario Democratico' is formed, comprising the five leading groups of Cuban exiles in Miami.
- August 18 Guatemalan President Ydigoras consents to the establishment of a guerrilla training camp in his country.
- Eisenhower approves a \$13 million budget for the CIA's anti-Castro program. He also OKs the use of US military personnel as long as they are not used in combat.
- October Cuban brigade reaches 400 recruits.
- November 4 CIA paramilitary group directs project officer in Guatemala to cease guerrilla training for all but 60 of the recruits. He is to begin training the other members of the brigade in conventional military tactics.
- By this time the concept of the operation has shifted from the initially planned small guerrilla operation to a relatively large amphibious landing.

- November 8 John F. Kennedy defeats Richard Nixon in presidential election.
- November 29 Kennedy receives his first full briefing on the progress of the CIA's anti-Castro planning from Allen Dulles and Richard Bissell. They describe the "new paramilitary concept" they have been developing. Kennedy approves their activities.
- December 1 Eisenhower is briefed for the first time on the paramilitary concept the CIA now favors.
- December 8 Details of the planned amphibious landing presented to the Special Group for the first time. The CIA hopes to land 600-750 heavily armed men. The landing is to be preceded by air strikes.
- The objective is to seize and hold a beachhead, maintain a visible presence and attract dissidents in Cuba to the landing force, hopefully triggering a full scale uprising. Special Group does not give formal approval, but encourages the CIA to continue its plans.

1961

- January City of Trinidad selected by CIA paramilitary group as the most promising landing site. Brigade recruited is significantly increased.
- January 10 *New York Times* publishes front page article with a map detailing the activities in the Guatemalan training camp.
- January 19 At a transition meeting Eisenhower endorses the Cuban operation and tells Kennedy that it is his administration's "responsibility" to do "whatever is necessary" to bring it to a successful conclusion.
- January 20 Kennedy inaugurated.
- January 28 Dulles and Bissell brief the National Security Council on the progress of their anti-Castro planning. Kennedy authorizes continuation and accentuation of their current activities and directs the Joint Chiefs of Staff to study the invasion plan.

- February 3 JCS study completed. "Ultimate success" is judged to depend on political factors: "a sizeable political uprising or substantial follow-on force." JCS gives the plan a "fair" chance of ultimate success and suggests that even if it fails it would contribute to the eventual overthrow of the Castro regime.
- February 24-26 A group appointed by JCS travels to Guatemala to assess the training operation. It returns a relatively optimistic report.
- March 11 Kennedy calls the Trinidad plan too "spectacular" and directs the CIA to develop a "quiet" landing.
- March 13-15 CIA paramilitary staff works out three alternatives to the Trinidad Landing site. The one they recommended calls for landings in the Zapata area surrounding Cochinob Bay (the Bay of Pigs). JCS review endorses the Bay of Pigs plan as the best of the alternatives. The JCS' continued preference for the Trinidad plan over all the alternatives is overlooked, however, by the civilian officials who received their report.
- March 16 Kennedy authorizes the CIA to continue on the basis of the Bay of Pigs plan, but reserves the right to cancel the landing up to 24 hours before it begins.
- March 23 Detailed invasion planning begins. An interdepartmental staff begins to assign tasks to different federal agencies.
- March 29 Original D-Day of April 5 is pushed back to April 10. The date is later changed to April 17.
- April 4 Senator Fulbright presents his objections to the Cuban invasion plan at a planning meeting. Kennedy polls the group afterward on whether to go ahead with the invasion. No one votes no.
- April 12 Kennedy and other National Security Council officials meet with Bissell to go over the final Bay of Pigs plan. Kennedy does not give final approval, but is told that he must decide by noon on April 14.

- April 13 Kennedy receives a very optimistic report on the brigade's preparedness from Marine colonel Jack Hawkins.
- April 14 Kennedy authorizes the initial air strikes intended to eliminate Castro's air force, but tells Bissell to shrink the strike to a "minimal" size.
- April 15 The initial air strike goes off as planned, but cover story rapidly falls apart.
- April 16. Kennedy agrees to Secretary of State Rusk's request to cancel the pre-invasion air strike because of the damage to public opinion that it will cause. Further air operations will have to wait until they could realistically come from the beachhead.
- April 17. The invasion begins.