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BAY OF PIGS DECLASSIFIED

THE SECRET CIA REPORT ON THE INVASION OF CUBA

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Introduction

History Held Hostage

The Bay of Pigs Report in Context

“How could I have been so stupid as to let them proceed,” John Kennedy asked his advisors more than once following the CIA’s fiasco at the Bay of Pigs. For more than thirty-seven years, historians, policy analysts, and even former participants of the now infamous invasion of Cuba have pondered that question. Ever since the early hours of April 17, 1961, when a CIA-led, trained, and equipped brigade of some 1400 Cuban exiles hit the beach at Cuba’s *Bahía de Los Cochinos* and was quickly defeated by Fidel Castro’s superior forces, the failed invasion has reverberated through domestic and international affairs. Few historical episodes carry such an enduring contemporary relevance.

Yet, for all its importance—to the origins of the U.S.-Cuba conflict, the study of foreign policy failures, the genesis of the Cuban missile crisis, theories of the Kennedy assassination, and the ongoing debate over covert operations, among many other issues—the history of the Bay of Pigs has remained shrouded in secrecy. For years, the CIA refused to release any part of its vast archive, estimated at over 30,000 pages, of top secret planning, policy, and action documents on “Operation Zapata.” In particular, the Agency maintained that, for national security considerations, it could not declassify the records of its own internal postmortem of the disaster. Written by CIA Inspector General Lyman Kirkpatrick after a six month inquiry, “The Inspector General’s Survey of the Cuban Operation” became one of the most closely guarded secrets of the Cold War—the historical Holy Grail of the Bay of Pigs.

It is not difficult to understand why the CIA kept the IG survey secret for so long; the report represents, perhaps, the most brutally honest self-examination ever conducted inside the agency. As scathing as they are revealing, the pages that follow expose, with stark clarity, the operational and political components of the dark side of U.S. foreign policy. Along with the lengthy rebuttal by the architect of the invasion, CIA Deputy Director of Plans Richard Bissell, this document offers a rare and unique window into the inner sanctum of covert warfare, and the CIA’s actions and attitudes toward changing the future of Cuba and other nations.

THE PERFECT FAILURE

The CIA Inspector General's report addresses one of the most dramatic—and traumatic—foreign policy disasters of the Cold War. The Bay of Pigs was, as historian Theodore Draper observed at the time, “one of those rare events in history—a perfect failure.”

Militarily, the 1400-man Cuban exile force known as Brigade 2506 was crushed by Castro's far larger military and militia in less than 72 hours.¹ A handful of Cuban fighter aircraft which escaped the destruction of a pre-invasion bombing raid, attacked and sank the Brigade's ammunition ship and other support craft; and the exile force could neither hold nor break out of the beachhead at *Playa Girón*. Some 114 brigade members were killed; 1189 captured. “It doesn't take Price Waterhouse to tell you that 1,500 Cubans aren't as good as 25,000,” former secretary of state Dean Acheson told President Kennedy as the operation collapsed.

As a covert operation which Washington could “plausibly deny” the invasion also failed. When President Eisenhower authorized the Bay of Pigs project on March 17, 1960, he admonished CIA officials that “the main thing was not to let the U.S. hand show.” In March 1961, President Kennedy ordered key changes in the CIA plan—changing landing sites from the populated city of Trinidad to a more isolated location, a night deployment instead of a day-time assault, and a reduction of airstrikes—to make the operation far “less noisy.” But to both enemies and allies alike, the U.S. “hand” was evident well before D-Day.

As early as November 1960, Cuban intelligence sent a report to Moscow on CIA training of the anti-Castro exiles in Guatemala; and in early April 1961, the CIA intercepted a cable from the Soviet Embassy in Mexico City accurately stating that the invasion was expected on April 17. On April 9, the *New York Times* published a front page story—considerably watered down after a call from the President—titled “Anti-Castro Units Trained to fight at Florida Bases.” Castro “didn't need agents over here,” Kennedy exclaimed. “All he has to do is read our papers.”²

Even worse, the U.S. role in the preliminary airstrike on April 15 was immediately exposed to the world—before the full invasion took place. The CIA managed to launch the strike the very week the United Nations was meeting to address Cuba's charges of U.S. aggression. A cover-story for the attack concocted by Deputy Director of Plans, Richard Bissell, his deputy Tracy Barnes and paramilitary specialist Col. Jack Hawkins—a defecting Cuban pilot, taking his B-26 and dropping bombs on key airfields around

Havana before flying to Florida—fell apart within hours; but not before U.S. Ambassador to the UN, Adlai Stevenson, had presented the false account to the entire General Assembly.³ The diplomatic embarrassment of being caught baldly lying to the world community led to the White House decision to cancel a second planned airstrike on D-day, which the CIA considered critical for the success of the operation. After the defeat, denial of U.S. responsibility became wholly implausible.

Kennedy called the failed invasion “the worst experience of my life.” In office less than twelve weeks, the new president had suffered a major political humiliation. Yet, the decision to give the CIA a green light had been his alone. “There's an old saying that victory has a hundred fathers and defeat is an orphan,” he told the press. “I am the responsible officer of the government.”

U.S. credibility as a world leader was also dealt a harsh blow. “Acute shock and disillusion” dominated the reaction in Western Europe, as White House aide Arthur Schlesinger reported back to Kennedy. With a seemingly unprovoked attack on Cuba's sovereignty that left over 1800 military and civilian dead and wounded on the island, European hopes for Kennedy's intelligence, vision and “fresh” approach to the Cold war, had been “wiped away” and Washington was perceived to be as “self-righteous, trigger happy and incompetent as it had ever been.” It was the decision to invade, not the failure, that bothered Western European political leaders, Schlesinger noted; “Why was Cuba such a threat to you?” they asked. “Why couldn't you live with Cuba, as the USSR lives with Turkey and Finland.”⁴ U.S. allies, Kennedy would later concede, “think we are a little demented on Cuba.”⁵

Intended to overthrow Castro, the invasion succeeded in helping him to strengthen his regime internally, and enhanced his image internationally as a David defeating Goliath. “Castro's position is stronger than before the invasion attempt,” the CIA's Office of National Estimates reported on April 28, 1961. His “hard-core supporters are more heavily armed and more enthusiastic in his behalf, and the widespread support which he has received abroad has probably increased his stature among many other Cubans.” In a secret meeting in Montevideo, Uruguay, five months later, Che Guevara expressed Cuba's appreciation to White House aide Richard Goodwin for the Bay of Pigs. “He wanted to thank us very much for the invasion,” Goodwin reported in an August 22, 1961 memorandum to Kennedy. “It had been a great political victory for them, enabled them to consolidate, and transformed them from an aggrieved little country into an equal.”⁶

Finally, although the operation was designed to deny the Soviet Union a revolutionary ally in the Western Hemisphere, it succeeded only in driving Cuba into a concrete alliance with Moscow. On April 16, at the state funerals of those killed during the airstrike the day before, Premier Castro officially declared Cuba a Marxist-Leninist state—a prelude to closer Cuban-Soviet ties. Fearing a second Bay of Pigs in 1962, the Castro government signed a defense pact with the USSR and accepted the installation of Soviet missiles on Cuban soil—a decision that led to the most dangerous moment in history when the world looked down “the gun barrel of nuclear war.”⁷

WHO LOST CUBA? INVASION HISTORIOGRAPHY

The emotional, and often acrimonious, debate over what went wrong at the Bay of Pigs divides into two distinct camps: those who blame the failure on President Kennedy’s decision to cancel the second airstrike and his refusal to salvage the operation through military intervention; and those who hold the CIA responsible for faulty assumptions about overthrowing Castro and for misleading the White House about the likely success of the operation.

For embittered CIA officials, and numerous Brigade 2506 members who felt abandoned and betrayed, the president’s decisions were a profile in cowardice, not courage. “The president is to blame,” states Grayston Lynch, the CIA man who was the first to set foot on the beach as the deployment began. “The battle was lost before [Brigade 2506] ever saw the Bay of Pigs.” In *Recollections of a Cold Warrior*, Richard Bissell characterizes Kennedy’s cancellation of the second airstrike as “certainly the gravest contributory factor in the operation’s failure.” At the “decisive moment of the Bay of Pigs operation,” according to former CIA director Allen Dulles, Kennedy lacked “a determination to succeed, a willingness to risk unpleasant political repercussions, and a willingness to provide the basic military necessities.”⁸

The major histories written by Kennedy aides Theodore Sorensen and Arthur Schlesinger Jr., as well as Peter Wyden’s authoritative 1979 book, *Bay of Pigs: The Untold Story* present a different account. They highlight the deception and self-deception of the Agency, and particularly Richard Bissell, in dealing with the brigade, Castro’s Cuba, and the Kennedy White House. White House officials felt deceived by Bissell’s arguments that the brigade landing would touch off an uprising against Castro, or, if not, the brigade would “go guerrilla” into the Escambray mountains—an impossible option

from the swamp-enclosed Bay of Pigs. “All of us—Kennedy and Bundy and the rest—were hypnotized by Dick Bissell to some degree, and assumed that he knew what he was doing,” Schlesinger later observed.⁹

In the “Who Lost Cuba?” debate numerous broader issues surrounding the Bay of Pigs have been lost—among them the propriety of U.S. intervention to rollback the Cuban revolution, the parameters of covert operations, the still hidden aspects of the invasion plan, and the oft-forgotten role of Castro’s victorious forces in the U.S. defeat. “Castro’s armed forces and militia were effective in defeating the invasion,” CIA analysts conceded in a secret intelligence assessment, “Consequences for the US of the Abortive Rebellion in Castro’s Cuba,” written one week after the debacle. “The reality was that Fidel Castro turned out to be a far more formidable foe and in command of a far better organized regime than anyone had supposed,” Schlesinger admits in *A Thousand Days*.¹⁰ But in the historiography of the invasion, why it failed is less important than the foreign policy attitudes, assumptions, and actions that contributed to this human, political, and foreign policy tragedy. “I don’t think that the failure was because of the want of a nail,” Kennedy’s National Security Advisor, McGeorge Bundy testified during one post invasion inquiry. “I think that the men who worked on this got into a world of their own.”

REVISITING THE BAY OF PIGS

In an effort to recreate, and recover, the evidence of that world, in 1995 the National Security Archive began a concerted campaign to advance the historical record on the Bay of Pigs invasion. Collaborating with Brown University’s Thomas J. Watson Jr. Institute for International Studies, our goal was to uncover still secret documentation, find surviving U.S., Cuban-American, and Cuban participants, and bring them together for a major historical reexamination of this important, and still relevant, episode.¹¹

In early 1996, in preparation for a retrospective conference on the 35th anniversary of the invasion, the Archive filed a series of requests under the Freedom of Information Act for the Inspector General’s report and all attached documents; and then stepped up public pressure for the release of these and hundreds of other records.¹² Two factors provided leverage for eventual declassification: first, President Clinton’s 1995 Executive Order that all secret documents over 25 years old be processed for release; and sec-

ond, the CIA's own announcement in 1992 that it would begin a historical review of 11 past covert operations as part of a new post-Cold war "openness campaign."

At the request of the Archive, on the 35th anniversary of the invasion, the State Department did release some 400 Pentagon, State and CIA documents—although the Inspector General's report and other key documents remained secret.¹³ The newly declassified documents were reviewed at the conference, held on May 31-June 2, 1996 at the Musgrove Conference Center supported by the Arca Foundation. The meeting also provided an opportunity and a venue for the two managers of "Operation Zapata"—veteran CIA operative Jacob Esterline, and Marine Col. Jack Hawkins—to discuss the operation publicly for the first time. Esterline had been head of the Cuba Task Force known as WH/4; Hawkins, his chief paramilitary officer.¹⁴ Both are referred to prominently in the Inspector General's report and rejoinder by their respective CIA designations: C/WH/4 and C/WH/4/PM (Chief/Western Hemisphere 4 Task Force and Chief/Western Hemisphere 4 Task Force/Paramilitary).

A number of important historical facts and interpretations emerged at Musgrove. On U.S. attitudes toward the target of the operation, Fidel Castro, the complex role of the architect of the operation, Richard Bissell, and the little understood role of political assassination in the invasion planning, the discussion provided a more refined sense of the arrogance, incompetence and ignorance that contributed to this imperial disaster.

ON CASTRO: What appears to have alarmed U.S. officials initially about Castro was his transcendent personality and leadership capabilities, as much as his revolutionary plans for Cuba, and potential ties to the Soviet Union. One of the earliest CIA assessments—written by a CIA agent who briefed Castro on the "danger of Communism" during his first post-revolution trip to Washington D.C. in April 1959—described Castro, ironically, as "a new spiritual leader of Latin American democratic and anti-dictator forces."† Esterline, then CIA chief of station in Caracas, first witnessed "the power of his charisma," during Castro's first trip abroad to Venezuela in March 1959,

† The CIA memorandum of conversation with Castro, dated May 8, 1959, and declassified in June 1998, records an extraordinary exchange. The CIA official, speaking Spanish, explained that "the U.S. appreciates [you are] not pro-Communist," but "Moscow and Peiping are attempting to exploit the Cuban revolution to destroy [the] Cuban-American friendship." Castro responded that the U.S. was "overly concerned" about international communism, but agreed to allow the CIA to "channel" information on communist activities in Cuba to him via intermediaries in Havana. The CIA briefer reported that the meeting was "beneficial and encouraging."

where he was hailed by massive throngs of supporters. Castro was "something different, something more impressive . . . and definitely harder to handle than anyone we had ever seen," according to Esterline:

It seemed to me that something like a chain reaction was occurring all over Latin America after Castro came to power. I saw—hell, anybody with eyes could see—that a new and powerful force was at work in the hemisphere. It had to be dealt with.¹⁵

Vice President Richard Nixon's initial perceptions of Castro were almost identical, albeit less hostile. Nixon met Castro only a few weeks later, during his trip to Washington D.C. in April 1959. For years, Nixon's observation that Castro was "either incredibly naive about Communism or under Communist discipline," was his only known impression of the Cuban leader. But the full text of his memorandum of conversation with Castro shows that Nixon was actually impressed:

The one fact we can be sure of is that Fidel Castro has those indefinable qualities which make him a leader of men. Whatever we may think of him, he is going to be a great factor in the development of Cuba and very possibly in Latin American affairs generally.¹⁶

According to the recently declassified minutes of the very first meeting of the Bay of Pigs task force, on March 9, 1960, CIA Western Hemisphere Division chief, J.C. King stated clearly that Castro had a "60 to 70 percent" popular approval rating. For this reason, Esterline's original plan for the Bay of Pigs called for infiltrating small, highly trained cadres into Cuba, according to the Kirpatrick report, "to organize, train and lead resistance groups" in the Escambray mountains. By October 1960, however, Richard Bissell, the CIA's Deputy Director of Plans and the driving intellectual force behind the invasion, had abandoned this plan. He then replaced it with an amphibious landing of a brigade of exiles in Cuba which, he expected, would set off a chain reaction of mass defections and support for the counterrevolution, bringing Castro down. This misreading of Cuba's political situation was the first of many willful mistakes that led to the Bay of Pigs disaster.

ON BISSELL: Richard Bissell was considered the best of the brightest in the U.S. government. A former professor of economics at Yale, he won his reputation for brilliance by implementing the Marshall Plan and overseeing the creation of the CIA's U-2 reconnaissance program. In 1954, CIA director Allen Dulles selected Bissell as a special assistant—"an apprentice," as Bissell described it—and he immediately went to work on PBSUCCESS, the

CIA paramilitary operation to overthrow the democratically elected government of Jacobo Arbenz in Guatemala. That operation proved critical to his misassumptions about Cuba.

"PBSUCCESS was a success, through dumb luck more than anything else," veteran CIA operative Richard Drain told CIA historian Jack Pfeiffer. Militarily, the operation failed when the CIA's ragtag rebels refused to engage in active combat. CIA psychological operations, however, intimidated Arbenz's military into forcing his resignation in the face of fears that the U.S. was about to invade. "We won more because of incompetence on the other side than anything else," notes Jake Esterline who helped run PBSUCCESS, and served as the first post-coup CIA station chief in Guatemala City.

Bissell and other Eisenhower officials appeared to believe that Castro's regime was similarly incompetent, and would similarly collapse under the psychological stress of the invasion. Guatemala, Bissell writes in his rebuttal to the Inspector General's report, "was an analogy and a precedent" for the Bay of Pigs.

Bissell was also responsible for agreeing to the changes in landing sites, and the reduction of air strikes ordered by the new president, John F. Kennedy. These decisions significantly undercut the chances of success, as Bissell's own aides explicitly made clear to him. The deputy director of plans, according to Col. Hawkins, "ignored the emphatic advice given him by the Chief WH/4 and the Paramilitary Chief that a landing at the Bay of Pigs would be disastrous and should be cancelled."¹⁷

On the Sunday morning of April 8, 1961, Hawkins and Esterline went to Bissell's Washington, D.C. home and said they were resigning. "We looked at every aspect and the odds and the percentages of success and we finally decided that we couldn't deliver on them," Esterline recalled in an interview published in this volume for the first time (see pages 258–266). But Bissell assured them their concerns would be met and that the operation would have the necessary support for success. In the aftermath of the disaster, both his deputies determined that he had misled them—and the President. "I don't think he was being honest," Esterline said. "I don't think he was being honest up—I mean with Kennedy and maybe with Dulles, too; and I don't think he was being honest down—in dealing with his two principal aides, Esterline and Hawkins."¹⁸

THE ASSASSINATION TRACK: One explanation for Bissell's recklessness lies in his most controversial, and most secretive, decision—an August 1960 authorization for a CIA-Mafia plot to assassinate Castro. "Assassination was intended to reinforce the plan," Bissell admitted in an interview many

years later. "There was the thought that Castro would be dead before the landing." In his posthumously published memoirs, he admits that "as I moved forward with plans for the brigade, I hoped the Mafia would achieve success."

While the CIA's multiple efforts to eliminate the Cuban leader have been well documented for years—including in a 100-page secret CIA history written by Kirkpatrick's successor in 1968—assassination as an explicit component of the Bay of Pigs operation, paid for through the WH/4 Task Force budget, has come to light only recently.

The assassination "track" started during the Eisenhower administration, and continued under Kennedy.¹⁹ At a November 3, 1960 meeting of the "special group" on Cuba, Under Secretary of State Livingston Merchant asked whether the CIA could take "direct positive action against Fidel, Raul and Che Guevara." Without them, he suggested, Cuba would be "leaderless and probably brainless."²⁰ CIA deputy director General Charles P. Cabell responded that such action was "uncertain of results and highly dangerous" as well as "beyond our capabilities."

In fact, the CIA had already set in motion a major effort to kill Castro—on the theory that the revolution would collapse without him. As early as December 1959, the head of the Agency's Western Hemisphere Division, J.C. King recommended that "thorough consideration be given to the elimination of Fidel Castro," because it "would greatly accelerate the fall of the present government." Indeed, at the first meeting of the Bay of Pigs task force, King predicted that "unless Fidel and Raul Castro and Che Guevara could be eliminated in one package . . . this operation [would] be a long drawn out affair and the present government will only be overthrown by force."

Unbeknownst to most of the invasion managers, Richard Bissell shared King's assessment, and subsequently authorized an assassination plot to go forward. In a briefing memorandum later prepared for Attorney General Robert Kennedy, the CIA's liaison with the crime syndicates, Sheffield Edwards wrote that "In August 1960" he "was approached by Mr. Richard Bissell . . . to explore the possibility of mounting this sensitive operation against Fidel Castro." The CIA's Technical Services Division (TSD) manufactured a number of poison pills—they were tested for potency on laboratory monkeys—which were passed through Mafia capo Johnny Roselli to a Cuban government operative in mid-March 1961. When this attempt on Castro's life failed, a second set of pills was passed to exile leader Anthony de la Varona, who sent them to Cuba in early April. A restaurant worker was sup-

posed to put the pills in Castro's food, but the assassination effort never took place.

Approximately \$200,000 for this operation came out of the invasion budget, according to Esterline, the head of WH/4. "All of a sudden I started getting requests to authorize big payments, \$60,000, \$100,000, and [not knowing what they were for] I refused them," Esterline recalled in our interview. Esterline demanded, and eventually received a briefing—only after it became clear that he would not otherwise authorize the funds. Told of the assassination plot, Esterline adamantly opposed it. "I said, do you realize that this is going to make people take this whole thing less less seriously if somebody thinks there's an easy way out with Castro being killed:

I thought it was absolutely immoral that we involve ourselves for the record in anything of this sort. Number one, I was just having trouble coming to grips with that. But number two, I thought it would be the most self-defeating thing for the operation which was going to be [difficult] at best.²¹

During the post-invasion inquiry of the Taylor Board—President Kennedy's hand-picked committee led by Gen. Maxwell Taylor to investigate the Bay of Pigs disaster—Bissell informed Attorney General Robert Kennedy that the CIA's "associated planning" for the Bay of Pigs included "the use of the underworld against Castro."²² No record of this briefing, however, has ever been made public. Indeed, despite the end of the Cold War, and the passage of so many years, the full text and supporting papers of the Taylor Committee inquiry—along with thousands of CIA and other government documents on the Bay of Pigs—remain hostage to the dictates of secrecy.

THE KIRKPATRICK REPORT

The CIA Inspector General's Survey demonstrates how important such secret records can be for understanding this, and other episodes. The IG report was the only contemporary investigation the CIA conducted on itself after the failed invasion. Almost 37 years after it was written, and after more than two years of repeated requests for its declassification, the CIA finally provided the Kirkpatrick report to the National Security Archive on February 19, 1998.

As a contribution to history, the Inspector General's report provides new

and specific details about the Bay of Pigs, as well as a rare internal overview of a major clandestine operation. It charts the transformation of "Operation Zapata"—officially codenamed JMATE, the Pentagon aptly called it "Operation Bumpy Road"—from a \$4 million covert infiltration project designed to train a cadre of skilled insurgency leaders and drop them into the Escambray mountains into a \$46 million overt amphibious assault. It describes, for the first time, the "intelligence net" of 27 agents inside Cuba when the U.S. broke diplomatic relations in January 1961. In chapters on the CIA's Miami base, political fronts, multifaceted paramilitary preparations, and American combatants, the report catalogues the day-to-day realities of running a massive paramilitary operation to overthrow another government.

The author of the report, Lyman Kirkpatrick—"Kirk" as he was known to his colleagues—served as the CIA's inspector general from 1952 to 1963. A twenty-year member of the U.S. intelligence community, he had been in Army intelligence and the OSS before joining the CIA. When Kirkpatrick contracted polio in 1952, his advancement toward the highest echelons of the agency stalled, and he assumed the IG post.²³ The Bay of Pigs became his most controversial assignment.

Almost immediately after the invasion, CIA director Allen Dulles assigned Kirkpatrick to do a "complete review" of the operation. Rather than focus on the decisions made by the White House, the Pentagon or the State Department, as Kirkpatrick noted in the report's introduction, the purpose was "to evaluate selected aspects of the Agency's performance and describe weaknesses and failures . . . and to make recommendations for their correction and avoidance in the future." Between April and October 1961, the Office of the Inspector General conducted some 125 interviews with the CIA personnel involved in "Operation Zapata," and reviewed hundreds of documents. In a cover letter submitting the report to incoming director John McCone, Kirkpatrick identified "a tendency in the Agency to gloss over CIA inadequacies and to attempt to fix all of the blame for the failure of the invasion upon other elements of the Government, rather than to recognize the Agency's weaknesses." He characterized his 150-page assessment as "highly critical but fair."²⁴

As the reader will note, the IG inquiry found fault with almost every organizational and operational aspect of the Cuba project. Kirkpatrick cited "bad planning," "poor" staffing, faulty intelligence, "fragmentation of authority," mistreatment of the exile forces, and "failure to advise the President that success had become dubious," as key factors in the failure. Among his conclusions:

- The president's cancellation of the D-Day airstrike was not "the chief cause of failure." That issue was presented to Kennedy under "ill-prepared, inadequately briefed circumstances," which better CIA planning, organization, staffing and management would have avoided.
- The operation was predicated on the belief, held by CIA deputy director of plans Richard Bissell, that "the invasion would, like a *deus ex machina*, produce a shock" inside Cuba and "trigger an uprising" against Castro. Yet, according to the IG, "we can confidently assert that the Agency had no intelligence evidence that Cubans in significant numbers could or would join the invaders or that there was any kind of an effective and cohesive resistance movement under anybody's control, let alone the Agency's, that could have furnished internal leadership for an uprising in support of the invasion."
- Agency handlers treated the Cuban exile political leaders "like puppets" and some agents treated the exile forces "like dirt" engendering animosity and lack of cooperation. The CIA, Kirkpatrick predicted, was "not likely to win many people away from Communism if the Americans treat other nationals with condescension or contempt," or "as incompetent children whom the Americans are going to rescue for reasons of their own."
- What was supposed to be a covert operation became a major overt military project "beyond Agency responsibility as well as Agency capability." Due to "multiple security leaks," invasion planning became known to the Cubans and widely reported in the U.S. press. "Plausible denial was a pathetic illusion."
- CIA officials misled the White House into believing that success was still likely. "At some point in this degenerative cycle," according to the report, "they should have gone to the President and said frankly: 'Here are the facts. The operation should be halted.'"

Cancellation, Kirkpatrick concluded, would have been a major embarrassment for the United States; the embittered exile forces would have spread the word of the lack of U.S. resolve. But aborting the operation would have averted failure, "which brought even more embarrassment, carried death and misery to hundreds . . . and seriously damaged U.S. prestige."

The report finished with a substantive list of recommendations on organizational and procedural changes that would presumably prevent such egregious errors in the future. "Before it takes on another major covert political operation [CIA] will have to improve its organization and management drastically," Kirkpatrick wrote. "It is assumed that the Agency, because of its experience in this Cuban operation, will never again engage in an operation that is essentially an overt military effort."

THE BISSELL REBUTTAL

The Inspector General's no-holds-barred criticism outraged the senior CIA officials who had been involved in the debacle. As the architect of the operation, Richard Bissell described himself as "wounded by it." Bissell submitted a comprehensive response drafted by his deputy, Tracy Barnes, titled "An Analysis of the Cuban Operation." After it was turned in on January 18, 1962, the new CIA director John McCone ordered that Bissell's rejoinder be permanently attached to the Kirkpatrick report as part of the official record.

Displaying the sophisticated intellect for which he was renowned, Bissell's "Analysis" addressed and rebutted every major argument in the Kirkpatrick survey. Intelligence on Cuba was "essentially accurate;" there was "solid reason" for a chance of at least "initial success;" staffing was "adequate." The operation had remained "technically deniable." The military plan was executed soundly and effectively. The defeat on the ground was due to defeat in the air, and that was not the CIA's responsibility. "It was directly and unambiguously attributable to a long series of Washington policy decisions."

Significant portions of the rebuttal addressed the "Agency vs. Government responsibility," as Bissell again and again returned to the issue of Kennedy's "political compromises," made in order to preserve plausible denial. Covert operations created a policy conundrum, he pointed out, "a clear conflict between two goals, a conflict of the sort familiar in recent American history:

One objective was that, mainly through the various activities comprised in this project, the Castro regime should be overthrown. The other was that the political and moral posture of the United States before the world at large should not be impaired.

Overthrowing Castro "in such a manner that the official responsibility of the U.S. government could be disclaimed" was the chosen solution, but at the cost of "maximum effectiveness," he argued. "If complete deniability had been consistent with maximum effectiveness, there would theoretically have remained no conflict of goals but in fact this could not be (and never is) the case."

In an assessment that remains entirely relevant to the discussion of covert operations today, Bissell posed the question: "What are the lessons for the future to be drawn from this unhappy experience?"

Perhaps the main one is that the U.S. should not support an operation such as this involving the use of force without having also made the decision to use whatever force is needed to achieve success. If the political decisions necessary to facilitate the effective use of force on an adequate scale, up to and possibly including the overt commitment of U.S. military forces, are too difficult to make, then the operation should be called off. . . .

LESSONS NOT LEARNED

In the years following the Bay of Pigs, one president after another has faced the “clear conflict” in U.S. foreign policy that Richard Bissell identified: pursuing a goal of illegitimate aggression without impairing the moral and political standing of the United States—at home and abroad. They all chose to use covert operations—operations that, in numerous cases, consequently came back to do far more harm to the United States than the targeted enemy ever could. The CIA’s first, and most egregious, overt failure appears to have had little impact on succeeding events.

For the Kennedy administration, the lessons of the debacle at Girón beach were deemed primarily procedural. In a secret postmortem written on April 24, National Security Advisor McGeorge Bundy identified the top ten “administrative” lessons of “Operation Zapata”:

First, the President’s advisors must speak up in council. Second, secrecy must never take precedence over careful thought and study. Third, the President and his advisors must second guess even military plans. Fourth, we must estimate the enemy without hope or fear. Fifth, those who are to offer serious advice on major issues must themselves do the necessary work. Sixth, the President’s desires must be fully acted on, and he must know the full state of mind of friends whose lives his decisions affect. Seventh, forced choices are seldom as necessary as they seem, and the fire can be much hotter than the frying pan. Eighth, what is and is not implied in any specific partial decision must always be thought through. Ninth: What is large in scale must always be open, with all the consequences of openness. Tenth: Success is what succeeds.

These lessons were, in fact, applied to the internal decision making process of the Kennedy White House.²⁵ On the use of major covert operations to overthrow and undermine other governments, however, the broader meaning of the Bay of Pigs failed to register with Kennedy or his successors in office.

To be sure, the President made some superficial changes at the CIA. Director of Central Intelligence Allen Dulles was forced to retire, and after a decent interval of a year, his heir apparent Richard Bissell also left.²⁶ Upon his departure in March 1962, Kennedy awarded Bissell the National Security Medal. “Mr. Bissell’s high purpose, unbounded energy, and unswerving devotion to duty are benchmarks of the intelligence service,” Kennedy remarked during the ceremony. “He leaves an enduring legacy. . . .”²⁷

That legacy included the misuse and abuse of CIA covert operations as a policy tool. The Bay of Pigs might have provided the dramatic opportunity to fundamentally alter the future of such operations. Instead, President Kennedy rejected a State Department proposal to strip the CIA of its covert operations functions—and even rename the Agency.²⁸ The Department of State position on the agency reflected a significant internal discussion, generated by anger at the conduct of the Cuba invasion, over reforming the CIA. At the same time, the invasion also sparked the first national debate on the propriety of covert operations in a democracy. Had it been disseminated, the Inspector General’s Survey on the Bay of Pigs would have contributed significantly to both the internal and public discourse. Instead, it was literally locked away—purposely hidden from public debate, and policy deliberations over the CIA’s future.

“Rather than receiving [the report] in the light in which it had been produced, which was to insure that the same mistakes would not be repeated in the future,” Kirkpatrick noted in his memoirs, *The Real CIA*, “those that participated in the operation resented it and attacked it bitterly.”²⁹ Memoranda written by Tracy Barnes, Dulles, Bissell and other CIA officials characterized the report as “malicious,” “biased,” and “useless.” At the highest echelons of the agency, the report was seen as a threat to the CIA’s very future. The new CIA director, John McCone, ordered the Inspector General to provide him with the distribution list of all 20 copies of the report; most of them were retrieved and burned; the copies that remained were locked away in the director’s office. “In unfriendly hands,” deputy director Cabell wrote in a December 15, 1961 memorandum, the report “could become a weapon unjustifiably [used] to attack the entire mission, organization, and functioning of the Agency.”³⁰

In the ensuing decades, the Bay of Pigs became but the first in a succession of scandals involving covert operations to assert America’s will over smaller nations. Cuba was a perpetual target. The White House simply ignored Col.

Hawkins firm warnings, made in a comprehensive secret after-action report dated May 5, 1961, that Castro “will not be overthrown by means short of overt . . . military power,” and that “further” covert efforts “should not be made.”† Instead, the Kennedy brothers turned again to the CIA to wreak U.S. revenge on Castro for his victory at *Playa Girón*. A “solution” to the Cuba problem, Attorney General Robert Kennedy told CIA and Pentagon representatives in January 1962 was now “the top priority in the United States Government—all else is secondary—no time, money, effort, or manpower is to be spared.” The president, he said, had indicated that “the final chapter on Cuba has not been written.”

The Kennedy White House attempted to write that chapter by authorizing Operation Mongoose—“a more ambitious and more massive paramilitary activity than the Bay of Pigs,” as Bissell described Kennedy’s 1962 CIA-Pentagon program. The threat of these sabotage and psychological operations, designed to foment civil upheaval inside Cuba, helped prompt Castro to accept Soviet missiles as protection from U.S. aggression. In the aftermath of the missile crisis, the Attorney General oversaw a \$10 million CIA program, codenamed “Second Naval Guerrilla,” to fund sabotage operations in Cuba conducted by Bay of Pigs veterans from base camps in Central America. And CIA attempts to assassinate Castro continued to the very last day of the Kennedy administration. According to the CIA’s own internal history on efforts to kill Castro, “at the very moment President Kennedy was shot a CIA officer was meeting with a Cuban agent in Paris and giving him an assassination device for use against Castro.”³¹

The CIA drew on the basic blueprint of the Bay of Pigs—creating political fronts, mounting propaganda campaigns, and organizing, training, arming and directing a proxy force of exiles—again and again over the next 35 years. From Nicaragua to Afghanistan to Iraq, protracted paramilitary warfare brought violence and bloodshed abroad—and damage to U.S. political institutions at home. The list of scandals generated by these operations is a long one: the CIA-backed Contra war against the Sandinistas alone produced the mining of Nicaragua’s harbors, the assassination manual, and the Iran-

† “Further efforts to develop armed internal resistance, or to organize Cuban exile forces, should not be made except in connection with a planned overt intervention by United States forces,” Hawkins wrote in his 48-page postmortem, “Record of Paramilitary Action Against the Castro Government of Cuba.” Like Bissell, he concluded that operational effectiveness had been “completely subordinated” to the dictates of plausible denial. “The Government and the people of the United States,” he concluded, “are not yet psychologically conditioned to participate in the cold war with resort to the harsh, rigorous, and often dangerous and painful measures which must be taken in order to win.” His secret assessment remained classified until June 4, 1998.

Contra scandal which virtually paralyzed the Reagan administration in 1987. The CIA’s Iraq operations between 1991-1996, during which the agency spent over \$100 million to arm, and organize rebel exiles to overthrow Saddam Hussein only to abandon them to Hussein’s military forces, reminded even current policy makers of the analogy to the Cuba operation. “If you encourage and almost incite people to rise up against their government, you incur a moral obligation,” as Clinton’s national security advisor Sandy Berger explained the difficulties in Iraq.

The Kirkpatrick report assumed that the CIA would never again engage in such paramilitary plots. Yet, the Bissell mindset—a combination of imperial arrogance, ethnocentric ignorance and a false sense of U.S. omnipotence—has dominated the history of covert operations since the Bay of Pigs. Policy makers, as Col. Hawkins recently observed, “continue to harbor unrealistically overblown ideas about what can be accomplished by covert, deniable means.” Indeed, the repeated controversies over recent CIA covert operations in Iraq, Guatemala, Libya, Nicaragua and elsewhere demonstrate that the issues raised by the Agency’s machinations in Cuba endure in the making of U.S. foreign policy.

“A wise man once said, ‘an error doesn’t become a mistake until you refuse to correct it,’” President Kennedy told the press after the Bay of Pigs invasion failed. There were, he said, “sobering lessons” to be learned. Now that the CIA’s top secret evaluation of this covert failure has finally fallen into the “unfriendly hands” of the public, those lessons can be learned, the mistakes addressed and, in the future, corrected.

Notes

1. Each brigade member was given a number when they joined. The Brigade derived its name from the number of Carlos Rodríguez Santana, the first casualty of the operation, who died during a training exercise in Guatemala.
2. Quoted in Peter Wyden's *Bay of Pigs: The Untold Story* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1979), p. 155.
3. CIA officials Joseph Langan and Clark Simmons, who were in charge of implementing the cover operation "came bouncing into the office all laughter and joy and offered to have a couple of ceremonial drinks, [because the operation] had worked," recalls Richard Drain, an operations officer during the Bay of Pigs. "I remember saying to them, 'well, I hope you are as happy about 5 o'clock this afternoon, as you are now . . . because how long this holds up in Miami seems to me very questionable indeed.'" Reporters immediately noticed that the defector's plane had the nosecone of a U.S. B-26, not a Cuban model, that its guns had not been fired and that it had been freshly painted. Drain made his comments during a January 6, 1976 interview with CIA historian Jack Pfeiffer.
4. See Schlesinger's memo, "Reactions to Cuba in Western Europe," May 3, 1961.
5. Kennedy made this remark on October 18, 1962 during a meeting of the Executive Committee meeting on the Cuban Missile crisis.
6. Goodwin to the President, "Conversation with Commandante Ernesto Guevara of Cuba," August 22, 1961.
7. Kennedy speech writer Theodore Sorenson coined this phrase.
8. Quoted in Richard Bissell's *Recollections of a Cold Warrior* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1996), pp. 191, 197.
9. Schlesinger made these remarks at the Musgrove conference on the Bay of Pigs, June 1, 1996. See James G. Blight and Peter Kornbluh, *Politics of Illusion: The Bay of Pigs Invasion Reexamined*, (Boulder, CO: Lynne Rienner, 1998), p. 65.
10. Schlesinger notes that "too much comment on the Bay of Pigs has fallen into the fallacy of Douglas Southall Freeman, who once wrote a long chapter analyzing the reasons for Lee's defeat at Gettysburg without mentioning the interesting fact that the Union Army was there too." See Arthur Schlesinger Jr., *A Thousand Days: John F. Kennedy in the White House* (New York: Houghton Mifflin Company, 1965), p. 293.
11. The methodology of combining documents, participants and analysts is known as "Critical Oral History," and was designed by Brown University Professor James G. Blight. The concept, as Blight describes it, "requires the simultaneous interaction of documents bearing on the paper trail of decisions for issues and events under reexamination, memories of those who participated in the decisions, and scholars, whose business it is to know the relevant aspects of the written record." The initial plan was to hold a 35th anniversary conference in Cuba, bringing together members of Fidel Castro's government with former CIA and Kennedy White House officials as well as surviving brigade members to discuss the events of April 1961 at *Playa Girón*. When that conference fell victim to the degeneration of U.S.-Cuban relations in 1996, a smaller meeting of former CIA, White House, and anti-Castro rebels was organized at the Arca Foundation's Musgrove conference center on St. Simons Island, Georgia. For the conference proceedings and a fuller description of critical oral history, see Blight and Kornbluh, *Politics of Illusion*.
12. See, for example, a 35th anniversary op-ed piece, "The C.I.A.'s Cuban Cover-up," in the *New York Times*, April 16, 1996.
13. These documents were part of the State Department's Foreign Relations of the United States (FRUS) series. They were released publicly on the 35th anniversary—some 18 months before publication of FRUS Volumes X and XI—at the request of the National Security Archive.
14. Hawkins could not physically attend the conference, but was in touch by phone and sent key documents and memos on the questions being discussed.
15. Esterline, as recorded at the Musgrove Conference, May 31, 1996.
16. Rough Draft of Summary of Conversation Between the Vice President and Fidel Castro, April 25, 1959.
17. Hawkins memo to the editor.
18. Esterline made these remarks at the Musgrove conference, June 1, 1996. See Blight and Kornbluh, *Politics of Illusion*, p. 83.
19. Whether the President Eisenhower or Kennedy knew in advance of the assassination plots remains an enduring historical mystery. It is clear that shortly after Kennedy's election, his national security advisor, McGeorge Bundy was briefed by Richard Bissell on ZR Rifle, the CIA's code name for its program to murder Castro and others. Recently declassified documents also show that in May 1961, and again in May 1962, Attorney General Robert Kennedy was briefed on the CIA-Mafia operation. In the first briefing paper, Edwards indicated that "none of the [Mafia's efforts] have materialized to date and that several of the plans still are working and may eventually 'pay off.'" No memoranda records the Attorney General ordering that these operations be halted. See the FBI's debriefing memo on Sheffield Edwards, "Arthur James Balletti, et al." May 22, 1961, and Edwards' memo on briefing the Attorney General, "Arthur James Balletti et al.—Unauthorized Publication or Use of Communications," May 14, 1962.
20. Minutes of Special Group Meeting, 3 November 1960.
21. Interview with Peter Kornbluh, October 10, 1996. See pages 258–266.
22. This information comes from Sheffield Edwards, one of only four CIA officials aware of the CIA-Mafia operation. See the FBI's debriefing memo on Edwards, "Arthur James Balletti, et al." May 22, 1961.
23. A number of his colleagues alleged that Kirkpatrick's bitterness at being relegated to the mundane job of Inspector General because of his disease manifested itself in the starkly critical language in his report on the Bay of Pigs. According to Richard Drain, "Kirk was trying to point blame at enough DDP people so that there would be different personnel involved later on;" Drain acknowledged that "that's a dirty thing to say." Jack Pfeiffer interview with Richard Drain, p. 45.
24. The Kirkpatrick report does not name individuals; the rejoinder, however, does include a biographic summary of key officers involved in the operation. A list of personnel and their CIA designations is included for the reader to identify officials discussed in the documents.
25. During the handling of the October 1962 Cuban Missile Crisis, according to Arthur Schlesinger, Kennedy refused to rely on the CIA and Joint Chiefs of Staff; instead he

- brought together an executive committee of top advisors to carefully discuss critical options. "No one can doubt," Schlesinger later wrote, "that failure in Cuba in 1961 contributed to success in Cuba in 1962." *A Thousand Days*, p. 297.
26. Kennedy "felt that I could not continue as DDP," Bissell recalled in an interview with CIA historian Jack Pfeiffer on October 17, 1975: "He said if this were a parliamentary government I would have to resign and you, as a Civil Servant, would stay on; but being the present government that it is, a Presidential government, I cannot resign and you . . . will have to resign."
27. Bissell admits that he left CIA with "a legacy that still has not been put to rest historically and perhaps never will be." Quoted in *Recollections of a Cold Warrior*, p. 204.
28. *A Thousand Days*, p. 428.
29. Lyman B. Kirkpatrick Jr., *The Real CIA* (New York: Macmillan, 1968), p. 200.
30. In an April 1, 1998 letter to the author, Col. Jack Hawkins remembered that "the CIA high command of that time seemed to reject the report out of hand, dismissed it as worthless and a threat to the CIA's very existence. Deeply immersed in their arcane world, they were unable to appreciate that one of their own was illuminating realities about themselves and their organization which deserved careful attention and introspection."
31. See the CIA Inspector General's report, "Report on Plots to Assassinate Fidel Castro," May 23, 1967, p. 94. The CIA official, Nestor Sánchez, brought a fake pen with a hypodermic needle for a high-level Cuban military asset to use against Castro. The asset, Colonel Rolando Cubela, balked at using such a device and asked for a sniper rifle. CIA efforts to kill Castro continued through 1965.

—KEY ACTORS and ACRONYMS

Personnel

| | |
|----------------|---|
| DCI | Director of Central Intelligence, Allen Dulles |
| DDCI | Deputy Director of Central Intelligence, Gen. C.P. Cabell |
| DD/P | Deputy Director of Plans, Richard Bissell |
| A/DDP/A | Assistant Deputy Director (Plans), Tracy Barnes |
| COPS | Chief of Operations (Plans), Richard Helms |
| C/WH | Chief, Western Hemisphere Division, J.C. King |
| C/WH/4 | Chief, Cuba Task Force, Jacob D. Esterline |
| C/WH/4/PM | Chief Paramilitary, Cuba Task Force, Jack Hawkins |
| D/WH/4 | Deputy Chief, Cuba Task Force, Edward Stanulis |
| COPS/WH/4 | Chief of Operations, Cuba Task Force, Richard Drain |
| C/WH/4/PP | Chief Propaganda, Cuba Task Force, David Atlee Philips |
| AC/DPD | Acting Chief, Development Projects Div. (Air) Stanley Beerli |
| C/PA/WH/4 | Chief, Political Affairs officer, Gerald Droller (aka Frank Bender) |
| C/FI/WH/4 | Chief, Foreign Intelligence, Cuba Task Force, Bernard Reichhardt |
| PP/PM/WH/4 | Propaganda officer, E. Howard Hunt |
| C/SPU/WH/4/PM | Chief, Strikes and Plans Unit, Cuba Task Force, Frank Egan |
| C/Maritime Ops | Chief of Maritime Operations, Capt. Jacob Scapa |
| COB/WH/4 | Chief of Base, Miami, Robert Reynolds |
| C.G. | Commandant General, U.S. Marine Corps, David Shoup |
| I.G. | CIA Inspector General, Lyman Kirkpatrick Jr. |

Acronyms

| | |
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| CEF | Cuban Expeditionary Force |
| CI | Counter-Intelligence |
| CINCLANT | Commander-in-Chief, Atlantic Command |
| COB | Chief of Base |
| COMINT | Communications Intelligence |
| CPO | Chief Petty Officer |
| CRC | Consejo Revolucionario Cubano (Cuban Revolutionary Council) |
| CSPO | Clandestine Services Personnel Office |
| CTF | Cuban Task Force |
| DOD | Department of Defense |