

**Criminally Negligent:**  
**Kennedy and the Bay of Pigs**

Most of the blame for the failure of the abortive invasion of Cuba in April of 1961 by American backed rebel anti-Castro forces can be placed squarely on the shoulders of one man. President John F. Kennedy must bear full blame for his decision to shift the invasion landing site, against the recommendations of both the Joint Chiefs of Staff and the entire American intelligence community, from the city of Trinidad to the Bay of Pigs.

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The Central Intelligence Agency, flush from its [REDACTED] 1954 coup in Guatemala, presented to the Eisenhower [REDACTED] in the spring of 1960 a program in which they outlined a possible scenario in which the United States could remove a perceived threat to the stability of the Americas. The threat they saw as a danger to our hemisphere was embodied by just one man, Fidel Castro.

Castro had seized control of Cuba from the Batista regime on January 1, 1959, during a popular revolution that had started in 1952. During 1959 Castro started to lean increasingly towards the communist elements in his revolutionary counsel to the understandable worry of the American government.

On March 17, 1960, President Eisenhower approved a four-point military plan that had been formulated by the C.I.A. This plan entailed four steps:

- (1) creation of a "responsible and unified" Cuban government in exile;
  - (2) "a powerful propaganda offensive";
  - (3) "a covert intelligence and action organization" in Cuba, to be "responsive" to the exile opposition;
  - and (4) "a paramilitary force outside of Cuba for future guerrilla action."
- "1

President Eisenhower was not, in the words of Richard M. Bissell, Jr. ██████ the CIA's deputy director for plans and chief architect of the original invasion plan, displaying signs of "vigorous activism" ██████ towards anything dealing with Cuba but his Vice-President, Richard M. Nixon was. This could most likely be explained by the fact that Eisenhower was a lame duck president in his last year of office, and that since Nixon would be campaigning that year for the presidency he would have loved to have been ██████ with an administration that had ousted a communist leader. Finally to the relief of the C.I.A. the President approved on August 18th a \$13 million dollar budget for the implementation of the agency's plan.<sup>2</sup>

Things then proceeded with the organizing of the Cuban Government in exile in south Florida. The CIA also set up military training bases for the Cubans in Guatemala. Guatemala was chosen as the training site because the government in charge had been put there with substantial American assistance. The feeling was that this was a country that could be counted on to be discrete about the training that would be going on.<sup>3</sup>

During the aforementioned Presidential campaign Senator John F. Kennedy's staff had been collecting question cards from the different rallies they had been attending and discovered much to their surprise that Castro was "bigger than Khrushchev" in other

words seemed to them that the American public viewed Castro as the main threat to U.S. security.<sup>4</sup> Since Kennedy was at the time seen as being "soft on communism" his campaign staff released a statement to the press saying that the U.S. needed to help the Cuban people defeat Castro by supporting exiles and "Fighters for Freedom".<sup>5</sup> When this hit the papers the next morning the Republican candidate, Richard M. Nixon, was furious that Kennedy would make such a statement in light of the fact that he had been briefed on U.S. plans previously by Allen W. Dulles, director of the CIA, on orders from President Eisenhower. Nixon thought that Kennedy was jeopardizing the current project by even giving the Cuban government the idea to look into the possibility that the U.S. might be backing an attempted coup. In an effort to allay any fears that Castro might have had, Nixon went so far as to say that he thought Kennedy was rash in supporting open intervention against Cuba.<sup>6</sup>

In a very close election Kennedy defeated Nixon by a mere margin of only 112,803 popular votes, and in doing so became the thirty-fifth President of the United States of America.<sup>7</sup> Upon taking office Kennedy got full briefings on the current invasion plans to which he and his closest advisors gave unanimous support.<sup>8</sup>

When Kennedy gave his inaugural speech he stated that we

would "Let every nation know... that we shall pay the price, bear any burden, meet any foe, in order to assure the survival and the success of liberty." But only nine months later Kennedy changed his ideas of what America should do stating that there "...cannot be an American solution to every world problem."<sup>9</sup>

As with almost all military operations it is extremely difficult to maintain security once a newspaper gets wind of it. This is true even if it means that lives will be lost due to news coverage. The Bay of Pigs was no different. On January 10, 1961 the New York Times reported on the front page that the U.S. was training Cuban guerrillas in the jungles of Guatemala.<sup>10</sup>

During the planning of the actual invasion there were a number of landing sites proposed, the two that got the most consideration were, the Zapata (henceforth referred to as the Bay of Pigs) and the Trinidad plans. The Trinidad plan was supported by the Joint Chiefs of Staff and the CIA because of its proximity to the Escambray Mountains,<sup>11</sup> where guerrillas had long been operating,<sup>12</sup> also it was a large port city with a population that was reputed to have anti-Castro feelings. The President though did not like the Trinidad plan because it was "too spectacular" he wanted a "quiet" landing site, which is what the Bay of Pigs provided because it was a sparsely populated region with almost no communications.<sup>13</sup>

So, against the advice of the Joint Chiefs and the CIA a new plan was drawn up that used the Bay of Pigs. The military and intelligence people devising this plan called for a total of three air strikes against Castro's air force so that the troops landing on the shore would not be harrassed from the air. This is basicly the plan that was presented to and approved by Kennedy.<sup>14</sup>

On the morning of April 14th the first air strike was launched against Cuba. This first mission consisted of only two aircraft and it resulted in only minimal damage being inflicted upon the air capability of Cuba.<sup>15</sup> The second and third air strikes were set for D-day morning, April 17, 1961, but inexplicably on April 16th at 9:15 p.m. the command post in Washington D.C. got the word that all air strikes had been ~~cancelled~~ by order of the President. When the military commander who had been appointed by the President heard that the air strikes had been canceled he complained that this was being "criminally negligent."<sup>16</sup>

At this point the disaster could have been avoided if Kennedy had just canceled the operation altogether instead of letting the troops continue ashore without the air support that they had been promised repeatedly since their training started the previous summer. While the military and the intelligence



people tried most of the night to get Kennedy to change his mind about the air strikes, they ~~tried~~ to inform the invasion fleet that the air strikes had been ~~announced~~.

The first of the long promised air cover finally did materialize on the morning of April 18, when Kennedy radioed the aircraft carrier Essex authorizing a 6:30-to-7:30 a.m. air cover. This air cover was even worse than useless because the pilots were not allowed to attack anything, not even in support of the ground troops; all they could do was fly around and watch and in doing so they just frustrated themselves and their friends on the ground at their inability to help.<sup>17</sup>

Throughout the attack Castro's small air force had been able to keep the invaders pinned down on the beach and thus stop them from securing a firm foothold. When Castro did arrive with troops he found it fairly easy to defeat a much smaller force that was quickly running out of supplies and hope.

One final episode in this ~~episode~~ of mismanagement was the fact that Kennedy would not allow American rescue ships to approach within sight of Cuba. Just how Kennedy envisioned our being able to rescue people is hard to fathom when our ships would have to stay over the horizon from the people they were sent to rescue.

Even though Kennedy took full public responsibility for the

defeat he ~~blamed~~ in private the experts at the CIA and in the military for leading him down the garden path in thinking that the plan they presented to him would work.<sup>18</sup> Kennedy knew full well that anything that he said about the matter in private would soon make its way into the public domain. In doing so he was able to bring public support to a President that apparently had been misinformed by his advisors.

The main lesson that the United States should have learned from this episode is that once something is started it is better to stick with the "game plan" rather than ~~it is~~ to try ~~and~~ improvise and hope for the same kind of <sup>results</sup> ~~results~~ as was originally planned; in other words once a decision has been made stick with it.

NOTES

1. Peter Wyden, Bay of Pigs: The Untold Story (New York: Simon, 1979), 25.
2. Wyden 30.
3. Jay Mallin, Merc: American Soldiers of Fortune (New York: Signet, 1980), 6.
4. Wyden 65.
5. Wyden 67.
6. Richard M. Nixon, The Memoirs of Richard Nixon (New York: Grosset, 1978), 221.
7. John Bartlow Martin, Adlai Stevenson and The World: The Life of Adlai E. Stevenson (New York: Doubleday, 1977), 551.
8. Lewis J. Paper, The Promise and the Performance: The Leadership of John F. Kennedy (New York: Crown, 1975), 86.
9. John A. Garraty, Encyclopedia of American Biography (New York: Harper, 1974), 612.
10. Wyden 46.
11. Wyden 102.
12. Mallin 22.
13. Wyden 100.
14. Martin 6.

15. Wyden 173.
16. Wyden 204.
17. Hugh Thomas, CUBA: The Pursuit of Freedom (New York: Harper, 1971), ■■■.
18. ■ Benjamin C. Bradley, Conversations with Kennedy (New York: Norton, 1975), ■■■.

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