

Chapter 2 REALITY AND THE POLICY PROCESS: NINE STORIES

Many failures combined to produce the Bay of Pigs failure. This chapter reviews how, at nine points, erroneous beliefs substituted for a clear grasp of what, in retrospect, was reality. These beliefs were: (1) Kennedy held a wishful image of the Cubans. He considered them volunteer patriots motivated to attempt, on their own, to liberate their homeland.

About what would follow after the men hit the beaches, Kennedy was wrong in five assessments: (2) He reduced and eliminated air strikes without realizing these decisions meant military defeat; (3) he believed American involvement would remain secret; (4) he believed Castro would lose his nerve; (5) he believed the Cuban people would rise up to support the "liberation" of their homeland; (6) he believed he (and the men) had a costless guerrilla escape option.¹

Others thought they grasped reality, but events proved they did not, on two additional issues: (7) Adlai Stevenson believed the CIA cover story for the defector pilot was true. And (8) almost all (and perhaps all) Kennedy's advisers, and the Cubans themselves, believed he would commit American military forces rather than allow an invasion to fail.

Finally, (9) there was a serious failure the invasion collapse obscured. Kennedy and his advisers did not consider the implications of a prolonged struggle that might have embroiled the United States had Kennedy not inadvertently scuttled his own operation at the beachhead.

1. *Kennedy imagined the Cubans to be volunteer patriots eager to liberate their homeland, on their own, to advance a "New Frontier" political agenda.*

Kennedy's problem — of both self-image and political symbolism — was how to commit an aggressive act without thinking of it as aggression, or how the United States could intervene in Cuba without violating the principle of non-intervention. He tried to find a way to reshape the CIA's original plan, and think about the operation, to achieve this objective.² His solution was to conceive this operation as American *support* of Cuban liberators. They were to be led by a liberation government whose "New Frontier" political program of liberal reform mirrored Kennedy's own progressive ideals.

Reality remained otherwise: the operation, from top to bottom, beginning to end, was American — American-conceived, American-inspired, American-

financed, American-managed. The Cubans were stage props; the forced political coalition had no united program.

Lest the situation be misunderstood, it should be made clear that none of the soldiers were mercenaries. They were paid only a subsistence amount. They were, for the most part, younger, idealistic, passionate patriots who believed their ideals – and their country – were now betrayed by Castro. But the absolutely necessary ingredient in their participation was faith that the United States was behind them and would not let them fail. Castro had 250,000 regular troops and militia. You would have been crazy to join a band of 1,400 and invade Cuba on your own.

In March 1960 the CIA undertook to form a liberation government. They had difficulty doing so. There were over 100,000 Cuban expatriates and 600 different political groups in the Miami area. The first wave of expatriates came with the fall of Batista: They had strong incentives to return to former positions of power and wealth. They were also unacceptable: Having been liberated, the Cuban people would scarcely support the reinstatement of right-wing Batistianos. Only as Castro moved more explicitly in a Marxist direction, and began to purge the army and his governing coalition of his early leftist, but non-Communist, supporters and they began to arrive in Miami, could the CIA work seriously to form a credible “liberation” government. But to do so, they now had to deal with groups spanning most of the political spectrum, some of whom were anathema to others.³

To form a political coalition required consummate skill (especially in dealing with Cuban politicians whom even their supporters often considered prickly prima donnas). Bissell’s ad hoc operation was forced to use some CIA agents who were not considered first-rate. In the Guatemala scenario the “liberators” were stage props, a low priority, so Bissell used his weakest people to handle that job. Gerry Droller, the Washington head of exile political contacts, spoke no Spanish and was openly condescending to Cubans. E. Howard Hunt was widely regarded in the agency as a charming man who seldom got anything done: He was designated to be head of political action, working in Miami and in touch with the politicians daily.⁴

Hunt was authorized to take off the kid gloves: “knock their heads together, kick them in the ass, anything at all.”⁵ But he could not produce a government. Finally, in mid-March 1961, with the invasion now tentatively approved, a D-Day in three to four weeks, and no liberation government formed, Bissell acted to get one. He fired Hunt and assigned a new man, “Jim Noble,” former CIA station chief in Havana.⁶ Noble’s order was to produce the coalition government in a week. He assembled the expatriate leaders on March 18 at the Skyways Motel in Miami, and he issued an ultimatum cleared with Washington. He excoriated the Cuban politicians for pursuing “selfish little aims and petty differences. . . . If you don’t come out of this meeting with a committee, you just forget the whole fuckin’ business, because we’re through!”⁷

Noble got a coerced alliance. It was a marriage of expedience, a vehicle for power. The “leaders” only exercised influence when they did what the American government wanted. Just after his selection to head the liberation government, Dr. Miro Cardona was requested to ratify the CIA’s earlier selection of Manuel Artime as Brigade commander. Other political leaders objected, but Miro told them (rightly) that he had no choice.⁸

The CIA learned early that it must take charge: The Cuban politicians could not organize an operation that would bring a significant number of people into the streets to fight and die behind the banner of putting them into power. Early Radio SWAN broadcasts (from the CIA’s propaganda radio on Swan Island in the Caribbean) were judged too candid about right-wing sentiments of some of the groups who proposed to return.⁹ In New York, the Cuban leadership issued press statements – but thirty pages long and in Spanish. To mount a credible liberation the CIA hired a professional, the Lem Jones public relations firm on Madison Avenue (another of his clients had been Twentieth Century Fox). David Phillips, the CIA’s propaganda chief, called the P.R. agency directly to dictate press statements on behalf of the Cubans. Even the invasion-day manifesto, explaining why their fellow countrymen should rise up to support them, was not written by the Cubans: E. Howard Hunt telephoned in the copy. The Cuban leaders were not told the day of “their” invasion. On a pretext they were put on a plane and then held incommunicado at a Florida military base (“kidnapped” some of them charged angrily), waiting for the CIA’s decision to fly them to the beaches.¹⁰

Howard Hunt later discussed his impressions of the men involved (as the senior American official to know most of the key politicians firsthand, his perceptions bear on the realism of Kennedy’s idealistic facade). Hunt had high regard for only a few. In the main, “they displayed most Latin faults and few Latin virtues. With one exception they were all professional politicians whose trade was public demagoguery and private intrigue. . . . I considered them shallow thinkers and opportunists.”¹¹ Bissell was appalled by the original political manifesto the politicians drafted, which promised to undo many of Castro’s progressive reforms; he instructed that (in his metaphor) a “sexier” set of proposals be drafted. Miro later met with Arthur Schlesinger to review a land reform package the White House was enthusiastic that his group adopt. He sighed; it could be put on paper, but almost any idea, including these bold reforms, was a matter of intense controversy among the politicians temporarily united under his leadership.¹²

Political conflicts, papered over in Miami, surfaced dramatically in Guatemala. In January 1961, half the 500 Cubans mutinied against the CIA when the agency – under pressure to expand the force quickly – began to recruit former members of Batista’s army who were anathema to many Brigade members. The CIA reinstated control and stage-managed a conciliatory visit from preselected Cuban politicians. But about a dozen intransigent troublemakers

were kidnapped, taken by seaplane and canoe to an almost inaccessible location in the northern mountain jungle of Guatemala, and held incommunicado by armed guards for three and a half months until the invasion attempt was completed.¹³

Nor did senior officials at the White House, under pressure to mount an invasion, have time to be well informed about everyone the United States was sponsoring as a "liberator." Jim Noble, recruited in March, briefed Bissell, A. A. Berle (an old-time New Dealer who was a Latin American specialist at the State Department), William Bundy from the Defense Department, and Richard Goodwin from the White House. Noble was shocked by the ignorance: "If I'd just thrown in Joe Blow's name and made up a fictitious background for him, he could have been named to the government, too."¹⁴ His suggestion for a genuine political convention among Cubans in Miami was rejected because of a lack of time. No one had been concerned with it earlier.

It would seem reasonable, in retrospect, to doubt that Kennedy ever really believed the propaganda. But the evidence is that he cared about the reality and wanted it to be true. He developed a bottom-line test to assure himself that these Cubans genuinely wanted to go to the beaches for their own motives; he formally demanded the Cuban leaders accept the fact that there would be no American military involvement. (I will return to this episode, and why the message Kennedy received satisfied him — erroneously.) Kennedy used Arthur Schlesinger, Jr., in the White House, to develop an enraptured White Paper ("The Cuban people remain our brothers . . .") to assure the world that the spirit of the "New Frontier" motivated the operation, that it would continue Castro's earlier programs: *Fidelismo sin Fidel*.¹⁵ Kennedy ordered a leftist politician, Manuel Ray, included in the liberation government in order to shape its policies and (with his allegedly large underground network) increase the likelihood of a mass uprising. America would be Cuba's benefactor, not an "aggressor."¹⁶

Having tried to create a viable viewpoint from which to approve the plan, Kennedy apparently ended up believing it halfway, and probably more than halfway. About the realities and the grier details of what they were doing, the CIA told him no lies, but they also told him few details. Nor did he ask.

So the CIA went ahead and substantially substituted image for reality. Its officials might have preferred the image to be the same as reality, but they had no time.

2. *Kennedy cut back and eliminated air strikes without realizing the disastrous consequences.*

[T]here is unanimous agreement that at some stage the Castro Air Force must be removed. . . . [T]he revised landing plan depends strongly upon prompt action against Castro's air.

—McGeorge Bundy,
Memorandum for the President,
March 15, 1961

There were two missions for the sixteen B-26s of the invader air force. On D-2 and D, the job was to eliminate Castro's air force. Afterward, from the beachhead landing strip, they were to fly tactical sorties against Castro's troops and destroy microwave and telephone systems so the (remaining) radio communications would be open to the manipulation that would multiply the apparent magnitude of the invasion and destroy the control and morale of the defenders.

Debate about how many planes to use, and when, continued throughout the planning meetings. Militarily, the CIA wanted "maximum" air power. The Department of State, concerned other countries not be implicated, wanted it "minimal."¹⁷

The CIA proposed full air power directed in one strike, on the morning of D-Day. The State Department argued this would be too spectacular, too large to appear to originate from indigenous defectors. The pretense of American innocence could be blown and the "international noise level" reach a crescendo if the Yankees of the north seemed back to their old tricks of invading and overthrowing Latin American governments and, to make matters worse, involving other Latin American governments in mutual military interference. The CIA compromised; they proposed the D-2 strike with the "defector" pilot who would fly to Miami to give it a plausible cover story.¹⁸

Initially, Kennedy agreed. But then Friday, April 14, James Reston, a senior *New York Times* reporter and columnist, angrily attacked the rumored Cuban operation in his column. Reston, outraged, claimed that it would reverse what he thought America's main historical purpose should be, "to put some kind of ethical base under the new world order." Later in the day, after reading the column, Kennedy called Bissell with the final "go" order for the D-2 air strikes the next morning. Kennedy gave his approval, but then, just before ringing off, he asked Bissell how many planes Bissell planned to use. Bissell said there would be sixteen.

"Well, I don't want it on that scale," said the president, "I want it minimal."¹⁹ Bissell did not object, pleased, with over a year of his own work invested, that the president was willing for the plan to go ahead at all. He passed the word that only six planes would fly.

What happened in those few seconds was consequential for what followed on Sunday: Kennedy had pushed Bissell, and Bissell had readily accepted a fallback position. It showed political sophistication by both men. Kennedy likely expected that Bissell had padded his estimates to afford a safety margin and planned to use more aircraft than the number he needed. In fact, Kennedy phrased his order — to make the strikes "minimal" — to imply that the minimum should be what Bissell *really* needed to do the job; he did not instruct Bissell how many to use. Bissell's ready agreement could be interpreted as an implicit acknowledgment that he did pad and his plans could be cut back for political considerations without harm to military objectives.

In part, however, Kennedy and Bissell misread each other. The Kennedys

were "personal conflict" learners. Kennedy was accustomed to the frank, even blunt, dealing of an inner circle of staff and family accorded the right of frankness in return for absolute personal loyalty. Earlier, when he was in the Senate, it had not been an awesome breach of protocol for staff to tell him he was wrong, or to argue with him. And if a staff member did not see eye to eye with him, or displeased him, he could always find another job with another senator.

But to a president, advisers became deferential. There was the aura of the office. His pleasure and displeasure now affected whether men, drawn to Washington to make an impact on history, could realize this central quest in their lives. Association with power in the White House was a "mountain top experience," one aide later put it.

When Kennedy gave a blunt order, "I want it minimal," his past style indicated he was not giving an absolute order, he was only saying what he wanted. He expected people to come back at him if it *shouldn't* be what he wanted. But since Kennedy's assessment was affected by the emotional intensity with which the argument was made, Bissell's quick deference confirmed, implicitly, that all the air strikes were not necessary.²⁰

Bissell accepted because he *had* padded to give the plan a substantial safety margin. And he decreased the sorties, too, because he did not want to jeopardize a mission (with a final "go" signal needed from the president on Sunday) by unnecessary confrontation. A quick assent still left the D-Day strikes to finish the job.

U-2 photographic overflights of Cuba did not yield a certain count of how many planes were destroyed on D-2, but several planes clearly remained operational.²¹ The D-Day strike was now considered crucial, and at full force: the men were unprepared for a contested landing, their boats were loaded with highly explosive fuel and ammunition, and they lacked anti-aircraft weapons to defend themselves.

But throughout Sunday, Kennedy's doubts continued. He arranged to go to an estate in Virginia and to a racetrack, hit golf balls in a pasture, and appear to be on vacation (a cover story). But all who saw him that day said he looked gloomy, pressured, distracted. He had agreed to decide by noon. He did not call Bissell until 1:45 p.m. to say "go ahead."²² (Bissell, again, had padded; the true "final" hour to abort the ship rendezvous was 4:00 – and the men would not, in fact, begin to hit the beaches until about midnight, so he actually had even longer.)

But after his approval, doubts continued to work on the president. He received no new factual information. But that morning the major newspapers had left the defector's cover story in shreds. Then, Stevenson learned he had been set up and his angry "Eyes Only" cable to Rusk arrived at the State Department.²³ Concern that the operation was becoming loud and public, and reaction to the "international noise level" in New York, prompted telephone

conversations among Rusk, Bundy, and the president. Rusk initiated the calls, and Kennedy cancelled the D-Day air strike at the same time he ordered McGeorge Bundy to New York City, "to hold the hands of Ambassador Stevenson" (as Bundy expressed it) and give him an accurate briefing over breakfast the next morning.²⁴

When Rusk spoke with the president, he urged the advisability of postponing any further air strikes until these could "plausibly originate" from within Cuba itself. To Rusk, this meant the air strip on the island should first be secured – which meant no dawn strikes. He found, to his surprise, the president did not remember any D-Day strikes were to originate from Nicaragua. "I'm not signed on to this," the president said, using navy parlance to indicate that he did not remember these details.²⁵

On Sunday evening, General Cabell stopped by the CIA after a golf game to check on developments. It was there, about 9:30 p.m., that he received a call from Bundy; at the president's order the D-Day strikes were cancelled unless there were "over-riding considerations." If the cancellation created problems for Cabell, he should call Rusk; Bundy was leaving for New York.²⁶

Cabell phoned Bissell and they went immediately to see Rusk at the State Department, arriving just after 10:15 p.m. Cabell and Bissell protested the cancellation very strongly to Rusk; Bissell, especially, was highly agitated. They told Rusk that if the president did not reverse himself, the landing was seriously endangered: Castro had operational aircraft, the Brigade lacked anti-aircraft capability; and men on the beaches would likely die under air attack. Rusk maintained that as the boats were expected to be unloaded and withdrawn by dawn, a delay would not be critical.

Rusk called Kennedy, reported to him that Cabell and Bissell were in his office, felt the cancellation would be "very serious," and briefed the president on their arguments. He concluded by restating his own original position, that in view of the problems in New York the cancellation stay and the CIA be allowed no further foreign-based air assaults. He listened for a moment, then turned to Cabell and said, "Well, the President agrees with me, but would you, General Cabell, like to speak to the President?"²⁷

Cabell demurred. He had nothing to add and, as a good military officer – with his arguments heard and the case now overruled, twice, by the commander-in-chief – he decided there was no point to further protest. Bissell, too, judged Rusk had summarized the case fairly and further protest would be "hopeless" or its chance at best "negligible."²⁸ Returning to the CIA, Bissell, acting on his own authority, cancelled planned notifications to CIA agents within Cuba. He did not want to compromise them if the invasion should fail; it now seemed more likely that it would.²⁹

At 4 a.m. General Cabell, still concerned about the error of the president's decision (and feeling intense pressure from his subordinates at the CIA),

visited Dean Rusk at his apartment in the Sheraton-Park Hotel and awakened him to request American jet cover during unloading and withdrawal. Rusk called the president and put General Cabell on the line directly. At 4 A.M., it was too late for the slow Brigade B-26s to arrive from Nicaragua by dawn. The general's options used American planes and American pilots. The president did not comment, asked to talk to Rusk, and their conversation was very brief. Rusk hung up the phone, turned to Cabell, and told him all requests were disapproved.¹⁰ Moreover, the president had ordered the carrier moved further out to sea and kept at least thirty miles away.¹¹

Why did Kennedy cancel? The "international noise level" was the sort of political risk he had feared, and which he had whittled down the operation to prevent. The CIA-designed cover story for their defector was exposed. Stevenson was furious, and he could lead opposition from within the Democratic Party. Rusk also advised cancellation and, in his quiet professional way, spoke with the authority of the New York foreign policy establishment. Kennedy was upset and determined, whatever else, that his (America's) deniability would stay and he would not further risk a Soviet move against Berlin or elsewhere in the world.

But a cancellation was now irrational. It was too late. The only consequence was to affect the symbolic gesture (in an isolated area) that the sixteen planes first land at the secured beachhead strip before they could again take off and begin to bomb. One still needed to explain where they originated. It was now implausible they all could be portrayed as indigenous Cuban defectors, but the case was equally fanciful whether they arrived at dawn—to help secure the beachhead by eliminating Castro's air power—or in the afternoon. Moreover (it is unlikely Kennedy was attentive to this detail), the CIA's nose cone error was public: there was no credible way to convince reporters these Brigade B-26s belonged to Castro. Foreign correspondents in Havana would observe and report this; to expose the American government's lies had become the lead story in a competitive business.

Later Kennedy told his aide Ted Sorenson that he had not appreciated the consequences of his cancellation. Yet if he failed to understand the consequences, it was because he arranged it that way.

DeRivera, a psychologist, has written a shrewd discussion of decision making, commenting on how often we ask for advice from those we know will say what we want to hear.¹² Kennedy did this, too. Oddly, for a man who had followed such formal procedures until now, he spoke only with Rusk and Bundy before making the decision. Had he truly wanted informed military advice, he would have called Lemnitzer, Burke, Cabell, Hawkins, Bissell, Shoup (commandant of the Marine Corps) or many others who knew the military details. He spoke only with the two men who would agree that "international noise level" was the criterion he should use.

His D-Day cancellation itself, as we have seen, made no logical sense. Given

Kennedy's earlier moodiness, his distracted appearance, his delay in giving the "go" order, his last minute decision (again without consultation) to reduce the D-2 strike, his failure to request a military briefing—and his obviously poor memory of even those military details he had been told—the plausible inference is that Kennedy was ambivalent, conflicted about this plan.¹³ Thus I think we have to conclude that "cutting out" his military advisers was a statement of what he did not want to hear.

One also surmises he was becoming very angry. As an astute politician, he surely knew what military advisers would tell him. Instinctively, he distanced them to dramatize his message. He was unwilling to hear from Cabell until after the decision; to appeal, he forced Cabell to go to Rusk. Then, by ruling against Cabell a second time *before* Cabell was asked whether he wanted to talk to him, he (surely, intentionally) put Cabell in a pressured and difficult situation. Kennedy leaned on the CIA hard, to make it work the way Kennedy wanted it, and within the badly fraying conditions of the secrecy they had promised. And, perhaps, Kennedy suspected that the CIA exaggerated the need for D-Day strikes, and they really did not need them (though their loss could make the job more difficult). They had accepted every cut to date; each of the earlier parts of the plan had included safety margins which could be trimmed to accommodate political realities.

Were Kennedy to hear forceful objections, these would come from senior advisers with the bureaucratic standing to call him directly. But that possibility was now hostage to chance and circumstance. A direct appeal could have come from Allen Dulles or the secretary of defense, Robert McNamara. But to effect a cover story, Dulles (tradecraft, again) had gone to Puerto Rico to give a speech. (*Tass* imaginatively charged he had gone to Puerto Rico to direct the invasion from a secret base.)¹⁴ McNamara had remained peripheral to the earlier discussions and no member of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, who might have enlisted McNamara, did so.¹⁵

It is probably true Kennedy would have retained the D-Day strikes had he foreseen the immediate consequences. Under the circumstances, that required not only factual information but emotional force. But professional language and the deference of subordinates kept such emotional force from him.

The discussion with Rusk was professional, diplomatic, low key. The words used were "critical," "overriding considerations," "serious risk," "noise level."¹⁶ Only outside of the presidential presence were men blunt. Back at the CIA, planners blasted Cabell without mercy. They were angry, shouting, red-faced; four-letter words filled the air, the pretense of rank and decorum gone. Marine Colonel Hawkins shouted at Cabell, a four-star general, "This is criminally negligent!" and at midnight, desperate and sobbing, he phoned Marine Commandant Shoup to tell him he was certain the invasion would now fail under dawn air attack. Shoup "damn near choked," agreed with Hawkins, but thought things had "gone too far" for him to help (nor did he have the bureau-

cratic standing to call the president).³⁷ General Gray, the liaison officer between the Pentagon and the CIA, was called at the Pentagon by CIA planners seeking allies: Gray quickly called General Wheeler (air force chief of staff) and together they made an emergency visit to awaken General Lemnitzer, chairman of the Joint Chiefs (at about 2 A.M.). Lemnitzer's reaction was that the president's decision was "absolutely reprehensible, almost criminal" in "pulling the rug" from under the Cuban soldiers. Lemnitzer agreed to Wheeler's and Gray's urging for immediate standby preparations for naval air cover in the morning in the event Kennedy reconsidered his order. These actions and contingency plans were the basis for General Cabell's visit to Secretary Rusk at 4 A.M.³⁸

No such strong emotion and blunt talk, at the time, reached the president. Indeed, any subordinate who called a president "criminally irresponsible" to his face would surely have taken the step expecting to end his career. (And he would likely be ineffective: his own behavior would become the issue.) Presidents seldom hear messages with a strong emotional charge from subordinates, certainly not critical ones.

3. Kennedy believed the American role would remain secret.

To Kennedy, a secret or plausibly deniable American role was crucial. The Soviet Union would not be challenged by a success (nor would he or the United States lose moral standing). Too, the expatriates likely stood a better chance to spark a nationalist uprising if they publicly appeared to act on their own motives rather than to be mercenaries or surrogates for a Yankee invasion.³⁹

Kennedy and his advisers relied on past experiences and faith in their own credibility. The CIA operations of the 1950s had remained secret. The press was part of the team. Never before had investigative journalists defected to score points by vigorously seeking and publishing information about covert operations: undoubtedly the McCarthy period, and the early cold war, had produced inhibitions that flowed from an elite consensus so marked there was no need to be overtly heavy-handed.

What changed? Soviet capture of a U-2 pilot in 1960, shot down during a spy flight over Russia, had trapped the Eisenhower administration into a public lie, admitted by Eisenhower. This probably made later intelligence exposés more acceptable (and newsmen and readers probably also learned they enjoyed such exposés).⁴⁰ Now, too, elite opinion was divided; many liberals in America supported Castro's overthrow of Batista; they were not sure America should oppose him now, especially without hard evidence that he was a Communist. Thus, this intervention was controversial, a story they would want to hear. Quite possibly a liberal president helped to make this a story; one could, in a sense, expose greater pretense.

A list of news stories that did appear (and an even longer list of those researched but withheld after White House pressure) prior to the invasion is

a formidable indictment of Kennedy's odd, continuing hope. On October 30, 1960 the Guatemalan newspaper *La Hora* published a story by a well-known journalist disclosing construction of the CIA base. American newspapers did not monitor *La Hora*, but Professor Ronald Hilton, director of the Institute of Hispanic-American Studies at Stanford, learned the information while visiting Guatemala, and was told it was "common knowledge." He reported it in the scholarly *Hispanic American Review* and produced an editorial in the *Nation*, on November 19, condemning the operation and seeking to alert a larger national constituency. The editorial in the *Nation* called the planning "dangerous" and urged the reports be checked immediately by all U.S. news media with correspondents in Guatemala.⁴¹ The planning was scarcely secret from the Soviet government: in November, *Pravda* and *Izvestia* began to run well-informed stories about the Guatemala training base and invasion preparations.⁴²

The *Nation* dispatched copies of its editorial, by courier, to the *New York Times* and other major news media, and followed up with telephone calls. It produced no response, possibly because many editors were unsure this was a story they wanted the responsibility for pursuing. But a reader of both the *Nation* and the *Times* clipped the editorial and sent it, with a letter to the editor, to the *Times*, asking if such reports were true, and, if so, why was he not reading the truth in the *Times*? That seemed a good question, too, to the assistant managing editor on whose desk the letter landed — and the *Times* reporter in Mexico City was dispatched to investigate.⁴³

His story ran, with a three-column headline, on the front page of the *New York Times* on January 10, 1961: "U.S. Helps Train an Anti-Castro Force at Secret Guatemalan Air-Ground Base." The *Times* included a map of the base. No one reacted, probably because Washington was between governments and there was no clear tie between the base and the new Kennedy administration.

But as the invasion drew closer, it was common knowledge, and easily learned, in the Miami Cuban community.⁴⁴ The Cubans were voluble and very enthusiastic, and American newsmen had easy access, at low cost, to news sources in Miami. A *U.S. News & World Report* newsman visited Arthur Schlesinger at the White House with the draft of an extensive, and accurate, story. The *New Republic* sent over galleys of what Schlesinger judged to be a "careful, accurate, and devastating" story. (Neither was published, because of White House influence.)⁴⁵

The major erosion of security began by chance: Tad Szulc of the *Times* was on vacation from his assignment in Rio and stopped in Miami to visit friends.

Early for a meeting, and waiting in a bar, he spotted a man he had once met in Cuba. The man greeted him with enthusiasm, talked excitedly about the wonderful invasion and overthrow of Castro that would soon occur and

which he assumed Szulc had come to Miami to report firsthand . . . and within a few days Szulc had the entire story, including an introduction to the CIA's chief contact man, "Eduardo" (E. Howard Hunt) at a party.⁴⁶

Szulc opposed an invasion, and he thought the idea of a popular revolt sheer fantasy. He thought, and believed others shared, an uneasy feeling the United States was wrong to seek Castro's overthrow. It was a story, his superiors at the *Times* agreed, they had a duty to cover.

Szulc's story was whittled down to accommodate White House pressure. The editorial hierarchy of the *Times* eliminated specific reference to the CIA, to an invasion date, and toned down the headline when they ran it on Friday, April 7.⁴⁷ But the story did report an invasion "was near." Kennedy, livid, shouted at his aides, "I can't believe what I'm reading. . . . It's all laid out. . . ." ⁴⁸

Bissell's secrecy held so far as details were concerned. The date of D-Day, and the landing site, were not known in advance. Nor did Castro learn of the air strikes or the diversions in advance.

Why did Kennedy believe he would get away with it? The *New York Times* officially defined reality. Kennedy knew that several newspapers and magazines had the story. Those publications also knew, by implication, they might be set up and their professional credibility exploited by CIA cover stories. As a former journalist, Kennedy could have guessed (if he thought about it) how journalists would react to being manipulated. In a competitive business, who would parrot the official line when a competitor was likely to publish the true and more interesting story? Three factors probably led Kennedy to hope that secrecy could be retained. First, the *Times*—and other papers—had been willing, under White House pressure, to pull their punches: the CIA was not mentioned by name. Second, the invasion itself was supposed to be quiet, uncontested, at night, and in a remote area. By the time it hit the press there would only be Cubans ashore. Third, when the need to assess the situation arose, Richard Bissell was a gifted phrasemaker. He told the president the operation still had a "fig leaf." An apt and vivid metaphor—who could tell if it was right?—and it kept the policy on track.⁴⁹

4. *American planners severely underestimated Castro's personal competence under fire.*

The key prediction of the Guatemala model was that Castro's government would disintegrate under pressure. In fairness to the CIA, we should recognize that Kennedy never gave psychological warfare its best chance. The daylight Trinidad landing, planned to be a dramatic catalyst, was abandoned when Kennedy wanted the introduction of troops via a quiet, remote night landing. Castro retained air power because Kennedy further changed the original plan. Technological tricks were never engaged in because no B-26s flew from the beaches to destroy microwave and telephone capabilities and leave radio communications vulnerable.

Still, Castro's record should have counted against the belief he would lose his nerve. With a handful of men he had launched (and won) a revolutionary challenge against Batista with an army of 40,000. On reflection, that scarcely looked to be a man who would collapse easily. Moreover, the Cuban charges to the United Nations, and in the press, specifically discussed Guatemala and it was doubtful psychological warfare would again be as effective against a leadership cadre prepared for it.⁵⁰

American policymakers underestimated Castro partly because they saw no sane explanation for his increasingly passionate, and apparently self-destructive, anti-American course. They genuinely considered him mentally unbalanced. Schlesinger says people in Washington considered his vivid fears and fiery oratory "hysterical."⁵¹ If so, it could be easier to produce nervous collapse than against Arbenz. Too, if Castro were mad, and messianically driven to spread revolution, there would be a clash of will and raw power sooner or later; it was prudent to act now, while he was still weak.

The CIA's intelligence branch put their judgment directly into psychological terms: Castro, they concluded, was "a psychotic personality." This judgment, made formally by the Board of National Estimates on February 21, 1961, and now declassified, is worth quoting directly.

The assessment addressed the question of why Cuba became allied with the USSR when Castro's 26th of July Movement was not originally Communist-inspired or directed. Deterioration of U.S.-Cuban relations, the report said, was "not a function of US policy and action, but of Castro's psychotic personality. It is evident, on the testimony of his supporters at the time, that Castro arrived in Havana in a high state of elation amounting to mental illness. . . . He became convinced that the US would never understand and accept his revolution, that he could expect only implacable hostility from Washington. This was the conclusion of his own disordered mind, unrelated to any fact of US policy or action."⁵² The report's ultimate criteria: "no sane man undertaking to govern and reform Cuba would have chosen to pick a fight with the US."⁵³ After all, signing an *arms* pact with the Communist bloc? Ninety miles from *Florida*? And given the *Monroe Doctrine*? That was not a sane man.

On the surface Castro might appear psychotic: delusions of persecution (he thought capitalists, and especially the United States, were out to destroy him and his revolution), megalomania (being a revolutionary at all, the grandiosity to claim oneself as the vanguard and savior of Latin America, challenging the United States), aggressiveness (expelling or eliminating all competitors, having former Batistianos and alleged spies shot, establishing a police-state dictatorship, "picking a fight" with the United States). Certainly there *had* to be a strong, personal explanation. Betancourt of Venezuela, for example, was a liberal reformer whose contrasting style showed Castro's conduct was not culturally determined and who signed on to join the Alliance for Progress

team. The apparently obvious diagnosis was that Castro was making up the whole world in which, in his "disordered mind," he was living.⁵⁴

Unfortunately, the CIA's Board of National Estimates, which reflected and reinforced "informed" opinion, was independent of the "plans" division headed by Bissell. For security, these intelligence estimators were kept in the dark.⁵⁵ Castro better knew the reality of what others in the building were doing than they did. He knew there were plots to overthrow him or assassinate him and that the Guatemala base was a reality. Nor did he — with a network of active agents in Miami as well as Guatemala — hallucinate that the underground operations and airdropped supplies to terrorists who set fire to sugar cane fields and killed civilians with several bombs a week in 1960 were the sole work of private groups the United States simply had difficulty controlling (as the Department of State, itself misled, protested).

There probably was an added motive for believing that Castro was a mad, paranoid fanatic. American leaders could simply look at themselves and see decent, hard-working people trying to do good in the world. Many had liberal sympathies. To maintain vociferously that Americans were evil, Castro must have an overwrought and feverish imagination and be rather borderline in his grasp of reality.

Castro may have been an ambitious, driven man. But the report, reaching for sophistication, did not use the basic facts needed for prediction. Castro was a veteran guerrilla fighter who had fought against heavy odds before, not a fair-weather soldier in Guatemala reluctant to get a uniform dirty. He had courage and guts. And he knew the invasion was coming.

5. *Kennedy and most White House advisers incorrectly believed the troop landings would trigger widespread rebellion.*

The CIA provided two sorts of intelligence estimates: There were the official intelligence estimates, an example of which (from the Board of National Estimates) we have just seen. Bissell's group ran its own, independent intelligence operation. The first group of estimators knew nothing about the plan, and they made no uprising forecast. Bissell's group, with the Guatemala model, never expected a spontaneous uprising; at best, they expected it would take a week or more to establish momentum. They provided weapons with the invaders for 30,000 — but only for 30,000.⁵⁶

Bissell's group gave the president modest numbers about what to expect: 2,500 hard-core supporters; another 20,000 would join once a movement began to build momentum; the majority of the Cuban people, they told the president, probably supported Castro; 25% of the population, they judged, would be favorably disposed to Castro's overthrow.⁵⁷ Their oral briefings were careful and professional: "Bissell said that you just couldn't tell whether this thing would ignite a real revolt. 'We have reports it will,' he said, 'but how can you possibly tell?' He was very cautious in his words. He promised nothing."⁵⁸

After the defeat, "we were promised a mass uprising and it did not occur" became a self-serving White House line, partly a cover story to divert attention from Kennedy's disastrous D-Day cancellation by arguing that, well, it would never have worked anyway. And the CIA colluded: their radio network infiltrators were still in Cuba. To surface the *real* scenario would have put lives in jeopardy.⁵⁹

Still, it seems certain that the White House and Joint Chiefs of Staff believed a mass uprising would be inspired to sweep the invaders to victory.⁶⁰ The specific efforts (detailed earlier) by Kennedy, Schlesinger, Goodwin, and others in the White House to create a political program to achieve mass support engaged mutual enthusiasm. In the end, they captured their own imaginations.⁶¹

The CIA did provide information on which their imaginations could work. There were, as we have seen, two CIA intelligence assessment tracks. The "unwitting" intelligence branch of the CIA painted an ambiguous picture, one from which people might conclude the Bissell group was too conservative. Their reports' contents were ambiguous and conflicting — but that was the nature of reality.⁶²

For example, one agent on March 10, 1961, reported, "Many people in Camaguey believe that the Castro regime is tottering and that the situation can at any moment degenerate into bloody anarchy. . . . The opposition forces in the Escambray are enjoying great popularity."⁶³ (Castro's own mistrust clearly extended to at least 200,000 people whom he arrested after the D-2 warning.) Yet on the same day, another written assessment maintained "we see no signs that such developments portend any serious threat to a regime which by now has established a formidable structure of control."⁶⁴

The conclusion that White House officials made up a cover story, tried to make it a reality, and then were carried along by their hopes, is strengthened by the numbers Bissell provided. Castro had 50,000 in his regular army and perhaps 200,000 militia: total, 250,000.⁶⁵ The CIA had no more than 2,500 hard-core supporters in the military. That means, Mr. President, that 99% of Cuba's military forces are not expected to support us.⁶⁶

Or take the 25% figure. That means, Mr. President, that 75% of the Cuban people will not be favorably disposed to this liberation.

By the available evidence, then, Kennedy and his advisers made up the belief in a mass uprising because they wanted to believe it. Too, they felt Cubans would prefer the nationalistic, anti-Communist, and democratic liberal ideals they stood for to Castro's.

6. *A guerrilla escape was available if the invasion fell apart.*

Kennedy rightly understood that the Trinidad plan included a guerrilla-escape option. (He did not know the Cubans were never trained to use this guerrilla option; it was a CIA "selling point," not a seriously planned contingency.)⁶⁷ But the scramble for alternative sites after he rejected Trinidad

eliminated the guerrilla option: the three roads and impenetrable swamp worked both ways and so it was impossible for 1,200 men to get out. In fact, a moment's thought would have shown a beachhead lock-in was a corollary of the site's advantages. But no one did think about it—or at least mention it.⁶⁸ If one assumes good faith, then the explanation is that Bissell, shifting from Trinidad to the Bay of Pigs, gave the president the better option he wanted by the criteria Kennedy specified publicly: A lost guerrilla escape was a minor change and so Bissell did not explicitly mention it. Possibly, if the "secure the beachhead and wait" scenario stalled, he assumed the naval task force in the area could be used. But he did not expect to fail, time was limited, and there were urgent and productive things to do rather than develop contingency plans to scuttle an operation which, if the president approved, and eliminating Castro now were a serious national objective, Kennedy would want to succeed.

The skeptical interpretation is simply that the CIA wanted the plan to go forward. The CIA never trained the men for guerrilla operations; thus, on the CIA's part, none of this talk was serious. They told the president that the Zapata swamp area had once been used by guerrillas, the truth but not "the whole truth" (the small pathways were unsuitable for more than a handful of men and Castro had helicopters that could hunt down men trying to escape). By such indirection they minimized the risk that a nervous president would bolt at the last minute.

This second interpretation now appears correct. According to the Taylor report, which I will review in the next chapter, officials had been encouraged to believe there was a viable guerrilla escape. If the president sensed, at some deeper level, that his CIA planners wanted his commitment but might not be entirely trustworthy in what they were telling him (and not telling him), his instincts were accurate. However, it is worth noting, for future reference, that Kennedy was not entirely candid with the CIA either. He placed great value on the guerrilla option, as did many of his own, non-Eisenhower appointees in the room. By not being forthright about his primary concern to be able readily to abandon their operation, the president was also stringing along the CIA, keeping up their morale: They got "the truth but not the whole truth" too.⁶⁹

Also, there was a conflict between roles. Bissell was assigned to develop, present, and defend the plan. He made the best case, subject to the public instructions of the president. In such a situation, the president needed skeptical experts he did not provide for himself.

Even if the president had the staff to ask the questions that needed to be asked, the task would have been difficult. Almost nothing was in writing (for security reasons). There were no briefing books to read and ponder, no systematic checklists comparing invasion sites by all the criteria developed over earlier meetings.

Officials the president might have relied upon, the Joint Chiefs of Staff, failed him. They did not know what he expected of them. They had proposed in writing, in January, that they be included in development of the military plans. The memorandum was apparently lost during the change of administrations; they were excluded.⁷⁰ Now, asked to comment, their review was limited to the logistics and training and to agreement that the initial landing would likely be successful. They did warn that secrecy was almost impossible and estimated the probability Castro knew an invasion was coming to be at least 85 percent.⁷¹ Kennedy did not specifically order them to review guerrilla or other escape options, and they did not do it. (The written account of the CIA plan they received at the last minute did not contain plans for a—nonexistent—guerrilla option.) As the invasion did fall apart, Kennedy's military adviser, General Lemnitzer (chairman of the Joint Chiefs), among others, still believed the men could escape "into the hills."⁷²

The gap between the images used by decision makers and the geography of the landing site illustrates a common source of difficulty in government policy, the tendency of bright men, new to a problem, to deal in "big think" abstractions, confidently, without their thought being grounded in a detailed appreciation of the situations in which plans will be implemented. The president "really didn't have a very good visual picture of the whole thing."⁷³ Kennedy probably relied on Bissell and Dulles to be responsible for details, and the Joint Chiefs to review the plan with more time and professional expertise than he could bring to second-guess them. Kennedy's ambivalence and growing inner doubts about the operation also probably kept him from internalizing all the details: he kept himself at a psychological distance. To his planners, the dictum of "no American involvement" was more personal than a public relations criterion: it was a metaphor of his own reservations.

7. *Adlai Stevenson believed (and gave an overly vigorous defense for) the cover story he delivered.*

Yes, Mr. Ambassador, yes, I'm sorry, but it's true. There is nothing more we can do. I'm afraid we've lost . . . No, we have nothing else to throw into it . . . Well, I'm sorry you're distressed. We all are . . . Yes, I'm sorry too that you weren't better informed . . . Well, good evening, Governor.

—Richard Bissell to
Adlai Stevenson⁷³

Stevenson's unrealistic belief is easily explained. They lied to him, and he did not expect he would be treated that way. Stevenson was misled, or explicitly lied to, three times. In early spring he suspected something was afoot; he came to Washington in March to express his alarm to Kennedy. Kennedy was evasive but assured him that whatever was being planned there would be no question of American involvement.

On Saturday, April 8, Kennedy sent two briefers (Tracy Barnes from the CIA and Arthur Schlesinger, Jr., from the White House) to New York to tell

Stevenson what would happen. Barnes did the briefing because Schlesinger missed his shuttle flight from National Airport and arrived an hour late. That he did so determined the character of what was said—and not said.

Barnes talked vaguely, in generalities: something would happen, it would “appear to be coming from the inside” of Cuba, there would be no American involvement, no one would leave from American soil. Essentially, Barnes gave a “broad brush” cover story. When pressed, Barnes lied and assured Stevenson there would be “nothing happening” while the General Assembly was in session.⁷⁴

Kennedy thought he had ordered more than this. His order in the Cabinet Room was to brief Stevenson “fully.” Adlai’s credibility was a national asset and nothing he should say in New York should be “less than the truth,” even if “it could not be the whole truth.”⁷⁵

That sounded good when Kennedy said it. But Barnes had to implement what were, in fact, contradictory orders. How could Stevenson provide a credible cover story without lying? Barnes had the privilege of working for a boss who wanted it both ways—and in Barnes’s understanding, Barnes had to give it to him.

So Tracy Barnes mumbled. He gave the “broad brush,” he talked around the point. Barnes gave Stevenson the model of what he *could* say sincerely and be credible: keep it a big picture, give general impressions, dance around. Just say there is no American involvement.

Why did Barnes lie to Stevenson about the invasion date? The likely reason is that Stevenson did not have a “need to know.” (In national security parlance, this phrase meant Stevenson could perform his assigned role whether or not he knew the information.) Barnes may have made a mistake on the spur of the moment. He *might* have said, “Adlai, the president has not decided . . .” but that would imply it *might* occur within a week. And that was critical information no prudent CIA official would reveal, certainly not in a United Nations embassy in New York, to an outsider and known critic, without specific order. Barnes may have lied, too, because he knew Stevenson opposed the operation and, being politically sophisticated, recognized Stevenson had not asked an idle question. If Barnes had said yes, it *would* happen while the General Assembly was meeting, then Stevenson would have officially found his open door to ask for detail, and to fly to Washington and argue against the operation, especially when he learned it was far more offensive than the plan Barnes had described. By saying No, denying anything would happen during the United Nations session, Barnes kept Stevenson neutralized unless the president wanted him actively involved and invited him to Washington, as the president would have done if he seriously wanted Stevenson to be involved.⁷⁶ Stevenson’s later anger came partly from specific lies in this briefing. But an implicit (and surely demeaning) message about his true place in foreign policy decisions would not have escaped Stevenson’s notice:

he was an outsider, kept at arm’s length in New York, and his “presidential” briefing gave him less truth than he would just have read in Szulc’s article in the *Times*.⁷⁷

The “need to know” bureaucratic code in national security affairs also led to the third incident of lying. When Stevenson called Washington to check the defector story, the State Department called the CIA—and the CIA lied to the assistant secretary of state who placed the call. In the CIA’s view an assistant secretary of state had no right (“need”) to know his part was a cover-up. A cover story was *better* if believed by its defenders: why uncautiously open the door to complication or entrust national security only to their acting ability? If the assistant secretary or Stevenson should have known, they would have been briefed by their bureaucratic superior (Rusk) who did know.

That last assumption, however, was inaccurate. Rusk was new, at least to this post in this administration. He had no expectation the CIA would lie to senior presidential appointees in his department. When the CIA said this defector was genuine, Rusk also believed it. (He thought *this* defector was genuine—he expected another defector might be the fake.)

The lie also was transmitted because Dean Rusk, in addition to being fooled, was in error about how the United Nations angle was to be handled. Ordinarily, the secretary of state would handle the U.N. issues. But the clear message to Rusk was that Stevenson was briefed and handled through special channels. Adlai Stevenson had been twice the Democratic Party’s presidential nominee. Since Kennedy had said publicly that Stevenson was to have “cabinet rank” in this administration, it seemed this earlier promise was being activated and Adlai was not Rusk’s subordinate in the operation. Kennedy, bypassing Rusk, had arranged that Stevenson be briefed through the CIA (Tracy Barnes) and his own White House staff (Arthur Schlesinger). There was no White House coordination, and everyone inferred someone else was taking care of it.⁷⁸

8. *The Cubans, the CIA, and Kennedy’s own advisers believed he would use American troops rather than accept failure.*

President Kennedy’s guidance was firm and consistent: there would be no direct American military involvement in this Cuban operation. To be certain the Cubans understood it, he sent three personal emissaries, Arthur Schlesinger, Jr., A. A. Berle, and Harvard Professor John Plank, to New York to see Dr. Miro Cardona. Returning to Washington, Schlesinger told Kennedy he thought Miro was shaken by their message and did not believe it. Kennedy called Bissell immediately to say that Miro must understand—and agree—or the invasion was off. Bissell sent Tracy Barnes to New York the same day. Barnes returned to report he had “formal assent” from Miro—but Barnes added that he doubted Miro believed the prohibition.⁷⁹

Taking considerable pains to be certain his message was received, the president acted with integrity to assure that the Cubans acted voluntarily and with-

out false hopes. In retrospect, integrity served him well: when the invasion did fail he was able to retain the public support of the leaders, despite private bitterness. But Kennedy was doing more. He wanted the Cubans to pass a test: did they *really* want to do this (and accept the risks) on their own, for their own ideals?⁸⁰

But the test did not work. No one believed Kennedy. The CIA and Kennedy's own advisers did not think he meant it. Miro did not believe him. The Cuban troops did not believe it.

The commonly accepted reason is that these men were too sophisticated. They relied upon past experience: Presidents and other politicians often speak for effect; later, as circumstances change, their pragmatic actions may differ from their earlier, verbal positions. They thought Kennedy talked tough so the invasion planners and the Cubans would get their acts together and accomplish the mission alone. But if American power and prestige were once committed, and American planes or troops were *really* needed to complete the job, then, they believed, he would act differently.

Of course this theory was also untestable. If you *asked* the president whether he had just told you the truth or was trying to manipulate you, he would have become angry and repeated himself. He would do that whether it was *really* the truth or something he merely wanted you to believe.

But senior CIA officials did not merely imagine, without plausible corroborating evidence, that Kennedy might use American forces. He accepted the U.S. naval escort task force they proposed: a task force which included seven destroyers, an aircraft carrier with jets, and an augmented marine assault battalion. In addition to this official task force, Kennedy was also aware another carrier, the USS *Boxer*, was stationed nearby: it was newly equipped to use "vertical envelopment" helicopter tactics. Not a great deal was made of the formidable size of the task force at the time, but men of the sophistication of Bissell and Dulles knew they provided the president with future options should he wish to use them. It was a reasonable assumption that Kennedy would have kept all American ships away from the island if he did not want those resources nearby.

Again, however, the theory was untestable. Sophisticated men, who understood the difference between current verbal statements and future policy contingencies, would recognize, almost subliminally, what was happening. It would be poorly serving the president to ask, directly and publicly, whether he wanted contingency resources. But for the president to say nothing allowed the interpretation that he had a deeper, ultimate commitment to success, that there were some scenarios where he might not rule out a later use for this American force. In reading and honoring the subtleties of what men of sophistication leave unsaid, Dulles and Bissell apparently misread Kennedy's simple, and persistent, lack of attention to details and his desire not to be "drawn in." Ostensibly, the ships were "escort," and Kennedy only said they should stay in international waters.⁸¹

It is also true that the American "noninvolvement" formulation could easily appear, to the CIA, not a true limit. It was a public relations guideline. The money, the guns, the planes, the training, the ideas — everything was American except the men who would do the fighting. The plan called for formal recognition of the liberation government seventy-two hours after the beachhead was established and they were flown in. After *that* the plan anticipated open involvement: They would drop the fig leaf and logistical and other support could pour in.⁸²

The message did not reach the Cuban soldiers in Guatemala for quite a different reason. CIA operatives lied, and they sent to Kennedy an ambiguous report at the last minute which falsely confirmed his belief that his conditions were understood and accepted.

The CIA men in Guatemala were caught in a bind by conflicting orders. They knew that to inform the Cubans of possible abandonment would destroy morale: the canopy of American power emboldened them. There have been later disputes about what the Cuban soldiers were told. It *may* be that no one ever *explicitly* lied to them. But it is well documented that the CIA produced atmospherics that were not the whole truth, a plethora of locker-room pep talk they knew people who were trusting, young, and innocent about the ways of the world would readily take as concrete commitments. "We're behind you all the way," was a typical assurance; "There will be a carrier offshore with blond-haired, blue-eyed Cuban pilots who don't speak Spanish . . . ;" "You're not alone. Others will be involved, too." "Pepe, when you hit the beaches, just keep walking, turn left, and you'll be in Havana," was said by an American commander to Pepe San Roman, and coming from an American he admired, he thought it meant America would be there to make it happen. In fact, most of the soldiers were under the impression they were part of a much larger invasion force, and many thought American troops would be fighting at other locations. But (security, of course) they did not ask to know details. It is absolutely clear that no one told the unvarnished truth: "If you get into trouble on the beaches, you're on your own. We're washing our hands of you."⁸³

There may have been another motive for the bravura assurances; they would have been a sophisticated counterintelligence strategy. So experienced an intelligence operative as Allen Dulles would likely assume Castro's agents would effect at least low-level penetration of such a large operation, widely known in Miami and Guatemala. As ultimate success depended on Castro's erroneous belief the invasion was not a Guatemala-sized token but many times larger than 1,200-1,400 men, and that the United States was involved and committed to its success, it is reasonable to conjecture that some of this talk was intentional.

But Kennedy understood his message had gotten through to the Cubans. Especially he was misled by the enthusiastic report of Col. Jack Hawkins, the CIA's ex-marine military commander, who traveled to Guatemala for a

last-minute inspection. Hawkins cabled that military readiness was high and the Brigade officers "enthusiastic . . . intelligent and motivated with a fanatical urge to begin battle. . . . The brigade officers do not expect help from the US armed forces."⁸⁴

Robert Kennedy later said this cable from Hawkins, more than any other factor, finally persuaded the president to go ahead.⁸⁵ Bureaucratically astute, well-timed, and well-phrased, it appeared to say exactly what this president wanted to hear: the picture of men with a "fanatical urge to begin," without any American military help, confirmed the United States to be truly in the support role he desired. (And it confirmed to Kennedy that he had acted with integrity, could pull out, and the operation "go guerrilla" without any breach of promise. He was covered.) Yet Hawkins was *not* confirming what Kennedy thought he said. Kennedy's stipulation was absolute: no aid, even if this caused the operation to fail. Hawkins meant there was no expectation of American military involvement if things went according to plan.

In a sense, Kennedy abandoned the Cubans in good faith. But the consequences, the bitterness of betrayal and disillusion, have been paid for over twenty years by most of the Cubans who served and survived.⁸⁶ The orchestrated misunderstandings were consequential: had the Cubans decided to go ahead, and believed Kennedy's limits, they would have been less passive and would have worried about, and independently reviewed, their contingency plans. Kennedy might then have effected a timely naval rescue to prevent the costly appearance of dramatic defeat and long months of negotiations to ransom the prisoners. After the Joint Chiefs signed off on the CIA plan, Marine Commandant David Shoup lay awake at night worrying about the welfare of 1,200 men put ashore to face 20,000 with no escape route. Kennedy might have worried, too, if he realized how much they depended on him. Over the two and a half years he still had to live, his conscience might have been clearer.

9. *Kennedy and his advisers did not adequately consider what would happen after the beachhead was secure.*

The Bay of Pigs was not a mad scheme. It was bold, perhaps unlikely. But it had a rationale and was based on an established track record. If the president desired—and vital American national interest required—a low-cost way to overthrow Castro now, without having to use large numbers of American troops in hard-fought battles at a later time, the CIA's invasion plan, coupled with its assassination plan, was—in main outline—probably the best that could have been intelligently devised. Could it have worked?

The answer, I think, is that it could not have worked the way Kennedy hoped. There was not a realistic chance of secrecy for the American sponsorship. Not ninety miles from Florida, with the hottest news story of the year about to break and a public controversy to spur the competitive instincts of reporters. Szule had been luckier, the *New York Times* bolder than other papers. But *New Republic*, *U.S. News & World Report*, and the Miami news-

papers, among others, already knew the basic facts and were persuaded to delay publishing only by conditional arguments of the need to preserve secrecy before the invasion was launched. And there were enough knowledgeable people whose convictions were opposed to the operation and whose standing with personal constituencies was at stake—Bowles, Stevenson, Fulbright, Reston—to be sure the story got out and the president felt their outrage at the abuse he had done to their ideals for America.

The meetings with the president were filled with the pragmatic, easier, less contentious, and activist questions, "Could it work?" "How do we make it work?" Few people asked Senator Fulbright's question, "*Should* it be done?" Part of the answer to this question of "should" involves personal values and different conceptions of Latin American political development and international relations. But part of the answer to "should" rests on an appraisal of the probable scenarios to be encountered, not merely the desire that the operation succeed and Castro disappear.

The CIA's predicted scenario, Cuba equals Guatemala, was unlikely. Had there been one massive and fully successful air strike (no prior warning to trigger police roundups), and the B-26s been moved to the beachhead strip, the beaches probably could have been held indefinitely, given American logistical support and continuing shelling and bombing along the built-up causeways of the three access roads. It might have stuck there. What would Kennedy have done then, without a guerrilla escape?

Since Castro expected the Guatemala model, and assuming assassination plans failed, it is unlikely he would have surrendered. At best, even if others tried for a negotiated settlement to stop the B-26 bombing raids, he would likely have moved to the mountains to continue the type of guerrilla warfare he had practiced against Batista. (There is indirect evidence he had such contingency plans.)⁸⁷ Even if 10% of his military and armed militia were loyal, he would have 25,000 men with him, and aid from a significant portion of that 75% of the population the CIA thought would not support their "liberation," and at least some of whom deeply resented America's past interventions.⁸⁸ It could have been Vietnam five years early.

There would not have been a quick or antiseptic victory. Kennedy's expected mass uprising could have produced civil war. Castro would have been fighting for survival, as would his military commanders and local political leaders, who could not have expected to retain power. Castro had a militia of about 200,000, well armed:⁸⁹ unlike Arbenz, Castro had already widely distributed arms to the populace, and both the CIA and Joint Chiefs knew it. Hundreds or thousands of deaths, mounting day by day, were not implausible. By the CIA's best scenario it would have gone for a week, probably several weeks. And journalists could have hired boats from Florida to cover the war and shown the increasing carnage to the world, and to Americans, on dinner-hour television. Yet Kennedy did not stop to imagine—or apparently ask for esti-

mates – during all of the sophisticated discussions, how many thousands might die, on both sides, if he said Yes.

But, deferring any plan for an end game to see, first, what developed, he likely would have faced serious consequences, the details of which he had not begun to imagine. His liberal constituents would surely have turned querulous. Even if he had won, the price of success would have been a specter of blood haunting his administration for the rest of its days.

In retrospect, then, one might say: Kennedy did not make a mistake after all. It turned out for the *best*. He could not have cancelled, he was trapped by the disposal problem. It would have been disastrous to press forward militarily from the beachhead. The best solution was the simple guerrilla “disappearance” of the Cubans Kennedy counted on. Without it, scuttling the operation on the beaches was the best thing he could have done.

Perhaps a revisionist historian, with new evidence, will someday argue that Kennedy shrewdly planned it this way. I think not, although he likely expected, when he said “go ahead,” to use his guerrilla escape quickly and write off the operation unless a dramatic public uprising quickly followed. The best evidence against manipulative scheming is that Kennedy, had he thought through his options, probably could have gotten out, albeit with a short-term cost, more easily than it seemed.

The key was the Cuban politicians. Eisenhower’s endorsement had always depended on the CIA’s production of a credible government. “Boys,” he said to Dulles and Bissell, “if you don’t intend to go through with this, let’s stop talking about it.”²¹ But until mid-March there was no liberation government. The exiled soldiers were mistrustful and suspicious of the politicians (the soldiers were there for ideals, and the usual variety of other motives that take people to war, but not from loyalty to the politicians who would return to power). Kennedy might have cancelled the operation and, if necessary, blamed the failure of the Cuban politicians to unite while an operation might still be conducted. He might have ordered background briefings to convey the message that the operation could not have succeeded without Hungarian-style carnage. That overt American invasion to change the balance of power precipitously in isolated Cuba could produce the danger of a tit-for-tat Soviet response in the growing Berlin crisis was a consideration responsible leaders of foreign policy opinion – in these years, a European-oriented New York network – would likely have accepted.

It would not have been an elegant solution. But if Kennedy wanted out, it had the sustaining virtue of being based on the truth. Yet the enduring reality, amidst all the questions that were not asked and his own ambivalences, was that Kennedy did not want to get out: he wanted to succeed, if possible at acceptable risk and certainly to try if the political cost of a failure could be minimal.

NOTES

1. I will not discuss separately the failure to estimate the domestic and international costs of failure because it was derivative: this mistake (6), plus the secrecy assumption (3), forestalled analysis of such costs. See the later discussion of political costs and the quality of decision making in chapter 6.
2. H. Morgenthau, “To Intervene or Not to Intervene” *Foreign Affairs* 45 (April 1967): 425–436, p. 431.
3. A. Schlesinger, *A Thousand Days: John F. Kennedy in the White House* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1965) reviews Cuban issues, *passim*.
4. P. Wyden, *Bay of Pigs: The Untold Story* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1979), pp. 31–32; E. Hunt, *Give Us This Day* (New Rochelle, NY: Arlington House, 1973) provides a personal account.
5. Wyden, *Bay of Pigs*, p. 114.
6. “Noble” is a pseudonym.
7. Wyden, *Bay of Pigs*, p. 116.
8. Schlesinger, *A Thousand Days*, p. 245.
9. Wyden, *Bay of Pigs*, p. 118.
10. *Ibid.*, pp. 207–208.
11. Hunt, *Give Us This Day*, p. 81. An assessment which also concludes that the Cuban politicians were further to the right than White House propaganda chose to describe is R. Stebbins, *The U.S. in World Affairs, 1961* (New York: Council on Foreign Relations, 1962), p. 312: “Comparatively conservative elements that reflected the interests of the Cuban propertied classes and wanted to undo most of the Castro economic and social program would seem to have been favored. . . .”
12. L. Mosley, *Dulles: A Biography of Eleanor, Allen, and John Foster Dulles and Their Family Network* (New York: Dial, 1978), p. 467; Wyden, *Bay of Pigs*, p. 116.
13. Schlesinger euphemistically calls this an “arrest.” CIA agents have no “arrest” powers. Schlesinger, *A Thousand Days*, p. 236.
14. Wyden, *Bay of Pigs*, p. 115.
15. Schlesinger, *A Thousand Days*, p. 245.
16. *Ibid.*, pp. 229–231, 243–244.
17. State Department pressure also eliminated plans for massive leaflet drops to distribute pro-liberation propaganda over Cuba. Their opposition was on the same grounds, reducing “noise level.”
18. Wyden, *Bay of Pigs*, chapter 4. Note that these calculations interacted primarily with the self-image decision makers wished to maintain and their estimates of how the press might “play” the story. Castro and the Soviet Union already knew America was behind the operation.
19. Wyden, *Bay of Pigs*, p. 170. Note that $N = 16$ was the entire force. This suggests Dulles and Bissell only respected the State Department’s concern for a “low visibility” first strike rhetorically and, as the controlled operational details, privately decided to make no change to the original plan. Bissell’s actual plan was to hit Castro’s air force twice, with everything he had, rather than once. Wyden, *Bay of Pigs*, overlooks this deception.
20. Kennedy had also sent word, indirectly, that he planned to make Bissell CIA director after Dulles’s retirement. The implication was that if Bissell made good on the Bay of Pigs, there would be a reward for serving the president well.
21. Wyden, *Bay of Pigs*, pp. 193–194.
22. *Ibid.*, pp. 194–195.

23. K. Meyer and T. Szulc, *The Cuban Invasion: The Chronicle of a Disaster* (New York: Praeger, 1962), p. 124, describe Kennedy as "shaken" by the force of Stevenson's anger. Stevenson was a proud man, and his standing among Democratic Party liberals would have given added weight to his reaction if he had resigned over the abuse of his credibility. Later, during the Cuban missile crisis, Stevenson was to be "set up" for the public by White House leaks scornful of his "soft" line. The virulence against Stevenson may have reflected strong feelings about his earlier last-minute influence on a decision many thought gutted the Bay of Pigs operation.
24. Wyden, *Bay of Pigs*, p. 197.
25. *Ibid.*, p. 199.
26. *Ibid.*, pp. 196-197, correctly reports CIA subordinates blamed Cabell for initiating a phone call to double-check his final authorization, thereby allowing discussion and a last-minute cancellation decision. (They observed only that he entered his office after stating this intention.) In fact, Cabell received the call from Bundy at that time, the result of earlier consultations among Rusk, Kennedy, and Bundy that were probably triggered by Stevenson's cable. The fury directed at Cabell later that night apparently stemmed in part from the belief he had caused the cancellation when he should have kept his mouth shut.
27. *Ibid.*, pp. 199-200.
28. *Ibid.*, p. 200.
29. Likely the CIA's own operatives were the radio specialists who would use Guatemala-style tricks against Castro's military communications. There was no plan to alert the Cuban underground of the invasion; past experience showed it was penetrated and unable to keep secrets.
30. Wyden, *Bay of Pigs*, pp. 205-206.
31. Presumably to dramatize the point.
32. J. DeRivera, *The Psychological Dimension of Foreign Policy* (Chicago, IL: Charles E. Merrill, 1968).
33. See also the discussion of liberal activism and larger-than-life drama in L. Etheredge, "Strong Imaginative Systems: The Liberal Activist Case" (Photocopy, 1983).
34. Wyden, *Bay of Pigs*, p. 190.
35. It is unlikely McNamara would have acted aggressively so early in a new administration when his department was not a "principal" in the operation and he had been cut out of the decision.
36. Wyden, *Bay of Pigs*, pp. 199-200.
37. *Ibid.*, pp. 204-206.
38. *Ibid.*
39. One of the puzzles is this assessment of Soviet conduct. Were they so easily fooled or manipulated? American policymakers, for example, had no inhibition against forceful challenges to Latin American governments (Guatemala, Cuba) even without the provocation of Soviet military action. Nor did the Czech coup in 1948, or the crushing of Hungarian resistance in 1956 in the name of the Soviet's "liberation" puppet government, deter American policymakers. The Soviets might only play tit for tat (no "overt" invasion of Berlin if there was no "overt" American invasion of Cuba) but there would surely be effects. What Kennedy imagined these would be is unclear.
40. So far as Castro's information was concerned, the president need not have been concerned about leaks. Castro was well informed about American preparations, as indeed he had every incentive to be. Miami was an open community, and his agents there kept him abreast of the recruitment drive. He knew of the Guate-

- mala base, and protest against American-planned invasion was the reason Dr. Roa, the Cuban Foreign Minister, was in New York at the United Nations. Assuming high CIA officials were correct in their assessment of a high-level KGB "mole" in the agency during these years, Castro may also have learned details through this route. The "hunt for the mole," and the chains of logical inference by which his presence was deduced, make a fascinating story, not least because it shows how increasing levels of sophistication by actors and analysts can make reality indeterminate and produce paralysis. The issue is a digression here; the CIA specialist at the *Newsweek* Washington bureau has produced a well-informed account. See Martin, *Wilderness of Mirrors*.
41. W. Hinckle and W. Turner, *The Fish is Red: The Story of the Secret War Against Castro* (New York: Harper & Row, 1981) review the conduct of the press. The *Nation* mailed (and hand delivered) many copies of its original story before the *New York Times*, via the route described by Wyden, picked up the story. See also R. Hilton, "Commentary: The Press and the Bay of Pigs" *World Affairs Report* 12 (1982): 151-152.
 42. H. Dinerstein, *The Making of a Missile Crisis: October, 1962* (Baltimore, MD: Johns Hopkins Univ. Press, 1976), p. 114.
 43. See Hinckle and Turner, *The Fish is Red*, p. 68. The *New York Times* reporter had earlier visited Guatemala but only filed a routine denial provided by its president. He was now instructed explicitly to "get out into the field" to check the story, a slap on the wrist from the head office which produced the map he included with his story.
 44. There is a partial defense for other papers; expatriate communities are well known to be alive with rumors of plots and plans to return.
 45. Wyden, *Bay of Pigs*, pp. 142-146.
 46. *Ibid.*, p. 143.
 47. Wyden, *Bay of Pigs*, pp. 153-155; Hinckle and Turner, *The Fish is Red*.
 48. Wyden, *Bay of Pigs*, p. 155.
 49. *Ibid.*, p. 142.
 50. See, for example, R. Roa, "Charges Delivered Against the United States Before the U.N. Security Council" *New York Times* (January 5, 1961), p. 5.
 51. Schlesinger, *A Thousand Days*, p. 293.
 52. U.S. Central Intelligence Agency. Board of National Estimates. Sherman Kent, Chairman. "Memorandum for the Director: Why the Cuban Revolution of 1958 Led to Cuba's Alignment with the USSR" (February 21, 1961) (Photocopy).
 53. *Ibid.*
 54. This theory of Castro's emotional imbalance is where the idea to "push him over the edge," via chemicals to make his beard fall out mysteriously, originated. It would have been a heroic act of political "sophistication" for Castro to understand this as an expression of how deeply the United States cared about, and wanted, good relations with him, one way or another. At a high enough level, of course, that is what it was: a desire, with a vengeance, for good relations.
 55. This also, as a general principle, may serve to keep intelligence estimation more independent.
 56. Recall, however, that the plan was never to attempt a military victory.
 57. M. Taylor, *Operation ZAPATA: The Ultra-Sensitive Report and Testimony of the Board of Inquiry on the Bay of Pigs*. (Introduction by L. Aguilar.) (Frederick, MD: Aletheia Books, 1981). Prepared from the sanitized and declassified original report of 1961. See p. 20. U.S. Senate, Committee on Foreign Relations, *Executive Sessions: Historical Series* 13(1) (Washington, DC: Government Printing Office,

- 1984). The hearings were originally held in 1961.
58. L. Mosley, *Dulles*, p. 469, quoting William Bundy.
 59. Note that the Schlesinger and Sorensen accounts omit the Guatemala strategy and thus make the operation appear less intelligent than it was.
 60. JCS documents made a routine distinction between initial success (the beachhead) and ultimate success (political). See U.S. Department of Defense, Joint Chiefs of Staff, Memoranda for the Secretary of Defense: JCSM 57-61, JCSM-146-61, JCSM-166-61. (Photocopies)
 61. Their belief that such rhetoric had been crucial in the presidential election likely encouraged this enthusiasm.
 62. This is important to emphasize. There were about 5,000 active guerrillas and a badly performing economy. No one could be sure what might develop: Wyden, *Bay of Pigs* excoriates the CIA for "waffling" and, I believe, misses the point that a decided judgment probably was impossible. "How," as Richard Bissell asked, "could you possibly tell?"
 63. Wyden, *Bay of Pigs*, p. 99.
 64. *Ibid.*
 65. The question, however, was primarily of *will*: whether these forces would surrender readily, especially if the United States was perceived to be the sponsor of the invasion.
 66. If one takes the highest number mentioned, about 25,000 active supporters, and even if one assumed them all to be within the military forces, 90% of the military would not be active supporters.
 67. Such training ended in November; although it is not clear how crucial specific guerrilla training might have been, there would be major tactical and logistical implications requiring pre-planning to effect an escape. Intense tactical air support, for example, might have opened the eastern road, and additional vehicles would have made escape to the mountains possible quickly.
 68. Reportedly there were small footpaths, but the men were not equipped with maps and the route was unusable by large numbers of men, especially if they were hunted by the 20,000 Castro troops the CIA also estimated would be deployed along the three roads.
 69. In sexual imagery: if he could cut his losses and abandon the operation at any time via a guerrilla escape, Kennedy had the CIA "by the balls," and the CIA may not have liked that idea.
 70. Taylor, *Operation ZAPATA*, p. 8.
 71. *Ibid.*, p. 10.
 72. Wyden, *Bay of Pigs*, p. 271.
 73. Telephone conversation reported in J. Smith, *Portrait of a Cold Warrior: Second Thoughts of a Top CIA Agent* (New York: Ballantine, 1981), p. 340.
 74. Wyden, *Bay of Pigs*, pp. 155-158 details the Stevenson briefing story.
 75. Wyden, *Bay of Pigs*, p. 156.
 76. Likely this was a crucial signal to Barnes that Stevenson was to be briefed as a bit player, not as a decision maker.
 77. Also, he had genuine reason to be concerned, as the General Assembly was scheduled to debate Cuban charges on what turned out to be D-Day. The *New York Times* stories were making it increasingly difficult for him to mount a credible defense in the forthcoming debate.
 78. It may also have seemed impolitic to Rusk to assert his formal authority to supplant the White House channel he knew the president had ordered.
 79. He said so in the Cabinet Room, many times. After the major meeting on April

- 4 he met privately with Rusk, Dulles, and McNamara to stress this ruling: it was likely from this meeting that the detailed rules of engagement issued to the naval task force also originated. After Miro's "formal" assent, the matter apparently rested there, with nothing further done. Wyden, *Bay of Pigs*, pp. 166-168; Schlesinger, *A Thousand Days*, p. 265.
80. Kennedy may also have been probing to see if he could scuttle the mission by making such a hard line demand.
 81. They also provided the communication to Washington.
 82. To the CIA, if noninvolvement were *too* convincing, the invasion was lost: If Kennedy grasped the logic of their plan, he had to recognize that 1,200 men could never defeat 250,000 unless, along with the other aspects of the psychological warfare, Castro and the Cubans believed absolutely that the United States was sponsoring this and would not let it fail.
 83. These conversations are discussed in H. Johnson, *The Bay of Pigs: The Leaders' Story of Brigade 1506* (New York: Norton, 1964), p. 68, et passim, and by Wyden, *Bay of Pigs*, pp. 190-193 et passim. Later, the American in charge of training was also asked by the Taylor Commission why the men had received no further training in guerrilla warfare, since this was the fallback contingency. He felt the men would have mutinied as they believed a frontal assault was essential.
 84. One suspects Dulles's "tracraft" in the timely arrival of a cable that could be distributed to the White House. Hawkins was scheduled to fly back to Washington and would normally have dictated a report there. See Wyden, *Bay of Pigs*, p. 169.
 85. *Ibid.*
 86. The Cubans have also been further used, rather cynically, for mere harassments never seriously designed for the liberation they were willing to risk their lives to achieve.
 87. Wyden, *Bay of Pigs*, pp. 103-108, 179.
 88. American policymakers seemed obsessed by the belief that such past experiences made no difference and America would be welcomed as a benefactor. When American policymakers speak of "foreign" interference in Latin America they mean "not United States'."
 89. In Guatemala the military was centralized and arms not widely distributed among the populace.
 90. Quoted in Wyden, *Bay of Pigs*, p. 31.