

John F. Kennedy & Cuba

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President John F. Kennedy's policy toward Cuba on two fronts, the "Bay of Pigs" fiasco and "Operation Mongoose," demonstrate a reckless leadership style that, to me, make him our "most overrated president."

To understand the political significance that Cuba held for Kennedy, it is necessary to review the 1960 presidential campaign. Running against then Vice-President Richard Nixon, Kennedy had sought to paint the Eisenhower administration as "soft on Communism," singling out its policy toward Cuba as "an incredible history of blunder, inaction, retreat, and failure." He criticized Ike's trade embargo as "too little, too late." He had also charged that "for six years before (dictator Fidel) Castro came to power, the Republicans did absolutely nothing to stop the rise of communism in Cuba. Our ambassador repeatedly warned the Republicans of mounting danger. But the warning was ignored...." (Clinch, 163) The Democratic candidate went even further by stating that anti-Castro "fighters for freedom" had received no military or economic support from the United States, and implied that under a Kennedy administration, such aid might be forthcoming. (Thompson, 101-102) John Kennedy, in Arthur Schlesinger's words, "knew the supreme importance of a first impression and was determined to create a picture of drive, purpose and hope." (Schlesinger, 214) Hence, it is possible that Kennedy was looking toward the political benefits of ousting Castro from power as a decisive way of proving this point, should he be successful in his drive for the White House.

After his election, President Kennedy was formally briefed on CIA plans to overthrow Castro, which had already been approved, in general, by the Eisenhower administration. Kennedy insisted that invasion plans must not include direct U.S. military involvement, and must be carried out as inconspicuously as possible, preferably at night, seriously hampering prospects for its success. (Reeves,

71) For this reason, the CIA changed the invasion site to the Bay of Pigs. In late January of 1961, Kennedy's Joint Chiefs of Staff reviewed the CIA plan and concluded that it suffered from a lack of adequate intelligence information, and could only succeed if accompanied by a "substantial popular uprising or substantial (U.S. military) follow-on forces." (Giglio, 51) Yet Kennedy and his new advisors -- Secretary of Defense McNamara, Secretary of State Rusk, and National Security Advisor Bundy -- approved the plan while failing to ask critical questions, such as whether the Bay of Pigs, being surrounded by swamps, was the best place from which to launch an invasion, or if the popular uprising against Castro promised by the CIA would actually materialize. (Giglio, 53)

President Kennedy also ignored the objections of others. Senator J. William Fulbright, chairman of the Senate Foreign Relations Committee, warned that an invasion would violate U.S. law as well as several OAS (Organization of American States) treaties, adding that such an act would be "wildly out of proportion to the threat." Undersecretary of State Chester Bowles was against any hasty moves, Ambassador to India John Kenneth Galbraith cautioned against "adventurism," and special advisor to the president Arthur Schlesinger feared a protracted stalemate. Former Secretary of State Dean Acheson, one of the few outsiders Kennedy consulted, referred to the size of the proposed invasion force and remarked that he did "not think it necessary to call in Price, Waterhouse to discover that 1,500 Cubans aren't as good as 25,000 Cubans." (Giglio, 53-54). In addition, Kennedy's "penchant for informality and reduced institutional checks created a situation where reduced bureaucratic safeguards existed." (Giglio, 55) At this early stage of his administration, JFK was evidently uninterested in seeking advice from, or engendering debate within, his cabinet. A passage from Richard Reeves' *President Kennedy* is shockingly illustrative:

"What do you think?' the President said, looking around the table. He was becoming impatient. His fingers were beginning to move on the table. 'Yes or no,' he said.

"They all said yes, sort of, and quickly, knowing the President wanted to get out of there Kennedy was too impatient to go all around the table, so three or four men never had to put their opinions on the line. Rusk's answer was not clear, and the military men tried to emphasize that this was a CIA thing, none of their doing....

"Adolf A. Berle, a State Department specialist on Latin America since Roosevelt's days, began a longer analysis but was cut off by the President, 'Adolph, you haven't voted!'

"Mr. President,' Berle said, 'there has to be a confrontation with Castro sooner or later, so... I say let 'er rip!' " (Reeves, 81-82)

What is perhaps stranger still is that such plans continued despite the fact that an imminent U.S. invasion had been "common conversation all over Latin America and in the United Nations," according to Treasury Secretary C. Douglas Dillon, who attended the meeting described above. Kennedy replied that this didn't bother him; he was more concerned about hiding U.S. involvement. (Reeves, 82)

In addition, the supposedly "secret" invasion plans were hardly secret to anyone who closely followed the news. As far back as January 10, 1961, even before Kennedy took office, *The New York Times* ran a front-page story headlined, "U.S. HELPS TRAIN ANTI-CASTRO FORCE AT SECRET GUATEMALAN BASE." (Reeves, 70) Arthur Schlesinger, lunching with *U.S. News and World Report* correspondent Harold Handleman on April 1, 1961, was surprised to hear the reporter recite many details from the CIA's allegedly "Top Secret" invasion plan. (Reeves, 83) The Kennedy administration managed to kill a piece about the proposed invasion due to be published in *The New Republic*, but another story ("ANTI-CASTRO UNITS TRAINED TO FIGHT AT FLORIDA BASES") made page-one news in *The New York Times*, also in early April of 1961. Even CBS news had reported that an invasion plan was "in its final stages." (Reeves, 84) If the U.S. invasion was such an open secret, why didn't President Kennedy abort the mission?

At a press conference held on April 12, Kennedy sought to quash rumors of an invasion in no uncertain terms:

"I want to say that *there will be not be, under any circumstances, an intervention in Cuba by the United States armed forces* (italics added). The government will do everything it possibly can... to make sure that there are *no Americans involved in any actions inside Cuba...* (italics added)

"The basic issue in Cuba is not one between the United States and Cuba. It is between the Cubans and themselves...." (Thompson, 117)

Despite this flat denial, Kennedy proceeded with his invasion plans. The day before the invasion, however, he canceled a scheduled air strike on Castro's air fields, and repeatedly refused to provide air cover for the exiles as the offensive got underway. By April 19, the "invasion" was over. Most of the exiles had been captured, and there was no popular uprising against Castro.

Why did Kennedy allow the CIA to train and equip the exiles but reject direct U.S. military involvement to aid them in the form of air strikes and troops? I would argue that political calculations were paramount: at his April 12 news conference, Kennedy had pledged there would be no overt U.S. military intervention in Cuba, using language that left little wiggle-room for fudging the issue later on.

Had he ordered air strikes or committed troops, and had there been serious American casualties, those words, inevitably, would have been thrown back in his face. Then again, as his conversation with Dwight Eisenhower in the aftermath of the incident seems to suggest (Reeves, 102-104), maybe Kennedy thought he could get away with it without any domestic political cost whatsoever.

In any event, as Theodore Sorenson's writes in *Kennedy*, JFK felt that "disapproval of the (invasion) plan would be a show of weakness inconsistent with his general stance." (Sorenson, 297) Kennedy elucidated his "general stance" toward Cuba in the 1960 election, and that *political* stance, I believe, is responsible for Kennedy's initial approval of the CIA proposal. Obviously, the blunders that occurred later were not all of his own making. Still, as in any administration, the final responsibility must rest with the president.

Instead of abandoning his designs on Cuba, however, President Kennedy continued to carry out extremely provocative policies toward the tiny Latin American country, policies that may have directly led to the Cuban missile crisis of October, 1962. According to author Robert Smith Thompson, only days after the Bay of Pigs failure, President Kennedy authorized another covert CIA plan to overthrow Castro, "Operation Mongoose." (Thompson, 122) Operating mainly out of Miami, by 1962 the plan included approximately four hundred Americans, two thousand Cubans, and an annual budget of \$50 million. Activities ranged from attempts to sabotage the Cuban economy to infiltration of CIA agents and weapons into Cuba. (Giglio, 190) In addition, early 1962 saw the Kennedy administration enact a trade embargo against Cuba, successfully lobby to ban Cuba from the Organization of American States, and authorize extensive military exercises in the Caribbean during April, which revolved around the hypothetical scenario of liberating an island from a dictator named "Ortsac" (Castro spelled backwards). (Giglio, 190) According to authors Thompson and Reeves, JFK discussed the possibility of assassinating Castro with several people (Thompson, 134; Reeves, 264-265), while Attorney General Robert Kennedy also pledged in a January 19, 1962 meeting at the Justice Department that "no time, money, effort, or manpower be spared" in precipitating "the overthrow of Castro's regime." (Thompson, 137)

In a National Security memo dated February 20, 1962, General Edward Lansdale, the man Kennedy picked to head Mongoose (Reeves, 263), devised a six point plan for invading Cuba (Thompson, 140), and in another memo on August 14, 1962, Lansdale referred, on paper, to the "liquidation of (Cuban) leaders." (Reeves, 336) Secretary of Defense McNamara had also discussed assassinating Castro

(Reeves, 337). On August 23, 1962, President Kennedy issued (but did not write) National Security Action Memo NSAM-181, which essentially "signaled that he was prepared to invade Cuba." (Reeves, 343) Yet at a press conference six days later, Kennedy responded to mounting Republican demands to "do something about Castro" by stating that "it would be a mistake to invade Cuba." (Reeves, 344)

On September 7, 1962, President Kennedy requested congressional approval to authorize the call up of roughly 150,000 Ready Reserve troops for active duty, and "welcomed a congressional resolution sanctioning the use of force to protect the hemisphere against Cuban aggression." (Giglio, 191) On October 1, 1962, Secretary of Defense McNamara authorized preparation for a blockade and air strikes against Cuba. (Thompson, 172) It is unclear whether JFK knew about McNamara's directive, Robert Smith Thompson writes, but on October 3, he did urge his Secretary of Defense and Joint Chiefs to step up plans for an air strike against Cuba and to "wargame" its "effectiveness." (Thompson, 172) From October 10 through 12, military airlift operations went into "high gear" in Key West, and the Joint Chiefs ordered the transfer of a marine brigade from the West Coast to the East. (Thompson, 174) Was the Kennedy administration actually preparing to invade Cuba a second time?

The CIA's intensifying subversive efforts, in conjunction with the provocative actions of the Kennedy administration toward Cuba, prompted numerous Soviet warnings in September that an American invasion would mean war. (Giglio, 191) Indeed, the Kennedy administration's approval of the Bay of Pigs invasion and actions throughout 1962 may have led Soviet Premier Nikita Khrushchev to gamble on placing missiles in Cuba. "(Castro) hasn't much military equipment, so he asked us to supply some, *but only for defense*" (italics added), Khrushchev told a Kennedy administration official. "However, if you attack Cuba, that would create an entirely different situation. It is unthinkable, of course, that a tiny nation like Cuba would ever attack the United States." (Thompson, 166) Given all the information outlined above, therefore, it is more than possible that it was not Khrushchev, but Kennedy -- through the belligerent covert and overt policies toward Cuba that he initiated or approved -- who was largely responsible for creating the Cuban missile crisis that brought the world to the brink of nuclear war.

In light of his reckless conduct in this matter, and his mishandling of the Bay of Pigs affair, it is my opinion that President John F. Kennedy is our "most overrated president." In one instance, Kennedy badly bungled an illegal invasion plan that he had not initiated; in another, he consciously chose to antagonize and isolate Castro, and may well have sought to overthrow and assassinate him. The

consequences of these actions might have conceivably led to World War III. To me, they bespeak neither capable nor ethical presidential leadership.

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