

The Politics of Misinformation: John F. Kennedy and Failure at the Bay of Pigs

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"I have made a tragic mistake. Not only were our facts in error, but our policy was wrong because the premises on which it was built were wrong," President John F. Kennedy told advisor Clark Clifford in late April 1961 following the failure of a covert operation designed to overthrow the Communist dictatorship of Fidel Castro in Cuba.¹ The Bay of Pigs was planned meticulously, but, as expressed by President Kennedy, failed miserably. Two major factors contributed to the failure of the Bay of Pigs invasion: the inaccurate information provided to President Kennedy by his advisors, which led him to believe that the operation would be a success, in addition to Kennedy's campaign promise to do something about Cuba, which led him to approve the first plan that crossed his desk.

When John Kennedy officially entered the 1960 presidential race on 20 January 1960, many doubts were held about his ability to lead the United States in time of Cold War and Communist influence. Throughout his Congressional career, Kennedy was thought to be soft on Communism. Cuba was a so-called four-letter word in the 1960s and represented the Cold War in America's backyard. Americans believed that Communists in Cuba, just ninety miles from the coast of Florida, posed a grave threat to the entire hemisphere and pressured Eisenhower, and later Kennedy, to act.

Kennedy felt that the Eisenhower administration had let the Cuban problem fall by the wayside. He said, "if the Eisenhower administration had given 'the fiery young rebel a warmer welcome in his hour of triumph, especially on his trip to this country,' Castro might not have gone over to the Communists."² Kennedy pledged to do something about the Cuba and the Communist influence of Fidel

Castro if he was elected President. Cuba was a point of controversy throughout the 1960 campaign, earning recognition at each of the four televised debates between Kennedy and Republican candidate Richard Nixon. In the third debate, Kennedy took the Cuban issue right to Nixon, saying, "Mr. Nixon would add a guarantee to islands 5 miles off the coast of the Republic of China, when he's never really protested the Communists seizing Cuba, 90 miles off the coast of the United States."³ Kennedy believed that Cuba would only be the start of problems in Latin America if nothing was done about the Communist government. In the fourth, and final, debate of the campaign, Kennedy declared,

We're going to have to try to provide closer ties to associate ourselves with the great desire of these people for a better life if we're going to prevent Castro's influence from spreading throughout all of Latin America. His influence is strong enough today to prevent us from getting the other countries of Latin America to join with us in economic quarantine. His influence is growing, mostly because this administration has ignored Latin America. You yourself said, Mr. Vice President, a month ago, that if we had provided the kind of economic aid 5 years ago that we are now providing, we might never have had Castro. Why didn't we?⁴

This campaign rhetoric would later lead to Kennedy's pressure to approve the first Cuban plan to cross his desk following his inauguration.

In the months between his election and inauguration, President-elect Kennedy met with President Dwight Eisenhower and his advisors for the traditional changing of the guard, pre-inauguration briefings. It was at this time that Kennedy first formally learned of the impending

invasion of Cuba, although he had suspected an attack had been in the works for some time. Travelling to the Kennedy compound in Palm Beach, Florida on 18 November 1960, Allen Dulles, Director of the Central Intelligence Agency, and Richard Bissell, Assistant Director, outlined the impending invasion to the President-elect. "While . . . from this moment Kennedy harbored grave doubts regarding the size, daring, and concealability of the CIA invasion plan, Kennedy still gave the impression that he generally agreed with it, pending his final official approval."⁵ Kennedy was informed of the plan for the invasion to be organized by the CIA, overseen by the White House and carried out by Cuban refugees living and training in the United States. Dulles and Bissell briefed the President-elect a second time on the twenty-seventh of November⁶ and he was formally briefed by President Eisenhower himself on the sixth of December.⁷

Both Kennedy and Eisenhower knew that the president had not given Cuba a high priority in his administration. However, once Castro was discovered to be Communist, Eisenhower and his advisors, in addition to the American people, felt something must be done about the red presence in the Western Hemisphere, and Eisenhower had entrusted the planning of the mission to Dulles and Bissell. Eisenhower revealed to Kennedy that this invasion had been in the planning stages for nearly a year, since March 1960, and that he had appropriated funding of \$13 million for the project in August of that year.⁸ President Eisenhower advised Kennedy to go ahead with the plan, "mak[ing] it clear that the project is going very well and that it is the new administration's responsibility to do whatever is necessary to bring it to a successful conclusion."⁹ Eisenhower advocated his support even if it meant going public with the invasion. He told Kennedy, "We cannot let the present government there go on."¹⁰ Believing that he fully understood what was being intended, Kennedy thanked Eisenhower for the information and prepared to take control of the highest office in the land.

Inauguration Day dawned cold and snowy in the nation's capital that year¹¹ and no one knew just how hot it would get for the new President and his administration before

Kennedy's fabled one hundred days were over. The original Cuban D-Day was scheduled for 1 March 1961, giving Kennedy just under two months to make a decision if the invasion were to proceed.¹² The date of invasion was postponed several times to allow Kennedy more time to gather information and decide what he wanted to do.

Almost immediately after the inauguration, Dulles and Bissell, acting on behalf of the CIA, began pressuring the President for a decision on whether to go forth with the invasion. According to one participant, "Allen and Dick didn't just brief us on the Cuban operation. They sold us on it."¹³ The CIA director and his assistant outlined the plan for the President, making it as accurate as they could. However, their version of the story turned out to be inherently inaccurate, as they were too closely connected to the situation and too much in favor of its occurrence.

The CIA...supplied President Kennedy and his advisers with chosen reports on the unreliability of Castro's forces and the extent of Cuban dissent. The agency did not dwell, however, on its own Board of Estimates's memoranda that foresaw a continuous reinforcement of Castro's power, nor did it mention other pessimistic reports from independent observers.¹⁴

To put it bluntly, Dulles and Bissell refused to take no for an answer, due to the amount of time they had put in on the project. Dulles stated: "We had made it very clear to the President that to call off the operation would have resulted in a very unpleasant situation."¹⁵ Even knowing that a similar plan had not worked in Guatemala, the CIA and Joint Chiefs of Staff pushed ahead to get the President's approval. As a member of the Joint Chiefs declared, "You couldn't expect us . . . to say this plan is no damn good, you ought to call it off; that's not the way you do things in government. . . . The CIA were doing their best in the planning, and we were accepting it."¹⁶ In the end, rather than giving Kennedy several invasion plans to choose from, Dulles and Bissell simply demanded a yes or no decision from him on the plan they had outlined. Kennedy had no idea that Dulles and Bissell were overestimating the Cuban public's distrust of the Castro regime and

no idea that they were overestimating the effectiveness of the Cuban forces being trained in Miami. Not being one to be pushed into a decision, Kennedy told Dulles and Bissell that he was going to consult with his advisors before making a decision. This sounds like a good idea in retrospect, given the now-known inaccuracies in the CIA plan. However, Kennedy's advisors were to let him down as well.

It was not only the inaccuracies of the information Kennedy was presented that led him to make the decision to go ahead with the invasion. Before approving the proposal, Kennedy called a meeting of his closest advisors on 4 April 1961, with the intention of making a final decision on whether to carry out the proposed plan.

Present at the meeting were: Secretary of State, Dean Rusk; Secretary of Defense, Robert S. McNamara, and Secretary of the Treasury, Douglas Dillon; General Lyman L. Lemnitzer, Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff; Allen Dulles, Director of the CIA and his Assistant, Richard Bissell; Presidential Assistant, McGeorge Bundy; Paul Nitze, Kennedy's specialist on strategic planning at the Pentagon; Thomas Mann, Assistant Secretary of State on Latin-American Affairs; Adolf A. Berle, Jr., Arthur M. Schlesinger, Jr., and Richard Goodwin, three Kennedy specialists on Latin America, and one outsider, Senator William Fulbright, Chairman of the Senate Foreign Relations Committee . . .¹⁷

While there was overwhelming support at the meeting for going ahead with the invasion, two individuals present expressed extreme concern about the invasion: Dean Rusk and William Fulbright. In addition, Under Secretary of State Chester Bowles, who had not been included in the meeting, was steadfastly against the invasion. Kennedy was unfortunate in not taking the advice of these three men into careful consideration when he made his final decision. It was also quite unfortunate that the President failed to consult his United Nations ambassador, Adlai Stevenson, who was kept in the dark throughout the invasion's planning.

As Chairman of the Senate Foreign Relations Committee, William Fulbright's opinion should have been one of the most weighty in President Kennedy's decision-making. However, it was only after he presented the President with "a

memorandum outlining the legal, moral, and political objections to an invasion"¹⁸ that Fulbright was invited to the meeting on the fourth of April. Fulbright was strongly against the Bay of Pigs invasion, mostly because of the moral repercussions he felt the United States would face in its aftermath. "To give this activity even covert support is of a piece with the hypocrisy and cynicism for which the United States is constantly denouncing the Soviet Union in the United Nations and elsewhere. The point will not be lost on the rest of the world – nor on our own consciences."¹⁹ Fulbright predicted that the operation would be a resounding failure and by allowing United States intervention, "we would . . . have assumed the responsibility for public order in Cuba, and in the circumstances this would unquestionably be an endless can of worms."²⁰ He recommended the President use the utmost caution in approving this mission as "the Castro regime is a thorn in the flesh; but it is not a dagger in the heart,"²¹ indicating he thought Cuba was not worth the risk of Cuban lives and American credibility. Fulbright was the most vocal, adamant critic against the Bay of Pigs invasion in President Kennedy's inner circle and his warnings were equally as adamantly ignored, for no one wanted to believe that the plan would fail.

Under Secretary of State Chester Bowles, upon reviewing the information for himself, also came out against the proposed invasion. He drafted a memo to the President and delivered the memo to his boss, Secretary of State Dean Rusk. In the memo, Bowles stated: "A great deal of time and money has been spent and many individuals have been involved in its [the project's] success. We should not, however, proceed with this adventure simply because we are wound up and cannot stop."²² However, President Kennedy never saw the memo; Rusk absorbed the information and integrated many of Bowles's opinions into his own. In addition, Rusk knew that "he [Kennedy] didn't like having a bunch of memos shoved at him."²³ Therefore, one of the most eloquently worded objections to the operation never reached the Commander-in-Chief.

From the time he learned of the impending invasion, Secretary of State Dean Rusk had

grave doubts about the overall feasibility of the operation. Upon reviewing Bowles's memo, these feelings became even more insistent. "Personally I was skeptical about the Bay of Pigs plan from the beginning,"²⁴ stated Rusk in his memoirs. However, believing that the rest of the administration was in favor of the operation, Rusk kept his opinions to himself during cabinet meetings on the subject. However, he was not complete silent on the matter; "although I expressed my opposition privately to President Kennedy, I should have made my opposition clear in the meetings themselves because he was under pressure from those who wanted to proceed."²⁵ This pressure came from members of Kennedy's cabinet, but most stringently from Dulles, Bissell, and the Joint Chiefs of Staff. Upon reflection, Rusk believed that he could have prevented the whole predicament if he had just made his feelings well known in the cabinet meetings. "If I had mounted a campaign within the administration and pulled together Secretary of Defense Robert McNamara and the Joint Chiefs and others, I might have blocked the invasion."²⁶ However, due to Rusk's quiet nature, Americans will never know if one vocal individual could have prevented the entire disaster.

United Nations ambassador Adlai Stevenson was the most notable advisor the President failed to consult. Stevenson later characterized this ignorance as "the most 'humiliating experience' of his years of public service."²⁷ Stevenson was not even informed of the planned invasion and was made to look like a complete fool in front of the Soviet ambassador when questioned about the invasion on the United Nations floor on the day it occurred. Even in the face of this humiliation, Stevenson supported the President and tried to cover up the American presence, stating, "If this was a United States military operation, do you think it would succeed or fail? How long do you think Cuba could resist the military power of the United States?"²⁸ This would have been true if the mission had been backed with the full power of the United States military. Kennedy missed out on a significant advisor and made the United States look disorganized and secretive by not keeping Stevenson abreast of the developments in the Cuban invasion.

After consulting nearly every available source, excluding Ambassador Stevenson, President Kennedy grudgingly made the decision to go ahead with the invasion, but reserved the right to cancel the invasion at any point. He also installed the stipulation that "in no circumstances whatsoever were United States forces to become involved in the landing."²⁹ This cancelled out the possibility of U.S. air cover for the invading forces, dooming the invasion in the eyes of many government officials. Kennedy did not realize what he had done to the effectiveness of the operation and was not informed of the problems this would cause for the invading troops. The invasion began on the seventeenth of April, with more than fourteen hundred Cuban refugees³⁰ landing at the Bay of Pigs. When the men left Guatemala, their training ground and base of operations, everything seemed favorable for the invasion; when they reached Cuba they found something significantly different. The individuals participating in the invasion were not told of the absence of American air support. As they arrived at this supposedly deserted stretch of beach, they found resort houses built along the waterfront. Instead of white sandy beaches, they found sharp reefs along the coastline, causing many of the ships to sink as they crashed into the reefs. By the time the invasion concluded on the nineteenth of April, over eleven hundred of the troops had been captured and over two hundred killed. Even though President Kennedy had compromised and allowed one hour of United States air support, it proved to be too little, too late.

Once it was apparent that the invasion was going to fail, Kennedy again turned to Eisenhower for advice, asking him to come to the Presidential retreat at Camp David, Maryland for a meeting. At this meeting, Kennedy briefed his predecessor on what had happened and asked Eisenhower for his opinion. When Eisenhower asked Kennedy why he had refused air support, the President replied, "we thought that if it was learned that we were really doing this rather than these rebels themselves, the Soviets would be very apt to cause trouble in Berlin,"³¹ which Eisenhower thought was a preposterous notion. At the end of their meeting, Eisenhower warned the

President that "the American people will never approve direct military intervention, by their own forces, except under provocations against us so clear and so serious that everybody will understand the need for the move."³² This ominous warning would have a particular significance later in Kennedy's administration.

Even after consulting numerous sources, the ultimate decision on the Bay of Pigs belonged to one man: President John Fitzgerald Kennedy. As Commander-in-Chief, it was only Kennedy who could have cancelled the operation. Looking back, one will never understand why he went through with the invasion. In fact, in the days after the invasion, Kennedy himself asked, "How could I have been so stupid to let them go ahead?"³³ Even so, the decision had been his, and his alone. It was Kennedy who interpreted the information given to him by Allen Dulles and Richard Bissell and who missed the fact that this information was inaccurate. It was Kennedy who ignored the recommendations of trusted advisors William Fulbright and Dean Rusk and forgot to consult Ambassador Adlai Stevenson. It was Kennedy who refused to be burdened by paperwork and therefore missed out on the written objections presented by Chester Bowles. Many factors may have influenced Kennedy's decision. Not wanting to be seen reneging on a campaign promise just three months after his inauguration, Kennedy was quick to do something about Castro. He strongly desired to avoid domestic criticism on Communism and this type of invasion would show his strength in dealing with the red presence in the Western Hemisphere. In

addition, he wanted to prove his strength to leaders around the world who felt he had neither the age nor the experience to lead the most powerful nation in the world.

In a press conference following the Bay of Pigs, Kennedy outlined three lessons he learned from the failure of the invasion:

First, it is clear that the forces of communism are not to be underestimated, in Cuba or anywhere else in the world. . . . Second, it is clear that this Nation, in concert with all the free nations of this hemisphere, must take an ever closer and more realistic look at the menace of external Communist intervention and domination in Cuba. . . . Third, and finally, it is clearer than ever that we face a relentless struggle in every corner of the globe that goes far beyond the clash of armies or even nuclear armaments.³⁴

Even after the fact, Kennedy missed out on the inaccuracies in the information he was presented and the political purposes for these inaccuracies. The Bay of Pigs invasion was the single greatest blunder the Kennedy administration committed during their thousand days in office. However, it did not have the impact many expected it to; Dean Rusk surprisingly admitted, "I have always marveled that the Bay of Pigs fiasco did not inflict greater damage upon the Kennedy administration than it did. We survived that episode better than we had any right to expect."³⁵ The Bay of Pigs invasion was doomed from the outset, due to the inaccuracies in the reports presented to President Kennedy and JFK's strong desire to do something about Communism in the Western Hemisphere.

Notes

¹ Trumbull Higgins, *A Perfect Failure: Kennedy, Eisenhower, and the CIA at the Bay of Pigs*, New York: W.W. Norton & Co., 1987, 154.

² *Ibid.*, 58.

³ John F. Kennedy, *Third Presidential Debate* [database on-line] (Boston: John F. Kennedy Library, 1960, accessed 10 April 1999); available from <http://www.cs.umb.edu/jfklibrary/60-3rd.htm>; Internet.

⁴ John F. Kennedy, *Fourth Presidential Debate* [database on-line] (Boston: John F. Kennedy Library, 1960, accessed 10 April 1999); available from <http://www.cs.umb.edu/jfklibrary/60-4th.htm>; Internet.

⁵ Higgins, *Perfect Failure*, 67.

⁶ Peter Wyden, *Bay of Pigs: The Untold Story*, New York: Simon and Schuster, 1979, 68.

⁷ Peter Kornbluh, *The Bay of Pigs Declassified*, New York: The New Press, 1998, 278.

⁸ Wyden, *Bay of Pigs*, 80.

⁹ Kornbluh, *Declassified*, 283-4.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, 284.

¹¹ Edward Klein, *All Too Human: The Love Story of Jack and Jackie Kennedy*, New York: Pocket Books, 1996, 268.

¹² Malcolm E. Smith, *John F. Kennedy's 43 Greatest Mistakes in the White House*, Smithtown, NY: Suffolk House, 1980, 81.

¹³ Lucien S. Vandenbroucke, "Anatomy of a Failure: The Decision to Land at the Bay of Pigs," *Political Science Quarterly* 99 (Fall 1984): 481.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, 476.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, 476.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, 477.

¹⁷ Smith, 43 *Greatest Mistakes*, 82.

¹⁸ Vandenbroucke, "Anatomy," 483.

¹⁹ Wyden, *Bay of Pigs*, 122-3.

²⁰ *Ibid.*, 123.

²¹ *Ibid.*, 123.

²² *Ibid.*, 121.

²³ Dean Rusk, *As I Saw It*, New York: W.W. Norton & Co., 1990, 209.

²⁴ *Ibid.*, 209.

²⁵ *Ibid.*, 210.

²⁶ *Ibid.*, 211.

²⁷ Wyden, *Bay of Pigs*, 152.

²⁸ Adali Stevenson, "The Bay of Pigs" in *The Annals of America*, Volume 18, 81.

²⁹ Smith, 43 *Greatest Mistakes*, 84.

³⁰ Thomas G. Paterson, ed., *Kennedy's Quest for Victory: American Foreign Policy, 1961-1963*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1989, 131.

³¹ Stephen E. Ambrose, *Eisenhower: Soldier and President*, New York: Simon & Schuster, 1990, 553.

³² *Ibid.*, 554.

³³ Vandenbroucke, "Anatomy," 491.

³⁴ John F. Kennedy, *Public Papers of the Presidents: January 20 to December 31, 1961*, Washington, D.C.: United States Government Printing Office, 1962, 305-6.

³⁵ Rusk, *I Saw It*, 216.

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