

'The CIA's Secret War on Cuba': Laying Bare Our Painful Legacy

By Haynes Johnson

Haynes Johnson took a leave of absence from his newspaper work in 1962 to write "The Bay of Pigs."

Acceptance of guilt comes hard. It's still most un-American. Even after all the assorted atrocities and assassinations, we cling to our innocence. Good guys don't do it.

That was the way with the Bay of Pigs. Just an isolated incident, a fragment from the past, vainglorious, ill-conceived, doomed, a handful of crazy Cubans forgotten in the rush of successive crises: The Missile Crisis. The Kennedys and King. Saigon and Mylai. Impeachment. Recession, inflation, energy.

It won't work. Much as we would like to forget, the Bay of Pigs and the Cubans and the CIA refuse to go away. Tonight, in the most powerful, disturbing television news special I've ever seen [CBS Reports: "The CIA's Secret Army" on Channel 9 at 9 o'clock], they come

back to haunt us anew. What we see, in chilling clarity, is not an incident. It is a pattern, a thread that winds its bloody way through almost a generation of our history now, and one that continues to afflict us. Murders most foul, true believers unleashed.

As Bill Moyers says, standing in the midst of Miami, "For 17 years now Cuban exiles have walked the streets of this American city carrying with them some of the darkest secrets of our government. They include some of the men who broke into Watergate and men enlisted by the American government to assassinate Fidel Castro. They are the soldiers of the CIA's secret war on Cuba."

It's their story that CBS tell—theirs, and ours. The two are inseparable. Cubans and their CIA mentors have marched through our history for years, as Moyers correctly comments. In the process they have raised questions about the major issues of our times, war and peace,

See CUBANS, B3, Col. 1

Clockwise from left: President Kennedy accepting Brigade 2506 banner in Miami; Pepe San Roman in Havana prison after Bay of Pigs; unidentified terrorists at their Miami hideout; U.S. paratroopers capturing North Vietnamese soldiers; E. Howard Hunt at Watergate hearings; and Castro denouncing America's Cuban blockade.

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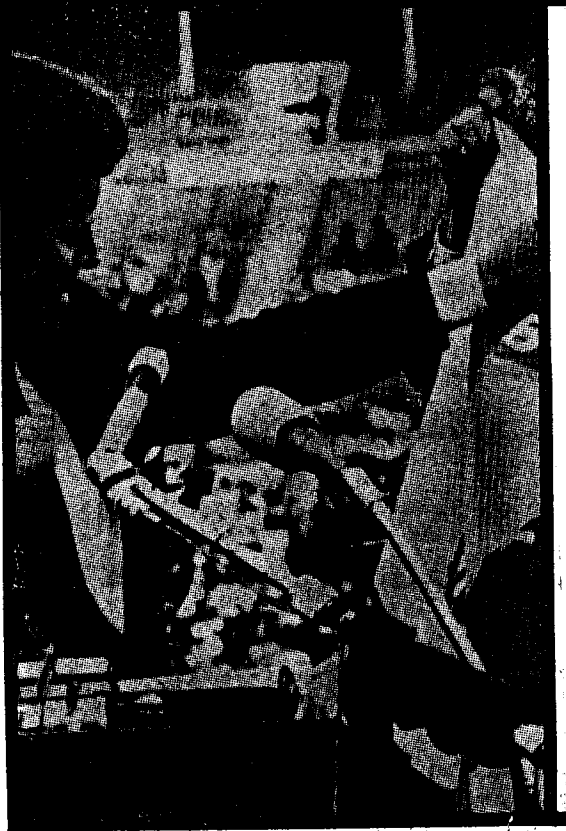
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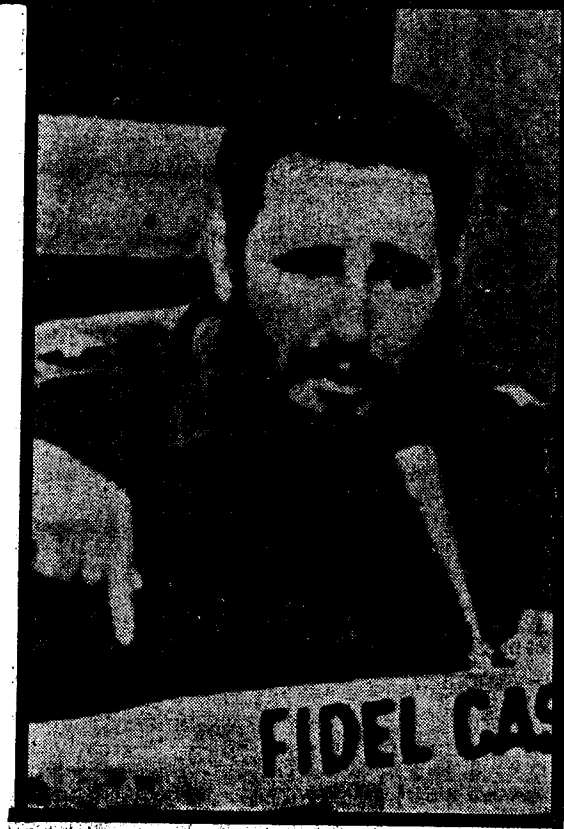
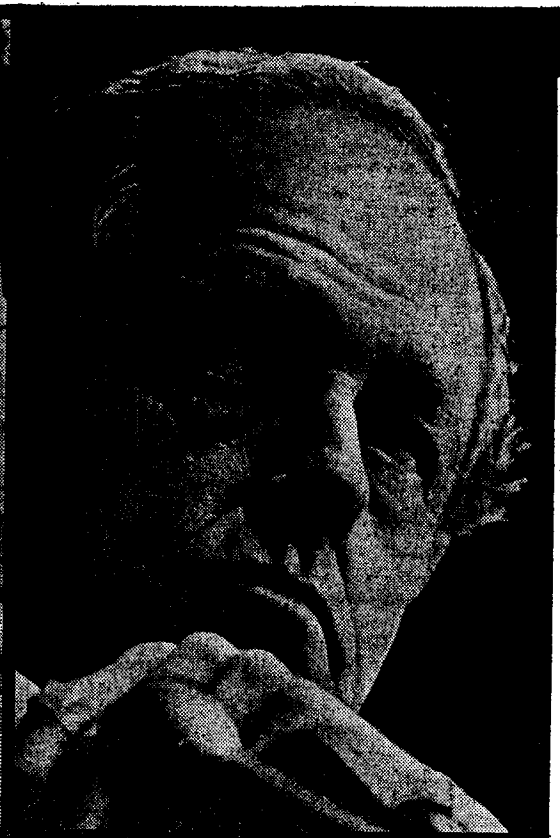
People

/ Entertainment

/ The Arts

B1





CUBANS, From Bi

assassinations and anticommunism, secrecy vs. democratic traditions, abuses of power.

Tonight's telecast begins by examining a Cuban exile terrorist group operating out of Miami. Then it traces back the evolution of that small band of terrorists, back to the formation of the Cuban Brigade that landed at the Bay of Pigs, back to the seeds of the long secret war against Cuban Communism that America continued to sponsor and finance from the 1950s and long into the 1960s.

The trail CBS follows leads from the Bay of Pigs to Watergate. Along the way it takes in all the principal political actors of the era, Eisenhower, the Kennedys, Johnson, Nixon. It's brilliant television, jarring in its implications, provocatively produced and reported by Moyers along with George Crile, who has spent two years of original work in Miami's Cuban colony. It's also flawed, often too superficial or simplistic, and it contains some controversial judgments, particularly about the role of the Kennedys and the implications about Castro's possible part in JFK's death. But by unmasking the secret and ugly side of our government's actions, and making us now face these consequences, the program performs a notable public service. And, from a purely personal standpoint, it's a moving and disquieting experience.

A Legacy

I won't pretend to be dispassionate or objective about this subject. Many of the Cuban faces I saw flashing across the screen were familiar. We had met only days after they were released from Castro's prisons in 1962, ransomed for nearly \$50 million by the U.S. government.

They were earnest, bewildered, still in a state of shock at their sudden liberation, still nursing a bitter sense of betrayal at the manner in which they were sent ashore and abandoned, still torn between trust and cynicism, still in awe at the power of an American government that could, at will it seemed, pluck them out of the darkest dungeons in Havana and on the Isle of Pines and deposit them back in Florida, with their families, by Christmas Eve.

We became collaborators, friends, intimates, working together in Miami and Central America for a year and a half on a book about their experiences, and about the forces that had catapulted them into the world arena. In the decade since, some became U.S. citizens, successful in their chosen fields, some journeyed to the old Belgian Congo as soldiers of fortune, some fought in Vietnam, some stayed in the CIA and plotted infiltrations and assassinations, some went into Watergate, some became corrupt. And some, as I see now on television, have become terrorists. (Not terrorists, insists one whom I remember as a boy-

ish aide to one of the Cuban Brigade leaders. "We are revolutionary." A distinction without a difference.)

That same Cuban calmly goes on to offer his rationale for current murderous actions, and in so doing unwittingly lays bare our terrible legacy to the Cubans and to ourselves. What they are doing now, he says, is only what we, the Americans, taught them.

"We learned from them," he says. "We use the tactics that we learned from the CIA because we were trained to do everything. We were trained to set off a bomb, we were trained to kill, we were trained to infiltrate inside Cuba, we were trained to do everything so we had that experience. And right now we don't have the support of the United States government. We have to do it for ourselves."

When better Frankensteins are built we'll build them.

'Executive Action'

The television documentary, once the glory of the medium in the days of Murrow and now fallen into network disfavor, at its best carries a power that print journalism cannot match. In the space of two hours tonight we are continually caught up in the juxtaposition of old film and new scenes that place the Cuban-CIA story in compelling perspective: Castro chatting with Nixon, Castro with Moyers . . . Kennedy and the Cubans, Kennedy in Dallas . . . Cubans invading, Cubans in captivity . . . Watergate burglars, freed felons . . . Ellsberg break-in, "surreptitious entries." In the end, they all merge into segments of the same story, moving inexorably from scene to scene, year after year.

But the real power comes from the people themselves. Seldom has television given us such unhappy glimpses into the kinds of thinking that produce Bays of Pigs, Vietnams, Watergates.

We see the Cuban terrorist, masked and armed, offer his justification for exploding a bomb on an Air Cubana flight resulting in the deaths of 73 people: "Any kind of Communist officials . . . should be dealt with the same way."

We see Richard Bissell, the CIA architect of the Bay of Pigs plan, endorsing as "an excellent statement," a top-secret White House report in 1954 charting the future course for the CIA by saying "hitherto unacceptable norms of human conduct do not apply."

We see Ray Cline, a high-ranking CIA deputy in those years, approving the need to conduct what amounted to a massive conspiracy to violate U.S. neutrality acts, federal, state and local laws, and seducing the press: "No one questioned the wisdom or the propriety of such activity," he says. "The question was whether you're doing enough to carry out the objectives of the U.S. government."

Some statement of American principles.



Fidel Castro with Bill Moyers

The most disturbing scenes, though, come when Bissell and Moyers discuss the delicate subject of "executive action." An older term is simply murder. And discussing the equally delicate need for official "deniability."

(The terminology of the operatives, as used on this program, would make Orwell feel at home: "Subtle sabotage . . ." "There is a difference between assassination and killing . . . political assassination is a very sophisticated subject" . . . "The word kidnap sounds to me like a term used in law. Remember that I'm a CIA agent — CIA background. We neutralize these things . . . We don't think in criminal terms.")

And so Bissell offers the rationale for "executive action" and deniability:

"A President typically says that he wants to get rid of somebody," Bissell says. "And obviously he and everybody else involved would much rather get rid of someone in a rather nice way, but if the emphasis is on getting rid of him, by whatever means have to be used, this I would have taken as an authorization."

Obviously, no more Mr. Nice Guys.

Mafia murderers, CIA contracts to "hit" Castro (give him a "silver bullet" was the way I heard it put many years ago), assassination activities spanning the decades and the Presidents from Eisenhower to Kennedy? So what? The problem was not in commissioning professional gangsters as assassins. The problem was that the CIA thereby possibly jeopardized the security of its information. Thus Bissell, on the Mafia connection: "I think we should have been afraid that we would open ourselves to blackmail."

The Kennedy Connection

For all its strengths, tonight's program contains serious flaws. Some

bad history gets mixed in with some of the explanations of events.

Part of this probably stems from television's need to simplify — and oversimplify—to rely on the visual instead of the abstract. The Bay of Pigs was not doomed because Kennedy canceled these air strikes, for instance. (He canceled one, reinstated others, and it made no difference anyway.) It was doomed because, like the Light Brigade that charged into oblivion at Balaklava, it never had the slightest chance of success. It failed essentially because of a massive misreading of Castro's revolution, his power and popularity. (Just as, later, and for the same kinds of official misjudgements, Vietnam became a much greater failure and disaster.)

But that's ancient history. More serious in present terms are the accounts of the assassination plots against Castro, and their possible connection with John Kennedy's in Dallas.

That we tried to kill Castro, whom we are at this moment courting, is without dispute. The official record, as now revealed, disclosed eight attempts on his life. On tonight's program Castro himself claims there were 24 attempts.

Moyers explores these efforts, and raises the theory that Castro retaliated against Kennedy because of the CIA plots on his own life. He interviews Sen. Robert Morgan of North Carolina, who spent 18 months as a member of the Senate committee investigating, among other things, the CIA-Castro situation. Morgan, a lawyer and former attorney general of his state, concludes, on the air, "I believe the circumstances in this case are so strong that they convince me beyond every reasonable doubt that the assassination of our President was an act of retaliation for what we had tried to do in eliminating Castro."

In Moyers' interview with Castro, Fidel naturally heatedly denies this: "It would have been absolute insanity." And Moyers goes on to term such accusations as "unsubstantiated speculation." But by raising that theory — and only that one — and leaving it there, the strong implication is that Castro indeed had Kennedy killed. Moyers does not examine the other conspiracy theories in the case, particularly the ones that have the assassination stemming from the CIA or their embittered Cuban exiles.

The view of the Kennedys is something else. In tonight's program the Kennedy brothers come over as the villains of the piece. They are the agents of deceit, the fomentors of the "secret war," the pressure points for Castro's overthrow and removal. This is neither the time nor place to weigh into that complicated story. But I found the version portrayed as singularly one-dimensional, singularly free of complexities.

No hint comes through, for example, of the doubts or concerns each of the Kennedy brothers felt about the role of the CIA and of covert action. In the aftermath of the Bay of Pigs, JFK said he wanted to shatter the CIA into a thousand pieces and scatter it to the winds. He didn't, but he did reduce its direct role.

But no brief for the Kennedys here, no apology: As always, the reality is hard to capture in a fleeting moment on the screen (or in a newspaper article written on deadline). There's no question about the cast of mind held by many — but not all — people in power at that time. However, I remember vividly one day in Robert Kennedy's Justice Department office while we were talking about the Cubans and the Bay of Pigs. He became emotional and, gesturing behind his desk, pointed to two kinds of "trophies" he kept to remind him of problems.

One was a white U.S. marshal's helmet, dented from a thrown brick, that had been worn during the Oxford, Miss., racial disturbances. The other was a crude hand-made rifle mounted inside a glass case. It had been taken from a dead Vietcong guerrilla. One represented our domestic problem; the other the foreign threat. The question was, he said, whether we would be up to handling either challenge properly and well.

Nor is there any doubt about how emotionally the Kennedys, and especially Robert, felt about the Cubans and about their own mistakes in that tragically mishandled invasion. I've seen Bob Kennedy weep when talking about members of the Cuban Brigade, and of the U.S. responsibility for, and to them. Guilt or compassion? Choose for yourself.

At one point in the program an American who landed on the beaches with the Cubans — against the direct orders of the President of the United States, incidentally — speaks about the "truth" of the invasion and its aft-

ermath. We still don't know all that truth, and in all probability never will.

The Kennedys, certainly two of the principal participants, might have added important perspective. Of course, they cannot.

Blind Trust

Long after the political disputes have faded over Cuba and the CIA's joint legacy to us in the '70s, the Bay of Pigs will retain its power as a tragic human story. Tonight's program captures that element powerfully. Toward the end we see two characters, played off in sharp contrast. Both are Cubans, both went from the Bay of Pigs into Watergate and wound up imprisoned.

But Bernard Barker and Rolando Martinez could not be more different. Barker comes over sneering, posturing, with an air of ugly venality as he defends the various illegal acts in which he participated. When George Crile remarks that it sounds like declaring war on the democratic system itself, with an analogy to the Nazis, Barker reacts venomously and angrily: "In other words we can't organize anything to defend ourselves. Huh? Because we are afraid that some people may call us Nazis. Then let us do nothing. I mean, this is what the Communists want you to think."

Martinez speaks with disturbing eloquence, expressing in a rush of emotion so many doubts and so many contradictions and so many dilemmas. It's as if he, unwittingly, raises the hard questions for all of us, questions about collective, and individual, guilt and responsibility, questions about affixing blame and assigning judgment, about examining THEM and, finally, US. It's easier to cast the CIA as the villain, all the while knowing it performs the darker deeds of the American government and allows us our innocence.

For years, Martinez had been in contact with the Navy, Coast Guard, CIA, FBI, all the higher authorities of the country. He had been praised by the President, Kennedy, and had worked all those years in a blind sense of trust. Until, that is, he got to Watergate. Watergate, where, as he says, he believed himself to be working directly under the supervision of the White House. Suddenly, he was in jail, his family suffering, his own personal principles in doubt.

Then:

"Who should I trust?" he asks. "Whom should I be loyal to? There I was, a Cuban. The Congress was fighting the White House. The White House was fighting the CIA. The CIA was fighting the FBI. The FBI was fighting the Congress. There I was in the middle in the Watergate. Who should I trust? Who should I talk to? Where was the country? Who was representing the country?"

I'm sure Martinez still hasn't got the answers.