

DARK SIDE OF The Dark Side of Camelot



Hersh

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Because of that sentiment and because of the recent release of a long-withheld internal CIA review of the Bay of Pigs operation, we asked one of the critics to present the case that Hersh had misinterpreted the historical record -- and had falsely accused John F. Kennedy of sponsoring assassination plots against foreign leaders.

By James DiEugenio

"Murder was in the air at the CIA and the White House as the new administration was taking office" in 1961, Seymour Hersh announces in a key passage of his recent book about John F. Kennedy's presidency. The first target of JFK's blood lust, Hersh asserts, was Cuba's Fidel Castro.

Kennedy's supposed killer instinct -- and its theoretical connection to his other base instincts for women -- rest at the heart of Hersh's controversial best-seller, *The Dark Side of Camelot*. The book, which landed a \$1 million advance plus millions more from TV networks, seeks to prove that Kennedy's sexual philandering crossed over into his presidential decision-making, that the personal became the political.

But Hersh's pop-historical thesis -- and his harsh assessment of Kennedy's Cuba policies -- have come under renewed scrutiny with the release of a long-suppressed internal CIA inspector general's report on the Bay of Pigs fiasco. The highly critical I.G. post-mortem paints a very different picture than the portrayal in Hersh's book.

In the book, Hersh swallows hook, line and sinker the version of the Bay of Pigs that has come from CIA loyalists for the past 37 years: that Kennedy pushed them into clumsy Castro murder plots and then betrayed the Cuban exile fighters by chickening out on a second air strike against Castro's forces. "As Kennedy had to know, his decision [against the air strikes] amounted to a death sentence for the Cuban exiles fighting on the ground," Hersh writes.

Sadly for Hersh, however, the CIA in February finally coughed up the Bay of Pigs report written by CIA inspector general Lyman Kirkpatrick in fall 1961 and locked away in a CIA vault ever since. Kirkpatrick laid the blame for the disaster firmly at the feet of the CIA hierarchy, not Kennedy. Rather than a mercurial president eager for the kill but lacking the nerve, the I.G. investigation found a CIA which systematically misled the White House and covered up the fatal weaknesses of the operation.

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And instead of blaming the Bay of Pigs defeat on Kennedy's decision not to bomb a second time or the failure to kill Castro before the invasion -- as Hersh does -- Kirkpatrick concluded that the operation was doomed from the outset by poor planning, a lack of popular support inside Cuba and a CIA blindness to the facts. Another CIA error, Kirkpatrick wrote, was the "failure to advise the President, at an appropriate time, that success had become dubious and to recommend that the operation be therefore cancelled."

The I.G. report notes, too, the CIA had failed "to reduce successive project plans to formal papers and to leave copies of them with the President and his advisers and to request specific written approval and confirmation thereof." In other words, the CIA was limiting Kennedy's ability to review and possibly reverse the agency's rush to invade.

The CIA's rosy pre-invasion assessments were published as an annex to the I.G. report -- and they undermine another pillar of Hersh's anti-Kennedy thesis. In the four papers shown to the White House in 1961 -- dated Feb. 17, March 11, March 16 and April 12 -- none makes a reference, directly or indirectly, to a planned assassination plot. There is not even an oblique reference to expected turmoil in the Cuban leadership or anything else that might be interpreted as a euphemistic reference to an "executive action."

The absence of any assassination reference in the CIA updates must be seen as bolstering earlier investigative conclusions that President Kennedy did not authorize a pre-Bay of Pigs assassination of Castro. That was the conclusion of a separate 1967 CIA inspector general's report on assassination plots and a 1975 congressional investigation headed by Sen. Frank Church, D-Idaho.

The 1967 I.G. report also raised the allegation that Robert Kennedy might have approved Castro assassination plots. Not true, the CIA report concluded. Then, on page 132, the report asks: "Can CIA state or imply that it was merely an instrument of policy?" The inspector general's response: "Not in this case," an answer indicating that the CIA was acting with some independence in the area of assassination -- just as Kirkpatrick concluded the CIA had in the overall Bay of Pigs operation.

Mafia Killers

Indeed, a careful reading of Hersh's book contradicts one of his own central conclusions: that Kennedy spurred a reluctant CIA into the business of assassination. In the

chapters preceding the "murder ... in the air" formulation, Hersh actually compiles a far stronger case that President Dwight Eisenhower, Vice President Richard Nixon and the CIA brass were already hard at work arranging assassinations against Castro and other Third World leaders, nearly a year before Kennedy became president.

Early in 1960, for instance, the Eisenhower administration concluded that "unless Fidel and Raul Castro and Che Guevara could be eliminated in one package," any covert military operation "would be a long, drawn-out affair," according to a passage Hersh quotes from the Church report. Hersh then notes that the Church investigation discovered that "the CIA made its first overt move to bring the Mafia into the assassination plotting against Castro in late August of 1960."

Under command of the CIA's covert action chief, Richard M. Bissell Jr., the CIA used a former FBI agent named Robert A. Maheu to contact Mafia kingpin Johnny Rosselli, who turned to his Chicago-based organized crime colleagues for help. On Sept. 24, 1960, Maheu flew to Miami where he met with crime boss Sam Giancana to seal the deal on Castro's doom.

The Republicans wanted Castro "done away with ... in November," before the Nov. 8 election, according to a quote from Giancana recounted in the Church report. "As the election neared," Hersh wrote, "Nixon was frantic about Cuba. Getting rid of Castro, by overthrow or murder, he thought, would give him the presidency."

The CIA readied its first batch of poisoned cigars for delivery by Oct. 7, 1960. There was also talk about arranging "a typical, gangland-style killing in which Castro would be gunned down," according to the 1967 CIA's I.G. report. Giancana, however, opposed a shooting because the gunmen would likely be caught. He favored poison and the project fell behind schedule.

In *The Dark Side of Camelot*, Hersh notes that Nixon's national security aide, Marine Gen. Robert E. Cushman Jr., confirmed Nixon's eagerness for a pre-election strike against Castro. Cushman described Nixon's motives in an interview with author Peter Wyden for his 1979 book, *Bay of Pigs: The Untold Story*.

"The Vice President regarded the operation as a major political asset," Wyden wrote. "He was eager for the Republican administration to get credit for toppling Castro before the election." But the CIA could not pull off the Castro hit in time, and Nixon narrowly lost the election to Kennedy.

Yet, after establishing facts about the Eisenhower-Nixon-CIA cabals, Hersh slides back into his anti-Kennedy theorizing. Musing why the Castro assassination failed in

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There wasn't much non-definitive evidence, either. The best argument that Hersh can muster for this theory that Kennedy conspired with Giancana to sabotage the Eisenhower-Nixon hit on Castro is the fact that Kennedy stepped up criticism of the GOP-Cuba policy in late September 1960. That criticism, Hersh asserts, "strongly suggest[s] that someone -- perhaps Giancana, Bissell, or [CIA director Allen] Dulles -- had already told him what was go-

ing on in Guatemala," where the Cuban exiles were training.

Or "perhaps" Kennedy was just trying to hoist Vice President Nixon on his own anti-communist petard. Nixon famously -- and disingenuously -- responded to the taunts by declaring his deep regard for international law.

The record of Eisenhower's assassination scheming is important, too, in evaluating Hersh's other claim that John and Robert Kennedy pressured a reluctant CIA into the murder business. While it's clear that the CIA murder plots date back at least to early 1960, Hersh asserts that John

REV. MOON, PRESIDENT NIXON & A GREEN CARD

Rev. Sun Myung Moon received his status as a U.S. "lawful permanent resident" -- his valuable "green card" -- 25 years ago, during President Nixon's administration, according to a Justice Department document released under a Freedom of Information Act request.

In a letter dated April 7, 1975, James F. Greene, then deputy commissioner of the Immigration and Naturalization Service, listed the date when Moon obtained his "green card" as April 30, 1973. But it was unclear from the letter whether Moon received any preferential treatment from the Nixon administration.

By 1973, Moon already was drawing public criticism for engaging in alleged brainwashing of impressionable young Americans. Moon was causing concerns, too, within the INS by bringing hundreds of foreign followers to the United States on tourist visas and then assigning them to mobile fund-raising teams.

But Moon also was making himself useful to the Nixon administration by organizing support for the Vietnam War and later for Nixon's defense against the Watergate scandal. Moon's pro-Nixon activities led to a face-to-face White House meeting between the South Korean theocrat and the besieged U.S. president on Feb. 1, 1974.

According to a 1978 congressional investigative report on the so-called Koreagate influence-buying scandal,

"Moon had laid the foundation for political work in this country prior to 1973 [though] his followers became more openly involved in political activities in that and subsequent years." The report added that Moon's organization used his followers' international travels to smuggle large sums of money into the United States in violation of federal currency laws.



Moon

That flow of money helped make Moon possibly the U.S. conservative movement's most important source of financial support. Since the 1970s, Moon has poured billions of dollars into conservative causes, including an estimated \$100 million a year to subsidize the daily *Washington Times* newspaper. Moon's organization also funnelled money to many conservative political figures, from the Rev. Jerry Falwell to former President George Bush. [For details, see *iF Magazine*, Sept.-Oct., Nov.-Dec. 1997 & Jan.-Feb. 1998]

According to other Justice Department records recently released under FOIA requests, Moon's legal alien status has protected him and his movement from government investigations into their sources of money and other legal questions. But Moon never became a U.S. citizen.

Two years ago, Moon denounced the United States as "Satan's harvest" and moved his base of operation to South America. Still, according to U.S. officials, Moon has not renounced his "green card." □

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Kennedy ordered a formalized assassination project before he was sworn in.

"A few senior men in the CIA learned in January [1961] that the incoming president was going to be much tougher than any outsider could imagine," Hersh writes. "Sometime just before his inauguration, President-elect Kennedy asked Richard Bissell, the CIA's director of clandestine and covert operations, to create inside the agency a formal capacity for political assassination."

To "prove" this historical point, Hersh relies heavily on former CIA officer Samuel Halpern, a loyal spokesman for the CIA's Old Boy power structure. But Halpern's statements, at best, are quadruple hearsay in which the first-hand players are dead.

For instance, Hersh quotes Halpern as quoting CIA officer William Harvey, who died in 1976, as quoting Bissell, who died in 1994, as telling Harvey that Kennedy, who died in 1963, had personally authorized the CIA "to set up" the ZR/RIFLE assassination program. "After the election," Halpern told Hersh, "Kennedy asked Bissell to create a capacity for political assassination. That's why Harvey set up ZR/RIFLE."

But besides the fact that Eisenhower was still president at the time and that Kennedy had no constitutional authority to give such an order, there is the thoroughly documented record that the Eisenhower administration and the CIA already had an aggressive assassination program under way.

There are other reasons to be suspicious of Halpern's account. A stalwart defender of the spy agency, the CIA veteran was listed second among witnesses to the 1967 CIA's I.G. investigation. Yet, the story Halpern told Hersh is found no where in that official report — written at a time when at least some of the principals were still alive.

'Approval by President'

But Hersh has a bit more to add. He cites contemporaneous notes made by Harvey from a conversation with Bissell — which apparently occurred on Jan. 25, 1961, five days after JFK's inauguration. The Harvey notes, which first appeared in the 1967 CIA's I.G. report, quote Bissell as stating that the "White House had twice urged me to create such a capability."

Harvey's notes then indicate that ZR/RIFLE's first targets were Castro, Rafael Trujillo of the Dominican Republic and Patrice Lumumba of the Congo — and that "approval by President" was a CIA requirement for carrying out the killings. The "approval by President" phrase is crucial to Hersh's argument that Kennedy initiated the assassination plots.

But, as Hersh writes only a few pages earlier, all three targets had been selected for elimination "in the last few months of the Eisenhower administration." In other words,

the "approval by President" apparently had come from Eisenhower.

Still, Hersh lays the blame for ZR/RIFLE on Kennedy. Hersh inserts into Harvey's notation — before the words "White House had twice urged..." — the bracketed adjective "Kennedy."

Hersh does not explain the foundation for that crucial insert. Yet, given the record of the Eisenhower White House pressing for an assassination capability for nearly a year, Bissell's comment could more logically be ascribed to the White House as an institution, not specifically to any one occupant.

That essentially was the conclusion of the Church investigation. When asked to explain the White House role in Harvey's plotting, "Bissell said he merely informed [Kennedy's new national security adviser McGeorge] Bundy of the capability and that the context was a briefing by him [Bissell] and not urging by Bundy," the Church report said.

Bundy also recalled that Bissell simply had described the "executive action capability" as "some kind of standby capability" already in place. Bissell further testified that he had no meetings with the incoming administration on substantive matters, prior to the inauguration. During their lives, John and Robert Kennedy also denied granting approval for the assassinations.

Operation Zapata

While Hersh may have hyped the evidence of John Kennedy's guilt, it is equally fair to say that Kennedy is not without blame for the long-running tragedy of U.S.-Cuban relations. He did let the Bay of Pigs invasion go forward, though it was a clear violation of international law and re-



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sulted in scores of dead. It is also true that a successful invasion might well have ended in the deaths of Castro and other Cuban leaders, even if Kennedy did not approve their individual assassinations.

Still, as the 1961 I.G. report makes clear, Kennedy inherited a set of poor policy choices, a veritable pig's ear that the CIA tried to sell as a silk purse. To the inexperienced president, Dulles and Bissell pitched Operation Zapata, the Bay of Pigs' code name, as an easy success. Since Kennedy had talked tough on Cuba during the campaign, he also was caught in a political trap set by his own words.

As the countdown to invasion ticked down, the new president polled his Cabinet and foreign policy advisers, who overwhelmingly favored going ahead. So, with the CIA underplaying the operation's internal problems and with his own hard-line rhetoric ringing in the background, Kennedy made his fatefully wrong decision.

But Hersh does not see any grays. In painting the darkest possible portrait of the Kennedy presidency, Hersh goes on to accept the conventional wisdom that the Kennedys turned the Bay of Pigs defeat into "a family vendetta." Uncritically again, Hersh quotes Halpern as claiming that the CIA had no particular feeling "that Castro had to go," except that the Kennedys "were just absolutely obsessed with getting rid of Castro."

With Hersh hanging on every word, Halpern depicted the CIA as a sort of abused child battered by John and Robert Kennedy. "You don't know what pressure is until you get those two sons of bitches laying it on you," Halpern told Hersh. "We felt we were doing things in Cuba because of a family vendetta and not because of the good of the United States. ... We knew we were in a political operation inside the city of Washington."

But neither Halpern nor Hersh explains why the CIA started this Kennedy "family vendetta" against Castro during the Eisenhower administration and then continued it for the 35 years since JFK's assassination -- through presidents Johnson, Nixon, Ford, Carter, Reagan, Bush and Clinton.

Bogus Papers

While Hersh's dubious journalism has drawn extensive criticism from a variety of historians, perhaps the most troubling aspect of the book is the mercenary motivation behind it, Hersh's acknowledged desire for a financial "killing." So, to earn his \$1 million advance and snare several million more from NBC and ABC, Hersh lowered his journalistic standards to those of the tabloid press.

Hersh joined the fad of laying bare a politician's sex life as a supposed act of responsible journalism, not prurient exploitation. He adopted a hostile attitude toward Kennedy, rather than a neutral journalistic posture.

Hersh's anti-Kennedy bias and personal greed were most famously revealed by his embrace of a trove of documents which purported to prove a host of Kennedy rumors, including hush money to Marilyn Monroe. Hersh obtained the documents from an obscure paralegal named Lawrence X. "Lex" Cusack 3rd, who claimed that his late lawyer-father handled the secret negotiations.

Hersh became an avid promoter of the mysterious papers, as he signed network contracts for television specials. But NBC backed off, reportedly because of doubts about the documents. Then, when ABC picked up the TV rights, it subjected the papers to forensic testing that Hersh had failed to do.

The documents were quickly dismissed as crude forgeries and Hersh declared that he had been "duped." On March 16, Cusack was indicted on fraud charges. After the indictment, Hersh joined in denouncing his erstwhile associate. Hersh also noted defensively that he had not included the bogus papers in his book. Disclosure of the apparent fabrications had occurred early enough for Hersh to slap together a manuscript without the Cusack documents.

But Hersh's book caused other historical damage that cannot be as easily corrected. Millions of Americans now believe that John and Robert Kennedy bullied an innocent CIA into the same violent tactics that cut both Kennedys down. Though that bitter irony over the Kennedys' fate -- spiced with salacious sex stories -- surely makes for a hot-selling book, it is not what the historical record supports.

While the Kennedys were not squeaky clean, as they operated in the dirty world of international statecraft, the foul stench of murder -- that Hersh blames on them -- was "in the air" at the CIA and the White House long before and long after John Kennedy held the office. □



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Bissell

sulted in scores of dead. It is also true that a successful invasion might well have ended in the deaths of Castro and other Cuban leaders, even if Kennedy did not approve their individual assassinations.

Still, as the 1961 I.G. report makes clear, Kennedy inherited a set of poor policy choices, a veritable pig's ear that the CIA tried to sell as a silk purse. To the inexperienced president, Dulles and Bissell pitched Operation Zapata, the Bay of Pigs' code name, as an easy success. Since Kennedy had talked tough on Cuba during the campaign, he also was caught in a political trap set by his own words.

As the countdown to invasion ticked down, the new president polled his Cabinet and foreign policy advisers, who overwhelmingly favored going ahead. So, with the CIA underplaying the operation's internal problems and with his own hard-line rhetoric ringing in the background, Kennedy made his fatefully wrong decision.

But Hersh does not see any grays. In painting the darkest possible portrait of the Kennedy presidency, Hersh goes on to accept the conventional wisdom that the Kennedys turned the Bay of Pigs defeat into "a family vendetta." Uncritically again, Hersh quotes Halpern as claiming that the CIA had no particular feeling "that Castro had to go," except that the Kennedys "were just absolutely obsessed with getting rid of Castro."

With Hersh hanging on every word, Halpern depicted the CIA as a sort of abused child battered by John and Robert Kennedy. "You don't know what pressure is until you get those two sons of bitches laying it on you," Halpern told Hersh. "We felt we were doing things in Cuba because of a family vendetta and not because of the good of the United States. ... We knew we were in a political operation inside the city of Washington."

But neither Halpern nor Hersh explains why the CIA started this Kennedy "family vendetta" against Castro during the Eisenhower administration and then continued it for the 35 years since JFK's assassination -- through presidents Johnson, Nixon, Ford, Carter, Reagan, Bush and Clinton.

Bogus Papers

While Hersh's dubious journalism has drawn extensive criticism from a variety of historians, perhaps the most troubling aspect of the book is the mercenary motivation behind it, Hersh's acknowledged desire for a financial "killing." So, to earn his \$1 million advance and snare several million more from NBC and ABC, Hersh lowered his journalistic standards to those of the tabloid press.

Hersh joined the fad of laying bare a politician's sex life as a supposed act of responsible journalism, not prurient exploitation. He adopted a hostile attitude toward Kennedy, rather than a neutral journalistic posture.

Hersh's anti-Kennedy bias and personal greed were most famously revealed by his embrace of a trove of documents which purported to prove a host of Kennedy rumors, including hush money to Marilyn Monroe. Hersh obtained the documents from an obscure parasite named Lawrence X. "Lex" Cusack 3rd, who claimed that his late lawyer-father handled the secret negotiations.

Hersh became an avid promoter of the mysterious papers, as he signed network contracts for television specials. But NBC backed off, reportedly because of doubts about the documents. Then, when ABC picked up the TV rights, it subjected the papers to forensic testing that Hersh had failed to do.

The documents were quickly dismissed as crude forgeries and Hersh declared that he had been "duped." On March 16, Cusack was indicted on fraud charges. After the indictment, Hersh joined in denouncing his erstwhile associate. Hersh also noted defensively that he had not included the bogus papers in his book. Disclosure of the apparent fabrications had occurred early enough for Hersh to slap together a manuscript without the Cusack documents.

But Hersh's book caused other historical damage that cannot be as easily corrected. Millions of Americans now believe that John and Robert Kennedy bullied an innocent CIA into the same violent tactics that cut both Kennedys down. Though that bitter irony over the Kennedys' fate -- spiced with salacious sex stories -- surely makes for a hot-selling book, it is not what the historical record supports.

While the Kennedys were not squeaky clean, as they operated in the dirty world of international statecraft, the foul stench of murder -- that Hersh blames on them -- was "in the air" at the CIA and the White House long before and long after John Kennedy held the office. □



Dulles



Bissell