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Bay of Pigs Revisted After Eighteen Years

By Tad Szulc

BAY OF PIGS — The Untold Story. By Peter Wyden. Simon & Schuster. 352 pages. $12.95.

Eighteen years ago last April the United States government and the Central Intelligence Agency treated the nation to the disaster of the Bay of Pigs, a milestone of our postwar history. The attempt to dispatch Cuban exiles as proxies for the United States to get rid of Fidel Castro, then in his third year in revolutionary power and still enjoying considerable popular support, was — in its conception and execution — a demented proposition.

It failed for the simple reason that it couldn't succeed — for military, political, psychological and intelligence reasons. President Eisenhower, who allowed this mad project to get off the ground, and President Kennedy, who allowed it to be carried out under the most suicidal of circumstances, must share the blame for the 1961 fiasco.

Peter Wyden, a journalist and the author of the latest book on the Bay of Pigs (chronicles of this catastrophe can, by now, fill an entire shelf), says in the introductory chap-

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ter that if the reasons for the invasion's collapse had not been covered up, "the CIA might perhaps have been curbed, and the country could have been spared the intelligence scandals of the 1970s, the revelations of a government agency routinely, daily, committing unconstitutional acts against its own citizens in its own country."

I HAVE TO QUARREL with this assessment and the assumption behind it. First, Wyden oversells his otherwise readable and insightful book by claiming that the reasons for the collapse remained "substantially secret" until he got around to the subject.

Although Wyden does come up with fascinating background and new detail — he is a fine and persistent reporter — the basic reasons for the failure of the Bay of Pigs have been known for a very long time, certainly to those especially interested in the story, including John F. Kennedy.

This being so, and this is the second point, if the president had really wanted to curb the CIA for being so criminally unprofessional in dealing with the Cubans (there was no cause *at that time* for doing it in terms of other failures or misdeeds), he presumably could have done it.

Even if the post-mortem report prepared by Gen. Maxwell Taylor in the aftermath of the Cuban adventure had not told him everything about it (which it didn't), Kennedy knew plenty if he had wished to act.

In this sense, then, Wyden's conclusion is historically off the mark. The important thing, it seems to me, is that Kennedy and his brother, the attorney general, both let and encouraged the agency to crank up more and more mindless schemes to eliminate Castro in one fashion or another.

To write a book about the Bay of Pigs 18 years after the event requires, in my judgment, a broader perspective — politically — than one finds in Wyden's effort.

I AM NOT, of course, suggesting that Wyden's book should have been a narrative of all the post-1961 anti-Castro operations by the United States as handled by the CIA. The Church committee has provided a great deal of this material in its final report on the general misdeeds of the agency.

What I would have liked to read, instead, would be a more thorough examination of the relationship between intelligence and policy, still highly topical and still highly unresolved as, for example, the Iranian crisis of 1978-1979 has demonstrated. Had Wyden gone more deeply into it, rather than producing what essentially is first-rate but superficial reportage, he would have rendered a signal service to the debate on intelligence and policy functions that continues to unfold inside our government.

That the CIA had made a mess of the Bay of Pigs, to put it charitably, is beyond question. In this context, Wyden offers arresting new evidence, ranging from the way in which agency personnel treated the hapless Cubans during training to the insane manner of placing the invasion brigade on leaky and ill-equipped ships.

HE PROVIDES FOR the first time hard proof that American citizens — CIA officers as well as Alabama National Air Guard pilots secretly recruited for the enterprise — actually participated in military operations. Wyden is to be praised for the diligence of his research in this area.

However, my impression is that Wyden has not dealt adequately (again, reportage gets in the way of political analysis) with a number of other crucial points in the Bay of Pigs story.

The first point is the quality of

intelligence upon which the decision to mount the invsion was based. Wyden states, as it has been stated innumerable times sinced 1961, that the CIA assumed that Cuba's population would rise overwhelmingly against Castro the moment the invaders hit the beaches. He repeats earlier reports that, despite this assumption, the agency chose not to advise the anti-Castro underground of the date and place of the invasion — for security reasons.

What I find lacking is a more cogent discussion of how and why the Eisenhower and Kennedy administrations let themselves be so easily convinced that the CIA's intelligence was correct. Was it the myth that American intelligence, an enormous establishment, simply cannot err?

THIS WHOLE SUBJECT of quality of intelligence is, to this day, supremely relevant. If one is to trace the history of the CIA's problems back to the Bay of Pigs, then, I would think, the significant aspect is the great intelligence failure of 1961 rather than the debatable notion that there would have been no scandals of illegal intelligence had Kennedy "curbed" the agency after the invasion. I would, in fact, submit that the seeds of our involvement in Vietnam in the Kennedy years, another colossal intelligence failure, are to be found in the CIA mentality in the context of the Bay of Pigs. Intelligence failures *are* systemic. In any event, the Cuban invasion was the end of the American age of innocence.

But it is not enough to scapegoat the agency. Why did the Joint Chiefs of Staff, as professionals, go along with the militarily hare-brained invasion scheme? And what was the matter with military intelligence? Here Wyden does stress that what appeared to add up to a blend of exaggerated secrecy and staff-work sloppiness resulted in an OK by the chiefs to land the exiles in the Zapata swamps. Still, Wyden skips too quickly over their failure to do their job properly.

And what does all this tell us about today's relationship between the Pentagon and the White House? Was 1961 an aberration in those terms, or is it a systemic problem?

FINALLY, THERE IS the question of how Kennedy handled the actual invasion crisis. This is probably the best section in Wyden's book, the story of the president's hesitations over whether and how to use American power not just to help exiles to hold on to the beachhead, but to rescue them at the moment of defeat. But, once more, it is a listing rather than an in-depth analysis of the options Kennedy had (or lacked?) at the height of the April tragedy.

And how did Kennedy's decision-making relate to global foreign policy (Wyden fails to convince one that the president actually believed that World War III would have resulted if a United States destroyer fired in self-defense on Cuban armor ashore) and to American politics?

Peter Wyden's book, a July Selection of the Book-of-the-Month Club, is superior reportage and story-telling. I admire his reporting skills, including his ability to get Castro to tell his side of the invasion. But I still feel that, with so much work, there should have been that extra dimension — the dimension of policy, politics and intelligence — to help us understand today the mechanism of crisis-management.

Things do not change all that much, certainly not in the 18 years elapsed since the Bay of Pigs adventure.

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