

JFK, Castro—And Controversy

To those who tuned in, it was a riveting show. In a special two-hour edition of CBS Reports last month, reporter Bill Moyers documented the Miami-based operations of "The CIA's Secret Army," a heavily armed anti-Castro Cuban terrorist battalion that was first organized, he said, under a vengeful John F. Kennedy after the humiliating Bay of Pigs debacle. The hard-hitting show brought instant critical raves. "Astonishing and darkly chilling," wrote The New York Times's John O'Connor. Others called it "brilliant," "remarkable," "shocking." But last week, at least one shocked viewer, historian Arthur Schlesinger Jr., suggested that if it was effective television, it was also egregiously bad history.

What troubled him most, said old New Frontiersman Schlesinger, was that Moyers appeared to have bought the CIA's own line that it was "an obedient, compliant agency" forced into murderous excesses by the Kennedys. This was "shabby, tendentious polemic," Schlesinger wrote in an open letter to Moyers that appeared in The Wall Street Journal. For example, he noted, while Moyers conceded that the CIA first set out to murder Fidel Castro well before Kennedy took office, the show neglected to say there was no hard evidence that Dwight Eisenhower or Kennedy even knew about the plot. The program, Schlesinger complained, was "flagrantly" one-sided in its choice of interviews, and raised larger questions about television's capacity to deal reliably with history.

Mind-set: Moyers rejects the charges. "Arthur, because of his allegiance to a previous era—which I appreciate—has missed the message," said Moyers. "We never said that the CIA was blameless or that Jack or Robert Kennedy wanted assassination. They were representatives of an era. The show was about a mind-set that dominated this country for 25 years, and left a remnant of Cuban terrorists still determined to bring Castro down."

The message of the Moyers show was nevertheless ambiguous. The program seemed on its surest footing with the terrorists themselves. In interviews with reporter George Crile III, hooded guerrillas were shown flaunting their arsenal of weapons in a Miami armory and boasting of "hundreds" of commando raids on Cuba launched, without interference, from Miami shores.

Where things grew muddled was in the attempt to trace the anti-Castro campaign from its origins in the Eisenhower years up through the present. Moyers and Crile interviewed former CIA officials and Cuban commandos, who told how terrorists were first trained for the Bay of Pigs invasion, then recruited for a continuing crusade of sabotage against the Castro regime. But it was unclear

whether the CIA has kept up any active support of the terrorists. And despite Moyers's disclaimer last week, the interviews suggested, at least by innuendo, that Kennedy wanted Castro murdered. In one interview, former top-echelon CIA official Richard Bissell discussed the circumlocutions by which a President may order assassination—"in such a way that [he] can never be proved to have explicitly authorized" the action.

The narrative leapfrogged back and forth across a seventeen-year period, with confusing results. At one juncture, Moyers said the commando raids began within weeks after the Bay of Pigs, with the Kennedys themselves recruiting "some of the first warriors." At another point,

of the assassination plan. An ultrasensitive Kennedy loyalist like Schlesinger could have missed that subtlety."

Unhappily, television's requirements for vivid, pithy material tend to work against subtlety. The need to compress events also forced the show into simplistic cause-and-effect exposition. "We had to make so many ruthless choices of what to exclude," says Crile. In answer to Schlesinger's charge that the interviews used were mostly with CIA men and the terrorists themselves, Moyers says that such Kennedy-era figures as McGeorge Bundy and Robert McNamara declined to talk.

In any case, says Moyers, the project did not begin as an effort to examine the Kennedy record. "We wanted to know who are these terrorists operating without interference in Miami, where do they come from—and we set out to answer that." To an impressive extent, he did answer it. As an aggressive on-the-



Moyers with Castro, critic Schlesinger: Vivid interviews, shaky history

he said the raids actually began two years earlier, in the Eisenhower era. The program also embraced the dubious theory that Kennedy was assassinated in retaliation for his attempts to have Fidel Castro murdered.

Overthrow: Moyers says he "regrets" leaving the implication that Castro had Kennedy killed. He insists, however, that the program never accused the Kennedys of ordering Castro's execution. "The subtle point," he says, "was that the Kennedys' whole behavior in wanting Castro's overthrow sent signals that would have nourished the CIA's pursuit

spot investigative report of that limited question, the Moyers documentary did what the TV medium does best. It told an important story with the sort of impact and immediacy no other news medium can match. As history, it was shaky, and the show may have had more impact than it intended. According to a radio report by ABC News correspondent Lionel Martin, "The CIA's Secret Army" appeared on local television in Havana recently. The general reaction, said Martin, could best be summed up in one word: "indignation."

—DAVID GELMAN