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CIVILIZATION

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How Richard
Bissell, the
golden boy
of the CIA,
pushed the
U.S. into the
Bay of Pigs

BY EVAN THOMAS



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WALLY MURRAY

"I know it's unfashionable, but I'm a believer in the 'Great Man' theory of history," says EVAN THOMAS. Thomas's portrait of Richard Bissell was drawn from *The Very Best Men*, his book about four CIA spymasters, due out in October from Simon & Schuster. It is the third book by Thomas examining important figures in the Washington establishment, which he covers on a weekly basis as Washington bureau chief of *Newsweek*. *The Wise Men*, written with fellow CIVILIZATION contributing editor Walter Isaacson, deals with six statesmen who guided American foreign policy after World War II. Thomas's second book, *The Man to See*, is a biography of Washington lawyer Edward Bennett Williams. "The first two books were about winners," Thomas says. "The difference with this group was that for all their abilities they ended up failing."

A book critic and columnist for *The Washington Post*, JONATHAN YARDLEY has written about the political struggle over funding for the arts in his newspaper column. "This essay seemed to me to be an opportunity to treat a subject that is often superficially handled at a more expansive length and in a more deliberative way." Yardley, who won a Pulitzer Prize for criticism, is the author of *Ring: A Biography of Ring Lardner, Our Kind of People, Out of Step and States of Mind*. He is working on a biography of the novelist Frederick Exley.



ROGER FOLEY

Yardley

"My principal concern this past quarter century has been to increase public awareness of the unique significance of jazz," says W. ROYAL STOKES. Author of *The Jazz Scene: An Informal History from New Orleans to 1990* and *Swing Era New York: The Jazz Photographs of Charles Peterson*, Stokes hosted a jazz show on public radio for 15 years, and has been *The Washington Post's* jazz critic and editor of *JazzTimes*.



Kaplan

ANDY FREEMAN

ALICE KAPLAN, professor of Romance studies and literature at Duke University, was a 1994-95 research fellow at the Stanford Humanities Center, where she studied the aftermath of the Nazi occupation of France. "During the postwar purge, writers and journalists were among the first to be tried and executed for treasonous collaboration," Kaplan says. "Thinking about the long-term relationship of power and culture in France while perusing the treasures of the Bibliothèque Nationale exhibit, I kept wondering: Were writers first on the docket because their published work was easy to assemble, or were they first because the written word has such tremendous symbolic importance in France?"

An essayist for *Time* and a contributing editor of CIVILIZATION, PICO IYER has been living in Kyoto on and off since 1987. His early experiences there are recorded in *The Lady and the Monk*, one of his four books. "For me," says Iyer, "Kyoto is the home I never thought I had, and one that remains with me wherever I go." Iyer's first novel, *Cuba and the Night*, came out in April.

IN FEBRUARY 1961, LESS THAN A MONTH AFTER JOHN F. Kennedy's inauguration, the top men of the Central Intelligence Agency welcomed the top men of the new administration at a private dinner at the Alibi Club, a small men's club housed in a narrow brick building a few blocks from the White House. The purpose of the evening was to have a good dinner, tell spy stories and, as Bob Amory, the CIA's deputy director/intelligence, put it, "to get a head start on the State Department." Each CIA man was told to prepare "a *New Yorker*-ish-type précis" of what he did.

The atmosphere was supposed to be casual, offhand, but gracious and confident, like the men who ran the CIA. Almost all of the senior agency officials had gone to Harvard or Princeton or Yale; they were equally comfortable swinging golf clubs at Piping Rock or discussing "deep penetration" of "hard targets" in Southeast Asia. The New Frontiersmen at the Alibi Club that evening were enthralled. The president's men, like

Bissell had made clear that he supported Kennedy in his presidential campaign. After the November election, a member of the transition team had asked the president-elect, "There must be someone you really trust within the intelligence community. Who is that?" Kennedy answered, "Richard Bissell." Now President Kennedy wished to make Bissell director of the CIA, to replace Allen Dulles, the agency's legendary but aging leader.

Bissell was already, in the view of many agency hands, the second most powerful man in government. During the late 1950s and early 1960s, the CIA routinely used covert actions—bribery, propaganda, paramilitary force—as tools of statecraft. As deputy director/plans (a purposefully innocuous title), Bissell was chief of the agency's clandestine service, a vast web of spies spread around the world. Bissell had, as he later put it, "taken to covert action like a duck to water."

The United States was engaged with the Soviet Union in a struggle for the "developing world" when Bissell became

Wayward

RICHARD BISSELL WAS THE GOLDEN BOY OF THE CIA—

"A MAN-EATING SHARK," HE SAID. HIS HUBRIS AND NAIVETÉ WOULD
PUSH AMERICA INTO THE DEBACLE AT THE BAY OF PIGS

their counterparts in the CIA, were impatient with bureaucracy. The State Department, the White House believed, was too ponderous and tentative for the "twilight struggle" against Communism. "They're not queer at State, but ... they're sort of like Adlai," President Kennedy told a friend, referring to U.N. ambassador Adlai Stevenson. For quick answers and fast action, Kennedy counted on the CIA.

The Alibi dinner began with three martinis all around (except for White House speechwriter Ted Sorenson, a teetotaler) and ended well after 1 a.m. The star of the evening was Richard Bissell, the agency's chief of covert action. He seemed an unlikely spymaster—bookish, slightly stooped, a little clumsy. But no one doubted his force of personality or his intellect. "I am," he announced, "your basic man-eating shark." There was laughter over the brandy snifters. It was just the right touch, a mixture of bravado and self-mockery.

Bissell was Kennedy's personal favorite. Kennedy had been dazzled by him at a dinner party given by Joseph Alsop, the columnist and gatekeeper of Georgetown society, in August 1960. Though a civil servant and supposedly removed from politics,

By EVAN THOMAS

He set about to remove some Third World strongmen who had become inconvenient to the interests of the United States, and whom Bissell personally regarded as "mad dogs." He ordered high-powered rifles delivered to agents in the Dominican Republic to get rid of Rafael Trujillo. He ordered a vial of poisons to be delivered to assassins in the Congo to eliminate Patrice Lumumba. Most audaciously, Bissell hired the Mafia to arrange the execution of Fidel Castro, who was transforming Cuba into a Communist stronghold in the Caribbean. At the time of the Alibi Club dinner, Bissell was organizing a secret army of 1,000 Cuban exiles to invade the island.

Bissell was daring and full of imaginative ideas, but he was not particularly cunning or devious. He was, for all his enthusiasm, quite unsuited to the spy trade. In the end, this mixture of confidence and naiveté was his undoing. All of Bissell's assassination plots failed. Less than three months after the cozy dinner at the Alibi Club, almost all the Cuban freedom fighters of "La Brigada" were either dead or languishing in Cuban jails. Publicly

"DD/P" in January 1959. Though a gentleman by all appearances, Bissell could be



Spy

Bissell in Berlin in 1956, the same year that he ordered the U-2 over Moscow on its first mission

humiliated in his first few months in office, President Kennedy privately vowed to break the CIA "into a thousand pieces."

The Bay of Pigs and the CIA's botched assassination plots have faded in the historical memory, overshadowed by the Vietnam War and Kennedy's own assassination. But it is not a stretch to say that Bissell, who died without much public notice last year, personified the hubris of his age. Bissell was part of a generation of amateur statesmen who came to Washington from Wall Street to help win World War II and who stayed on to manage "the American Century." They had a confidence and panache that seemed suitable to great-power diplomacy in Europe, but they came to grief in the swamplier proving grounds of the Third World, first in Cuba and more tragically in Vietnam. Three decades later, Janet Barnes Lawrence, the widow of Tracy Barnes, Bissell's No. 2 at the CIA and his schoolmate at Groton and Yale, puzzled over the sheer absurdity of the Bay of Pigs: "How could they do anything so *dumb*?" The answer lies in the peculiar confluence of Bissell's character, his class and his time.

THE QUALITY MOST PRIZED BY THE WASP UPPER class, into which Richard Bissell had been born on September 18, 1909, was effortless grace. Bissell, as a young boy, had none. "He couldn't step on a playing field without breaking a leg," said his Groton schoolmate John Bross. While painfully insecure, he was intellectually imposing—though that didn't count for much at a New England boarding school, where building character and winning football games were higher priorities. Bissell recalled being "an out-cast ... a perfect foil for teasing."

As a form of self-protection, Bissell carried within him a private sense of grandeur. His life before Groton's spartan regimen had been grand indeed. On a voyage to Europe as a little boy, he had watched his father eye a bucket of caviar in the dining salon of the SS *France*. "We will have that, and we will have it every night!" exclaimed Bissell Senior. Bissell Junior had asserted himself on the Atlantic crossing by flinging his teddy bear into the ocean liner's wake. "Get it," he commanded his nurse. At Groton, Bissell's hobby, which he pursued obsessively, was memorizing train timetables between distant cities. His schoolmates laughed at him, believing that his fascination was a childish pursuit. But in fact Bissell was building whole railroads in his mind, empires of rail that would be better designed, more efficient, faster, superior.

Bissell's mother, Marie, was a rebel, within the confines of Hartford society. She drove a bright yellow roadster and once decorated the Hartford Atheneum for a private ball entirely in papier-mâché, much to the discomfort of her husband, who was head of the Hartford Fire Insurance Company. Marie Bissell encouraged her son to take risks. Sailing in rough weather in Maine during the summers, she taught him that a small boat with a sturdy keel can take green water over the leeward rail and still not capsize.

At Yale, Bissell and his roommates were roof climbers. Donning sneakers, smearing their faces with black grease paint (so as not to reflect the streetlights), they clambered about the steep slate rooftops of the college halls before dropping through

PRIVATE COLLECTION

THE SECRET WARRIORS OF THE CIA WAGED SHADOW WARS—USING ESPIONAGE, BLACKMAIL, BRIBERY AND SABOTAGE—THAT COULD BE “PLAUSIBLY DENIED” BY THE WHITE HOUSE

the open window of a startled friend—and demanding cocktails. “It was dangerous, criminally dangerous,” said Bissell, who moved on to the even more dangerous sport of scaling vertical cliffs in the hills outside New Haven. Bissell fell once, tearing his collarbone loose from his sternum. After several months in the hospital, he returned to the cliff where, alone, unroped and hands “shaking,” he made the same climb.

By his last year at Yale, Bissell was a clever and self-confident figure on campus. He ran a newspaper, called the *Hoot*, that mocked Yale’s pieties, and he took satisfaction in turning down a “tap” from Skull and Bones, the hoariest of Yale’s senior societies. Bissell’s mind was at once capacious and facile. He had a particular interest in empire: He studied the examples of ancient Rome and 19th-century Britain. After a stint at the London School of Economics, he came back to Yale, teaching a famous “black-market seminar” on radical economics to the most talented undergraduates (who included future national security advisors McGeorge Bundy and Walt Rostow).

During World War II, unfit for soldiering because of poor eyesight, Bissell took a dreary-sounding job with the Shipping Adjustment Board in Washington. Within a few months, he developed the only system that could keep track of all the ships (putting to good use his schoolboy daydreaming about railroad schedules). The experience made him a natural to work on the Marshall Plan, which funneled massive aid to Western Europe to keep it from starving and falling to the Communists.

Bissell essentially wrote the Marshall Plan; Bundy later called him the “real brains” behind the complex task of designing a program for European recovery. To a large extent, Bissell operated on his own authority. Long afterward, he talked about being visited by an official from the Treasury Department who told Bissell that he personally owed the federal government \$6 million to \$8 million for shipping coal to Europe from South Africa without authorization. Bissell shooed the man away. He had “complete contempt for stupid bureaucrats and even senior people who were slow and stodgy,” recalled Paul

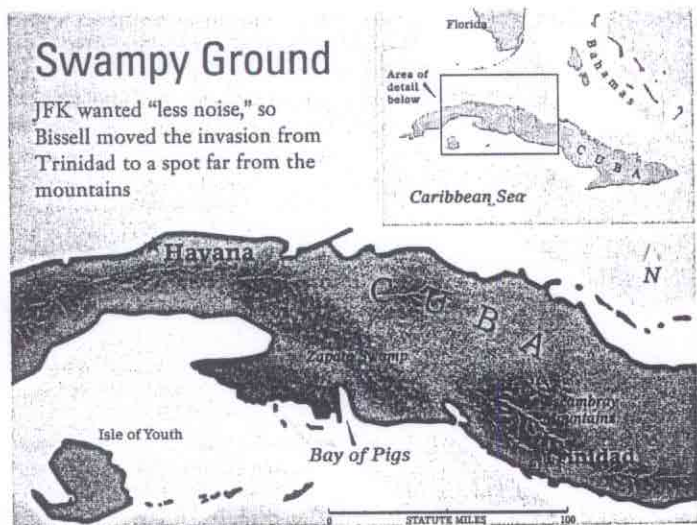
Nitze, who worked with Bissell on the Marshall Plan. “He would express himself in vigorous and biting terms about all these troglodytes wandering around.... He made enemies, but fewer than I would have expected because he was so entertaining.”

Bissell and Nitze believed that America’s wars, hot or cold, were too important to be waged by self-promoting politicians or Pentagon bureaucrats. That was a central lesson of World War II for the men who had come to Washington from universities or the great law firms and investment houses of Wall Street. These men didn’t shilly-shally around; they prided themselves on getting things done, their own way. They circumvented red tape, and sometimes legal restrictions. After the war, Secretary of the Navy James Forrestal wrote his fellow Wall Streeter John J. McCloy that it was a good thing America had won the war; otherwise, both men would be in jail for the liberties they had taken on behalf of the war effort.

DURING THE EARLY DAYS OF THE COLD WAR, THE place to be for such men was the Central Intelligence Agency. It was the president’s “action arm.” A conventional war carried the risk of one side resorting to nuclear weapons. But the secret warriors of the CIA could wage a shadow war against the Soviets—with espionage, blackmail, bribery, sabotage—that could be “plausibly denied” by the White House. In those early days, Congress and the press pretty much left the CIA alone. “Oversight” consisted of Clarence Cannon, the chairman of the House Appropriations Committee,

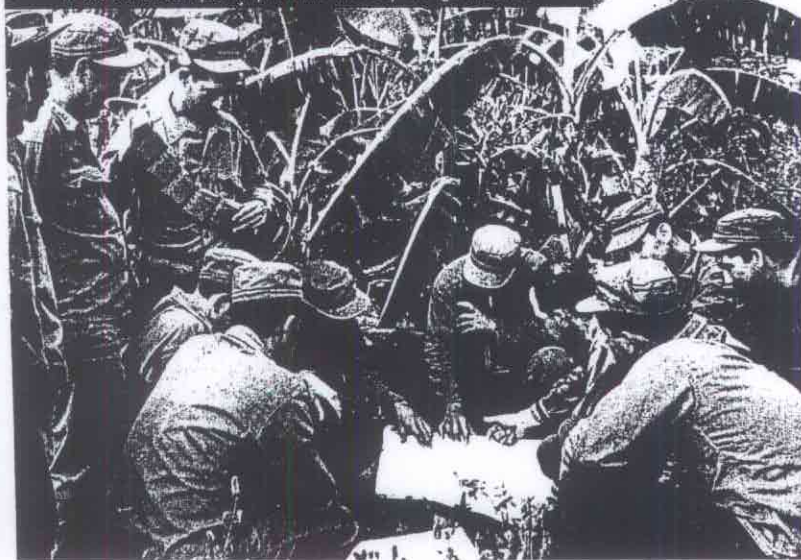
asking Allen Dulles if he was sure the CIA had enough money for the coming year. The CIA was self-consciously a social elite as well. Many agency men were veterans of America’s wartime spy outfit, the OSS. They joked that OSS stood for “Oh So Social.” Allen Dulles continued the tradition: He not only asked recruits where they had gone to college but what college clubs they belonged to as well.

Bissell fit in easily when Dulles hired him as a special assistant in





Castro briefs his militia fighters (above); Cuban exiles train at a base in the Caribbean just days before the Bay of Pigs invasion



the winter of 1954. "There was a feeling of esprit, a sense that you could accomplish things," Bissell recalled. In the summer of 1954, he played a minor role in the overthrow of the left-leaning government of Guatemala. Using propaganda and disinformation to make a ragtag band of Guatemalan exiles into an invading "army," the CIA effectively scared President Jacobo Arbenz into resigning. Bissell later recalled being sent as Dulles's "eyes and ears" to the Guatemala operation's secret headquarters in Opa Locka, Florida. Bissell was fascinated by

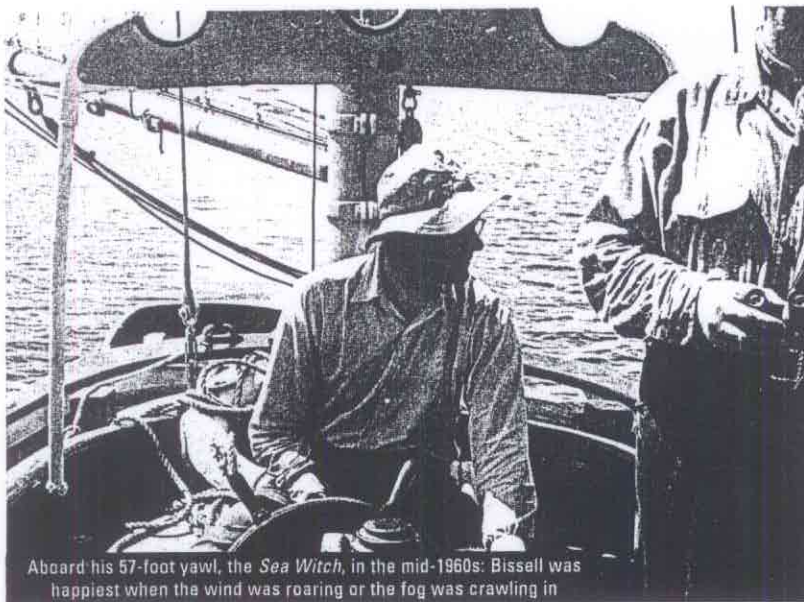
the determination of the men, the 40-foot chart lining the walls, the ringing phones and chattering teletype. Everything seemed well organized, efficient. Bissell was so impressed that he would later use the Guatemala operation as his model for the Bay of Pigs.

Bissell first made a name for himself in the CIA with his work on the U-2 spy plane, which was a major breakthrough in intelligence gathering during the Cold War. In the early 1950s, national security officials were deeply worried about a surprise attack. The Eisenhower administration had little useful intelligence about Soviet intentions or capabilities. The Soviet Union was known at the CIA as a "denied area"; the agency's spies had been unable to penetrate the Kremlin. In those days before the development of the intercontinental missile, the Pentagon was darkly warning about a "bomber gap" that would give the Soviets an advantage over the United States if a "hot war" broke out.

Bissell was given the job of developing a plane that could fly above the range of Soviet air defenses and photograph the aircraft and tanks below. After wresting control of the plane's development from Gen. Curtis LeMay of the Air Force (in what Bissell wryly described as a "moderately bloody affair"), Bissell's team was able to move with astonishing speed: 88 days to prototype, eight months to a test flight, 18 months to fully operational airplanes. The spidery craft, nicknamed "Angel" by the agency, was light but strong enough to fly at an altitude of 70,000 feet over a range of 4,000 miles. Bissell was able to build a revolutionary aircraft in less time than it usually took the Pentagon to write specifications for a pair of boots by "throwing the procurement book out the window," said Bob King, Bissell's special assistant. "He ignored the lowest bid stuff. It took too long and you got a bad product." Instead Bissell went right to the best. Working

in a secret hangar called the Skunk Works, Kelly Johnson of Lockheed designed the plane. Edwin Land, creator of the Land camera for Polaroid, designed the special high-resolution film. Shell Oil concocted a special fuel without knowing what it would be used for. The total cost of the plane was \$19 million, \$3 million under budget.

On July 4, 1956, Bissell walked into Allen Dulles's office and announced, "Well, Allen, we're out and running." "Where is it flying?" the director asked. "It's flying first over Moscow, then



Aboard his 57-foot yawl, the *Sea Witch*, in the mid-1960s: Bissell was happiest when the wind was roaring or the fog was crawling in

PRIVATE COLLECTION

over Leningrad," Bissell replied. Dulles paled. "Was it really wise to do that the first time?" he inquired. Bissell assured his boss that the first time was the safest.

The Soviets picked up the American spy plane on radar, but they couldn't do anything about it. The U-2 quickly proved that the bomber gap was a myth, and after the Soviets frightened the West by launching the first satellite, Sputnik, the U-2 was able to prove that a "missile gap" was equally illusory. The knowledge that Chairman Khrushchev was lying when he boasted that the Soviet Union was building rockets "like sausages" allowed President Eisenhower to restrain defense spending. More important, it kept the United States from overreacting in inter-

disappointed when President Charles de Gaulle of France turned down a similar offer. Just as well, Bissell later decided. He had not bothered to inform anyone at State, the White House or even the CIA before broaching the plan to de Gaulle. When he did, he was surprised to discover that "virtually none of my colleagues" thought that cutting a secret deal with the French president "had been a good idea."

Bissell had become a kind of independent contractor. The Air Force pilots "sheep-dipped" to the CIA began to joke that they flew for the RBAF—the Richard Bissell Air Force. Bissell had his own headquarters in downtown Washington ("the Bissell Center") and his own communications system, which was "compartmented" from the rest of the CIA.

Dulles knew enough about Bissell's spectacular success to put him in charge of covert operations. It did not matter that Bissell had little knowledge of espionage "trade craft" and only limited experience in the field (his small role in the Guatemala operation). He was now in charge of a secret empire: more than 50 undercover stations around the world, hundreds of covert-operation programs working at any given time, a "reserve fund" of at least \$100 million in unvouchered funds at his disposal. "I was surprised by the extent of it," Bissell said. As he rummaged through the "eyes only" files in his new office, an unadorned and slightly shabby room with peeling linoleum in an old "temporary" building down on the Mall, Bissell "kept running into new pieces."

Blessed with a photographic memory, Bissell learned quickly.

BISSELL'S MOST IMPORTANT TASK WAS TO GET RID OF CASTRO. THE ONLY QUESTION WAS HOW. CIA OFFICIALS HAD TALKED ABOUT ASSASSINATION BEFORE, BUT BISSELL WAS THE FIRST TO ORDER ONE

national crises—perhaps the most valuable service an intelligence agency can perform in peacetime.

Eisenhower was nonetheless reluctant to approve too many missions by the U-2. He was afraid the Soviets would eventually be able to shoot down the plane, provoking a dangerous incident. In a remarkable act of lèse majesté, Bissell found a way to carry out the U-2 missions without consulting the president. He approached the British intelligence service and the Royal Air Force about undertaking U-2 flights of their own. When the British asked if they would need Eisenhower's permission, Bissell replied, "Not at all. That's not the play." The RAF "got the point," recalled Bissell, "and we got it set up." Bissell was

To his aides, who called him "the mad stork" (because, as one said, "none of his limbs were connected exactly right"), he seemed perpetually in motion. He was chronically late and—dangerous for the chief of the clandestine service—sloppy about keeping track of paper. "He was a lousy manager," said Bob King, "but a great leader. When he arrived, there would be this wave of, 'Here comes Mr. Bissell!' He imbued you with idealism, that you were doing something very important." King and others were baffled by Bissell's more peculiar WASP customs. They could not understand why he drove old cars until they fell apart. (He occasionally showed up for work with a distributor cap in the pocket of his English-tailored suit.) Though

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Bissell's suits were expensive, King was under the impression that he had only two of them, and that neither had ever been pressed.

Bissell was courteous, well mannered and calm during crises, almost eerily so. But little things, some tiny loss of control—a misplaced paperweight was enough—could unleash a tantrum at once infantile and Vesuvian. Unlike the Ivy Leaguers who had learned how to swear by being around enlisted men in wartime, Bissell did not cuss much. "Sweet Jesus" was about as profane as he got, but he could say it with real emphasis: "Swe-e-et JEEsus!" Bissell's general approach to obstacles was to ignore them. He would calculate the risk and push ahead. Driving his secretary to an office party, he dismissed her warnings that he was going the wrong way down a one-way street. "Goddamn it, I'm only going one block," he said. Bissell took a bigger risk when he failed to pay heed to the intelligence analysts at the CIA, as he did from time to time when he did not like what they were saying.

BISSELL ESCAPED THE PRESSURES OF WASHINGTON aboard his 57-foot yawl, the *Sea Witch*. Sailing thrilled and consoled him; he felt free of nagging bureaucrats and prying politicians. Every summer, he would take a long cruise east of Penobscot Bay in Maine, into cold and remote waters where a yachtsman can sail all day without seeing man or boat. Bissell was happiest when the wind was roaring or the fog was closing in. He liked to sail by dead reckoning. Nothing satisfied him more than to creep out of the deep fog at night into a narrow passageway marked by a single unlit buoy. He accomplished this time and again. He also bounced off a few rocks, once nearly sank and twice lost a mast. The first dismasting was in a nor'easter. The second came when he guessed wrong on the height of a drawbridge. "He didn't want to wait," said Fritz Liebert, a Yale friend and regular companion aboard the *Sea Witch*. "He had a will of steel and if he thought this was the course to be taken, he was committed. God help anyone who got in his way. He'd turn ice-cold and grit his teeth."

"There will be no Communist government in Latin America while I am DD/P," Bissell declared to his aides shortly after he became head of the clandestine service. He had not figured on Fidel Castro, whose public image was rapidly transformed during the course of



UNITED STATES

Adlai Stevenson felt "tricked" by the CIA; the agency's director, Allen Dulles, had put Bissell in charge of covert operations



UPI/GETTMAN (2)

that year — from Jeffersonian idealist and liberator to Kremlin stooge who had imposed Communism on the Cuban people.

Bissell's most important task, he knew, was to get rid of Castro. The only question was how. At first, Bissell's men tossed around schemes to embarrass Castro by making his beard fall out. Castro was scheduled to take a trip to Chile in the spring of 1960. The agency developed a plan to sprinkle thallium powder, a woman's depilatory, in his shoes when they were put out at night to be shined. The scheme was called off when Castro canceled his trip. Other ideas, never carried out, included: giving Castro a box of his favorite cigars treated with a chemical to induce "temporary disorientation" (the hope was that he would

smoke one before making a speech) and using a hallucinogenic aerosol spray to contaminate the air of the radio station where Castro made his broadcasts.

These plots were so crackpot that they seemed almost amusing when they were revealed 15 years later during congressional hearings on "dirty tricks" by the CIA. Less sophomoric, but equally outlandish, was a plot cooked up by Bissell to kill Castro.

CIA officials had talked about assassinations before, but Bissell was the first to order one. Bissell had been toying with the idea of state-sanctioned murder for a while. In 1959 he had briefly considered trying to eliminate Sukarno, the Indonesian strongman, by hiring a female agent to give him a lethal dose of venereal disease. (Sukarno was a sexual predator with a particular taste for airline stewardesses; asked about this plot



Tracy Barnes, Bissell's No. 2: "How could they do anything so dumb?" his wife asked

COURTESY OF THE BARNES FAMILY

in 1993, Bissell chuckled and replied, "Ah yes, the stewardesses.")

In June 1960 Bissell asked the specialists in the CIA's technical services staff to make an inventory of toxic agents that could be used to "incapacitate or eliminate" a man. A new box of Castro's favorite cigars was prepared, this time treated with botulinus toxin, a virulent poison. But Bissell had no one to deliver the gift. That is why, sometime that August or September, he turned to the Mafia to try to kill Castro.

Bissell should have been in a cautious mood that summer. In May the Soviets had finally shot down a U-2, capturing the pilot, Francis Gary Powers, and touching off a diplomatic crisis that caused a superpower summit meeting to be canceled. Eisenhower's hopes for détente with Khrushchev had been dashed, and Bissell took some of the blame for pressing the president to authorize the flight (he had ignored evidence that the plane had come within range of Soviet anti-aircraft missiles). But the embarrassing incident made Bissell even more determined to "get" Castro.

Johnny Rosselli, the Mafia chief first approached by the CIA to eliminate the Cuban dictator, was a little surprised to be asked. "Me?" he exclaimed. "You want me to get involved with Uncle Sam?" At the time, Rosselli, a mid-level hood in Las Vegas, was under investigation for tax evasion. Rosselli agreed to help — "for patriotic reasons," he explained. He soon recruited Sam "Mo Mo" Giancana, the boss of Chicago, and Santos Trafficante, who had run the Mob's casinos in Havana.

The Mafia never came close to killing Castro. Despite repeated requests from the CIA, which supplied the mobsters with vials of toxin and caches of weapons, the Mafia's agents kept getting cold feet. The suspicion arises that they were merely going through the motions. Justice Department prosecutors later suggested that the Mob was trying to pick up an IOU from the government, an insurance policy against prosecution.

Bissell was "flummoxed by the stuff not working. It wasn't for lack of trying," he said in an interview in 1993. Congressional staffers who later investigated the assassination plots referred to the CIA as "the Gang That Couldn't Shoot Straight." The image of Richard Bissell ordering a Mafia "hit" in the cultured tones of Groton and Yale seems utterly incongruous. Endicott Peabody, the rector of Groton, preached "muscular

Christianity" to his boys; no one taught them street smarts. What made Bissell think he was suited for such dirty work? Perhaps the reason lay in his WASP upbringing, in which stoicism was a code of conduct: "never complain, never explain." To compensate for the "softness" of wealth, boys learned to be tough. Hiring the Mafia may have been a crazy idea, but it certainly seemed tough.

Bissell later said he never really discussed the assassination plots, not with the White House, nor in any detail with his superiors at the CIA. "Too sensitive," he explained. He "assumed" that he had authority, because Allen Dulles did not try to stop him. Bissell did not like to use the word "assassination." He preferred "executive action."

THE INVASION OF CUBA IN APRIL 1961 BY AN ARMY of 1,200 Cuban émigrés trained and armed by the CIA originated as a plan to infiltrate a few dozen commandos. The CIA had begun trying to stir up the resistance against Castro in the fall of 1960 with airdrops of weapons and supplies. But pilots missed their targets, or else the Cuban farmers who made up the tiny (and frightened) anti-Castro underground could not find their way to the drop sites. It was clear, by late November, that infiltration would not work. Like a driver who speeds up when approaching a yellow light, Bissell ordered a World War II-style amphibious landing.

On a banana plantation in Guatemala, CIA paramilitary trainers tried to make an army out of "La Brigada." Speaking no Spanish, they startled the Cubans by shouting Hungarian and Russian obscenities at them. The Americans tended to refer to their charges as "tame Cubans," though they would come to admire their courage. Some Pentagon colonels were dispatched by the Joint Chiefs of Staff to assess the fighting capability of this force. "Marginal at best," they concluded. But they did not press the point; this was a CIA show.

"Bissell wanted backing, but he didn't want a lot of advice," recalled Bob King. As it turned out, the White House official responsible for acting as an "honest broker" between the CIA and the rest of the government was National Security Advisor McGeorge Bundy. Bissell's former student had been on the job





Francis Gary Powers (right) on trial in Moscow: Bissell knew that the U-2 came within range of Soviet antiaircraft missiles

only a few days in January 1961 when Bissell told him about the invasion plans. Years later, Bundy admitted that he fell for the glamour of covert action. "It was the stupidity of freshmen on our part," he said, "and the stupidity on their part of being wrapped in their own illusions."

President Kennedy was ambivalent about the Cuban operation. He could easily see the risk of failure. On the other hand, he didn't want to get blamed by the Republicans for "chickening out" or going soft on Communism. The president calculated that the less the military risk, the greater the political risk, and vice versa. It was a foolish calculus because it invited him to take half measures in an all-or-nothing situation.

When Bissell presented the invasion plan to the president, the Joint Chiefs and senior administration officials on March 11,

wouldn't put in his stack," said Bundy. "He never said, 'Do you really mean it? If we get the beachhead, will you back us up?' These worries were covered up. Once engaged, Bissell believed, Kennedy wouldn't allow it to fail." Bissell later denied this subterfuge. "I did not deliberately mislead the president," he said. But he had trouble explaining why, given the worsening odds, he insisted on pushing ahead.

On Saturday, April 8, a week before the scheduled invasion of Cuba, Bissell's CIA lieutenants rebelled. His two top-line officers on the Cuba project, Jake Esterline and Col. Jack Hawkins, went out to Bissell's house in Cleveland Park and told him that they wanted to resign. They told him that the operation was out of control, and they could not go on with it. If Bissell was shocked, he gave no sign. He listened quietly, then urged them to recon-

BISSELL SHOULD HAVE BEEN IN A CAUTIOUS MOOD AFTER THE SOVIETS SHOT DOWN A U-2 SPY PLANE. BUT THE EMBARRASSING INCIDENT MADE HIM EVEN MORE DETERMINED TO GET CASTRO

Kennedy interrupted after a few minutes. "Too spectacular," he said. "It sounds like D-Day. You have to reduce the noise level of this thing." Bissell tried to lecture Kennedy. "You have to understand ..." he began. The president said he understood perfectly. He wanted "less noise."

This was a moment that demanded hard thinking and honest debate, not a summary judgment. The fact is that the invasion had to be "noisy" to succeed. A thousand men acting on their own

sider. The project was too far along. It was too late to stop. He asked them to be good soldiers; reluctantly, they agreed.

At the White House, the Kennedys were performing similar gut checks. Robert Kennedy ran into Chester Bowles, a dovish State Department official. According to a story that later made the rounds, RFK jammed three fingers into the undersecretary's soft stomach and told him in an even voice that "he, Bowles, was for the invasion, remember that, he was for it, they all were for

it." President Kennedy cut off a conversation with his speechwriter Ted Sorenson by saying, "I know everyone is grabbing for their nuts on this."

On the morning of Saturday, April 15, eight B-26s, supplied by the CIA and flown by pilots of the U.S.-trained brigade, bombed Castro's airfields. At the United Nations, the Cuban foreign minister, Raul Roa, demanded the floor to declare that his country had been bombed by U.S. aircraft. The American ambassador, Adlai Stevenson, righteously denied the charge. The planes had been flown by Castro's own pilots, he insisted. They were defectors.

The CIA had fed Stevenson a flimsy cover story that soon collapsed.

The U.S. ambassador felt he had been "deliberately tricked" by the agency, and he sent an angry cable to Washington. The president was beginning to have more doubts. On Friday, he had cut in half the size of the CIA's first air strike, from 16 to eight planes. Stevenson's complaints further unnerved Kennedy. As he gloomily hit golf balls out at his wife's estate in Virginia on Sunday afternoon, the president decided to cancel a second air strike scheduled for the next morning, D-Day for La Brigada.

Bissell learned that the second strike had been canceled that evening at about 7 p.m. He knew that Castro's small air force had to be destroyed on the ground, or it would rake the beaches and the invasion fleet in the morning. But for some reason, he did not personally appeal to the White House. Years later, Bissell still could not explain why, except to concede that perhaps a kind of fatalism had set in. "I believed the president had made up his mind," he said. "There was no point in prolonging the agony. We had to go ahead and make the best of it." He decided not to go home that night. Instead, he climbed to "the dormitory," a bare room with 10 army cots up above the operations "war room" in a dingy office building on the Mall.

AT 6:30 A.M. ON APRIL 17, ONE OF THE BRIGADE'S landing ships, the *Houston*, was hit at the water line by a rocket fired by one of Castro's British-built Sea Fury fighter-bombers. The ship quickly began to sink stern-first as the terrified members of the brigade clung to the decks. From a rubber raft floating near the foundering ship, a CIA paramilitary officer, William "Rip" Robertson, shouted, "Get off, you bastards! It's your war!"



Castro's forces rout La Brigada, which had counted on U.S. air support: "This thing has turned sour like you wouldn't believe"

At 9:30 a.m., a second ship of the invasion fleet, the *Rio Escondido*, went up in a giant fireball. Castro's planes had hit 200 barrels of aviation fuel, ensuring that the brigade's B-26s, based in Nicaragua (three hours away), would never be able to refuel in Cuba. Worse, a communications van sank with the ship, cutting off any air-land radio contact. Some of the members of the invasion force had to swim ashore after their landing craft hit coral reefs that the CIA charts had marked as seaweed. They were met by Castro's tanks. Castro knew the Bay of Pigs well; it was one of his favorite fishing grounds.

The next two days were a rout. Castro's T-33 jets shot down the brigade's slower B-26s while American carrier pilots circled helplessly a few miles away, forbidden to engage the enemy. From the beach, the brigade commander begged his CIA handlers for air cover "as you promised." The CIA men told him to hang on.

At 10:15 that Tuesday night, the Marine Band struck up "Mr. Wonderful" when JFK appeared, dressed in white tie and tails, at a White House reception for congressmen. The president's brother Bobby grabbed Sen. George Smathers by the elbow on the dance floor. "The shit has hit the fan," he told Smathers. "This thing has turned sour like you wouldn't believe."

White House aide Walt Rostow was sent to pick up Bissell at the CIA. He found his former Yale professor standing in the middle of the war room, surrounded by shouting men. Bissell was unshaven and haggard but calm. Bissell returned to the White House, where, a few minutes after midnight, he found an extraordinary scene: the president, the vice president, the secretaries of state and defense, all in white tie, and the Joint Chiefs of Staff in dress uniform, draped with medals. Bissell,

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now struggling visibly to control his emotions, pleaded for air cover for the men who were pinned down on the beach. Kennedy responded that he didn't want to get involved. "Hell, Mr. President, we *are* involved," interjected Adm. Arleigh "30 Knot" Burke, the chief of naval operations. Reluctantly, sometime after 2 a.m., the president authorized six Navy fighters—with their markings painted out—to fly cover for one hour in the morning, long enough for the brigade's remaining ships to unload ammunition and for the B-26s to fly a bombing run against Castro's troops.

The air cover never materialized. In a final, farcical turn, the exhausted CIA operators forgot about the one-hour time difference between Nicaragua and Cuba. Two of the remaining B-26s were shot down. "I have nothing left to fight with," radioed the brigade commander, Pepe San Román. "Am taking to the swamps. I can't wait for you." To his CIA handler, safely aboard ship offshore, San Román had a last farewell. "And you, sir," he said, "are a son of a bitch." Before they fled into the jungle, some

Oval Office. "In a parliamentary government, I'd have to resign," he told the CIA man. "But in this government, I can't." Bissell, he said, would have to go.

Bissell was gracious about his dismissal, though he felt let down. He had thought that Kennedy was "tough." An old friend, Tish Alsop, found Bissell sitting in his garden that Sunday. Opera music was blasting out of the door of his living room. "He was devastated," she said. Yet Bissell maintained a brave face around his CIA colleagues. On the night the invasion collapsed, he astonished two of his senior aides by inviting them home for a quiet family gathering around the piano. He made sure to praise others for their work and to say that the responsibility for the failure was his alone.

Richard Bissell hung on at the CIA for nine more months—long enough to help launch another attempt to get Castro, Operation MONGOOSE, a program of subversion and sabotage against Cuba. It was no more successful than Bissell's earlier efforts.

KENNEDY SUMMONED BISSELL TO THE OVAL OFFICE. "IN A PARLIAMENTARY GOVERNMENT, I'D HAVE TO RESIGN," HE TOLD THE CIA MAN.


"IN THIS GOVERNMENT, I CAN'T." INSTEAD, BISSELL WOULD HAVE TO GO

of San Román's men fired at the wakes of the departing American destroyers.

In the days ahead, the 1,189 members of the brigade held in Castro's prisons would make a bitter joke of the Americans' failure to provide air support. Every time they heard a plane fly overhead, a cry would go up in the cellblocks: "Don't shoot! Don't shoot! It's one of ours!"

To Gen. Maxwell Taylor, the president's military advisor, the White House seemed like a command post "that had been overrun." He had seen the same glazed eyes in the Battle of the Bulge. "How could I have been so stupid to let them go ahead?" President Kennedy moaned to Ted Sorenson. Arthur Schlesinger thought the president had been "transfixed" by Bissell's briefings. "You can't beat brains," Kennedy had said. Now the president summoned Bissell to the

In a somewhat stiff ceremony, President Kennedy awarded Bissell the National Security Medal before he "resigned." His CIA comrades gave him a nostalgic final dinner at the Alibi Club. But his career as a highflier was over. He served briefly as director of the Institute for Defense Analysis until he was driven

out by Pentagon generals he had antagonized. "Badly spoiled" by his career in government, he "missed the agency," he said in 1993, the year before he died. He also missed the *Sea Witch*, which he had sold in the late 1960s when he grew too old to handle her. In retirement in his hometown of Hartford, he spent the days working on charities and reading; he especially liked histories of the ancient Greeks. In the evenings, he would sometimes pull out his charts and retrace his old cruises, remembering the gales and storms, the close scrapes, the dead reckoning through the thick fog. 



Kennedy awards Bissell the National Security Medal in 1962: The CIA man felt let down because he had thought the president was "tough"

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