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A spy's bitter, personal look at Bay of Pigs

REFLECTIONS OF A COLD WARRIOR: FROM VALTA TO THE BAY OF PIGS. Richard M. Bissell Jr. with Jonathan E. Lewis and Frances T. Pudlo. Yale University Press, \$30. 288 pp.

By DAVID BEARD

Staff Writer

On an April morning in 1961, Richard Bissell's world imploded, along with the mission that would forever stain his two decades in U.S. government service — the Bay of Pigs.

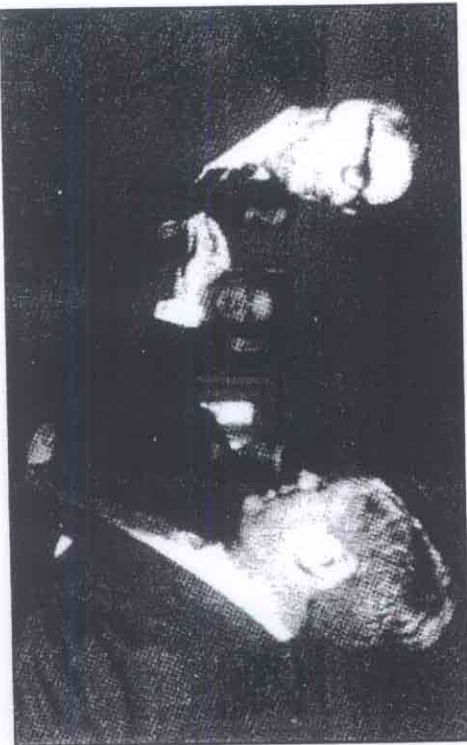
Inside Bissell's office, where he worked as CIA deputy director of plans, the calls from Cuban exiles and their CIA supporters grew in urgency as American planes failed to support their invasion on Cuba's southern coast.

"They were pulling at Dickie's coat, begging him to send in the army and make good on the covert operation by sheer force," Walt Rostow recalled in his memoirs, *The Diffusion of Power*. "All day long the cables kept coming in. It got worse."

Bissell couldn't do anything. New President John F. Kennedy didn't allow help. Amid the failure of the Bay of Pigs, Castro imprisoned hundreds of thousands of his countrymen, declared himself a socialist and paved the way for waves of Cuban exiles to flee to South Florida.

Bissell's unsparing *Reflections of a Cold Warrior*, published posthumously, attempts to explain how a group of influential Americans came to believe that covert action could strengthen their nation. The group, many like Bissell from private boarding schools and Ivy League colleges, forged their patriotism during World War II and shared the desire for America to remain on the world's stage afterward.

"For any policy makers outside the CIA, covert action became a quick fix, an easy way to deal with the world's intractable problems and renegade nation states."



The cover photo of *Reflections of a Cold Warrior* shows Richard Bissell receiving the National Security Medal from President Kennedy.

And for a while, it worked. From Opa-locka Naval Air Station outside Miami, CIA planes helped overthrow Guatemala's leftist elected president in 1954. A CIA-backed assassination led pro-Western Iranian Shah Reza Pahlavi to become that nation's ruler.

Bissell, who grew up near Hartford, Conn., in a mansion that Samuel Clemens built, left his post as a Yale economist to become a Washington problem-solver on several wartime economic boards. After the war, he was attracted to the fledgling CIA and its cerebral and muscular vision of the world.

He led the development of the U-2 spy plane and the Corona satellite program, which represented the leading edge of America's information-gathering on Soviet military installations.

Bissell was influenced by Tracy Barnes, a colleague from his days at Groton, who coordinated the Guatemalan overthrow and recruited thousands of Cuban exiles in Miami for what became the Bay of Pigs. Of Barnes, Bissell wrote: "I admitted his ideas and learned from them some lessons that were perhaps unwise — namely, to be aggressive."

Bissell's memoirs offer new documentation on the strident support the mission received from President Dwight D. Eisenhower. Seventeen days before leaving office, Eisenhower called Bissell and two other CIA officials into his office and urged them to use any action from Cuban revolutionary leader Fidel Castro

"Failing that," Eisenhower said, "perhaps we could think of manufacturing something that would be generally acceptable." Eisenhower's secretary of state, Christian Herter, suggested a fake attack on the U.S. Navy base at Guantanamo Bay, blaming the Cubans.

To his credit, Bissell doesn't place all the blame for Bay of Pigs on Kennedy. Bissell himself didn't pay strong attention to U.S. military studies that cast doubt on the possibility of a large-scale internal uprising against Castro. He and others didn't protest strongly when the daytime mission was changed to a nighttime landing and moved to the remote Giron Beach peninsula, from which escape by the exiles was nearly impossible.

Another critical missing ingredient — unmentioned in the book — was a paucity of Latin American experts aiding the decisions.

The Bay of Pigs ended Bissell's government career and left him a broken man, shuffling from a think-tank to private industry to consulting.

A photograph on the cover of this book shows Kennedy commemorating the longtime public servant in a special ceremony — before showing him the door.

"If this were a parliamentary government," Kennedy told Bissell, "I would have to resign and you, a civil servant, would stay on. But being the system of government it is, a presidential government, you will