

Kennedy's Bay of Pigs Has Infected a Decade

THE WASHINGTON POST Sunday, April 11, 1971 C3



Associated Press

The Havana newspaper Hoy published this picture in late April, 1961, over a caption saying that it

showed Castro soldiers herding prisoners captured at the Bay of Pigs earlier in the month.

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"THERE'S AN OLD saying," President John F. Kennedy said in the wake of the Bay of Pigs debacle, "that victory has 100 fathers and defeat is an orphan."

It will be 10 years next Saturday since some 1500 Cuban refugees, trained and equipped by the Central Intelligence Agency, landed on the south shore of Cuba in an abortive invasion that ended two days later. Looking back over the intervening decade, that was probably the young President's greatest mistake.

Although Mr. Kennedy manfully took the responsibility, what was involved was far more than a question of victory or defeat. The Bay of Pigs set in train a host of actions whose results are in many cases still with us today. With additional information now at hand, including Nikita Khrushchev's reminiscences, it is worth a look at the ramifications of that fiasco.

At home, the disaster produced in the President a skepticism about advice and advisers, above all about the Joint Chiefs of Staff and the CIA. It was not long before all the leading figures in those sacrosanct establishments were replaced. Organizationally, McGeorge Bundy was moved into the White House from across the street, there to be succeeded in a new locale of power by Walt W. Rostow and finally by Henry A. Kissinger.

But it was the wider ramifications that now seem more important. Here were involved not just the United States' relationship with Latin America but its relationship with the Soviet Union and even the relationship between the Soviet Union and Communist China.

Affected, too, were Mr. Kennedy's view of Indochina and the view of his successor, Lyndon B. Johnson, when a crisis arose in the Dominican Republic. What the two Presidents did in those widely separated areas relates to the status of America today, both its internal divisions over the Indochina war and its growing aversion to international commitments.

Presidential Agony

OF COURSE, it is absurd to pile all the ills of today's America on the back of Mr. Kennedy's error in giving the go-ahead for the invasion of Cuba. But that there is a relationship is beyond doubt. And John F. Kennedy's place in history will be the poorer for it.

The Bay of Pigs details are well known and need not be repeated here beyond the simplest facts. Mr. Kennedy inherited the plan from the Eisenhower administration, he agonized over it, and in early April, 1961, he finally approved the invasion on the advice of his senior aides, military and civilian.

That the President agonized, I can testify first-hand, rereading now a memorandum of 45 minutes spent with him alone in the Oval Office on April 7. It is also true that I, like most other Washington journalists who knew something about what was up, failed to report it adequately.

To put the Bay of Pigs in context, one must recall the mood of the day, so different from that of April, 1971. In his presidential campaign, Mr. Kennedy had called for American help for the Cuban refugees from the island that Fidel Castro had conquered two years earlier. His opponent, Vice President Nixon, who knew what plans had been made in secret under President Eisenhower, replied that to do what Mr. Kennedy suggested "would lose all our friends in Latin America" and "would be an open invitation for Mr. Khrushchev to come in."

Remember that in his inaugural address, Mr. Kennedy declared to cheers that "we shall pay any price, bear any burden, meet any hardship, support any friend or oppose any foe in order to assure the survival and success of liberty." Castro and Cuba fell within that pledge, and Mr. Kennedy's National Security Council found that the continued existence of Castro's regime would endanger American relations with Latin America.

A Fulbright Caveat

ON APRIL 3, two of Mr. Kennedy's youthful aides, Arthur Schlesinger Jr. and Richard Goodwin, produced a State Department pamphlet calling "the present situation in Cuba" a "grave and urgent challenge" and speaking of "the seizure by international communism of a base and bridgehead in the Americas."

Sen. J. William Fulbright (D-Ark.), in a memorandum to the President, declared that "Castro is a thorn in our flesh but he is not a dagger in our hearts." But Fulbright could not dissuade either the President or his top aides.

Even after the debacle, the President, defending himself against charges that he had left the refugee forces to die on the beaches, spoke of

"subversion, infiltration and a host of other tactics" that made it "clearer than ever that we face a relentless struggle in every corner of the globe that goes far beyond the clash of armies or even nuclear armaments."

The most instant other problem at the time of Cuba was Laos. Gen. Eisenhower had told Mr. Kennedy just before the change of Presidents that if a political settlement could not be obtained in Laos, he would be willing, "as a last desperate hope, to intervene unilaterally."

Mr. Kennedy himself had told an off-the-record session of radio-TV officials April 6 that "intervention has many hazards, but a collapse is more hazardous. The alternatives are somber. We cannot permit Laos to be won by an insurgent group."

Doubtless he had in mind Khrushchev's January remarks approving insurgencies all over the world, which led Mr. Kennedy to promote counterinsurgency training and the Green Berets. But after the Bay of Pigs, the President's brother, Attorney General Robert F. Kennedy, remarked that if it had not been for the Cuban affair, the United States would probably be up to its ears "in the jungles of Laos."

A 'Tongue-Tied' Bargainer

IN JUNE, Mr. Kennedy went to Vienna to meet with Khrushchev. They did manage to cool the Laos issue. But Khrushchev took the offensive and Mr. Kennedy, clearly with the Bay of Pigs as a strike against him, was put on the defensive. The two talked of "miscalculation" and Mr. Kennedy said that he himself had miscalculated about the Bay of Pigs.

George F. Kennan, the former ambassador to the Soviet Union, was later to characterize the President at Vienna as a "tongue-tied young man, not forceful, with no ideas of his own." He added that the impression Mr. Kennedy made probably encouraged the Kremlin later to send missiles to Cuba.

The Vienna argument centered on Berlin. Khrushchev was so hard that Mr. Kennedy afterward asked veteran diplomat Llewellyn E. Thompson, then the ambassador to Moscow, whether it is "always like this." Thompson replied: "Par for the course."

The encounter with Khrushchev led Mr. Kennedy to ask Congress to increase the military establishment. And even though the "missile gap" that Mr. Kennedy had attacked in the presidential campaign was quickly found to be a Soviet rather than an American defi-

clency, Mr. Kennedy also increased the U.S. missile stockpile. The stage was being set for the 1962 Cuban missile crisis.

Khrushchev contends in his reminiscences that "we were quite certain that the (Bay of Pigs) invasion was only the beginning and that the Americans would not let Cuba alone." And "they feared, as much as we hoped, that a socialist Cuba might become a magnet that would attract other Latin American countries to socialism."

The question was discussed, wrote Khrushchev, by the Politburo. While on a visit to Bulgaria, he said, "one thought kept hammering away at my brain: What will happen if we lose Cuba?" And so, as Khrushchev told it, "the logical answer was missiles."

Khrushchev coupled this theme of protecting Cuba against what he said he felt would be a far stronger invasion with the idea that "our missiles would have equalized what the West likes to call 'the balance of power,' " meaning that at one stroke he could counter the growing American missile lead.

Kennan expressed the belief, in the tape he did for the Kennedy Library after the President's assassination, that Mr. Kennedy's behavior at Vienna "in effect, although not deliberately," led Khrushchev into the missile crisis because Khrushchev "failed to realize on that occasion what a man he was up against." Khrushchev also has said he found Mr. Kennedy "a very intelligent, likable person," though at Vienna "I felt he was politically inept, but was learning fast."

The missile crisis was a tremendous victory for the United States at the time, just as the Bay of Pigs had been a vast defeat at the moment. But if the Bay of Pigs led Khrushchev to the missile crisis, so the missile crisis outcome led the Kremlin to begin a vast new nuclear arms program.

Just how much was done between the missile crisis and the ouster of Khrushchev is still obscure, but there is no doubt that his successors have gone forward with a massive program to reach the parity of today. They surely swore to one another that never again would there be such a Soviet humiliation.

Did the Bay of Pigs lead Mr. Kennedy into Indochina? Some have suggested that, but McGeorge Bundy and others in the Kennedy entourage deny it. Still, one has a nagging suspicion that after the Bay of Pigs, Mr. Kennedy felt the necessity of showing strength. He held back on Laos to join in the Geneva agreement on neutrality for that country.

Mr. Kennedy said he believed in the domino theory. Hence it may be argued that he began sending thousands of Americans to Vietnam as advisers simply in line with such beliefs as those expressed in his inaugural address. In his last State of the Union address, in 1963, Mr. Kennedy declared that "the spearpoint of aggression has been blunted in South Vietnam."

The Democrats had long suffered under Republican charges that they "lost China." Mr. Kennedy tried to use

the same tactic in the 1960 campaign against Richard Nixon on the "loss" of Cuba to communism. Both these events, plus the Bay of Pigs, seemingly were in Lyndon Johnson's mind when he sent overwhelming American forces into the Dominican Republic to assure that it would not be "lost" to communism.

The Dominican affair, on top of the Bay of Pigs and despite the Cuban missile crisis, helped to sour American relations south of the border. But that was minimal, in geopolitical terms, compared to the Soviet-American-Chinese fallout.

The Bay of Pigs can hardly be blamed for the Sino-Soviet break. But it is a fact that Peking pounded on Khrushchev after the missile crisis, charging him with "adventurism" for going in and with "capitulationism" for pulling out under Mr. Kennedy's pressure. If the Bay of Pigs led or helped lead Khrushchev to the missile crisis, then the Bay of Pigs at least added to the Sino-Soviet quarrel.

The course of history in the decade since the Bay of Pigs has been affected by thousands of facts, suspicions, theories, calculations and miscalculations plus the nature of the personalities who have ruled in many nations. The Bay of Pigs cannot be credited or blamed for the trend of events.

Still, the evidence now available more than suggests that major elements in the action-reaction phenomenon in international affairs this past decade did have an origin in, or receive an impetus from, that disastrous error of America's young President.