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C.I.A. Bares Own Bungling In '61 Report on Bay of Pigs

By TIM WEINER

WASHINGTON, Feb. 21 — One of the most secret documents of the cold war is out: the Central Intelligence Agency's brutally honest inquest into the 1961 Bay of Pigs fiasco, which laid the blame for the disastrous invasion of Cuba squarely on the agency's own institutional arrogance, ignorance and incompetence.

The 150-page document also cautioned those who would use the C.I.A. to overthrow enemies, saying that job belongs to the Pentagon and its broad arsenal of military forces around the globe.

The report painted a picture of an agency shot through with deadly self-deception, one whose secret operations were "ludicrous or tragic or both." In mounting the Cuban operation, almost none of the C.I.A. officers were able to speak Spanish, yet those same officers heaped contempt on their Cuban "puppets" hand-picked to replace Fidel Castro, the report said.

The Bay of Pigs invasion, carried out in April 1961, was organized by the C.I.A. and was intended to lead to the overthrow of Mr. Castro, whose Communist Government just 90 miles from the Florida coast was seen as a beachhead for Soviet influence in the Western Hemisphere.

While the basic facts of the commando raid on Cuba are known, the report, titled "The Inspector General's Survey of the Cuban Operation," is an untapped well of cold, hard facts. A leading historian of the operation, Peter Wyden, wrote wistfully in his book "Bay of Pigs: The Untold Story" (Simon & Schuster, 1979) that the report was "probably buried forever."

This week, after 36 years of secrecy during which all but one copy of the report was destroyed, a Freedom of Information Act request by the National Security Archive, a non-

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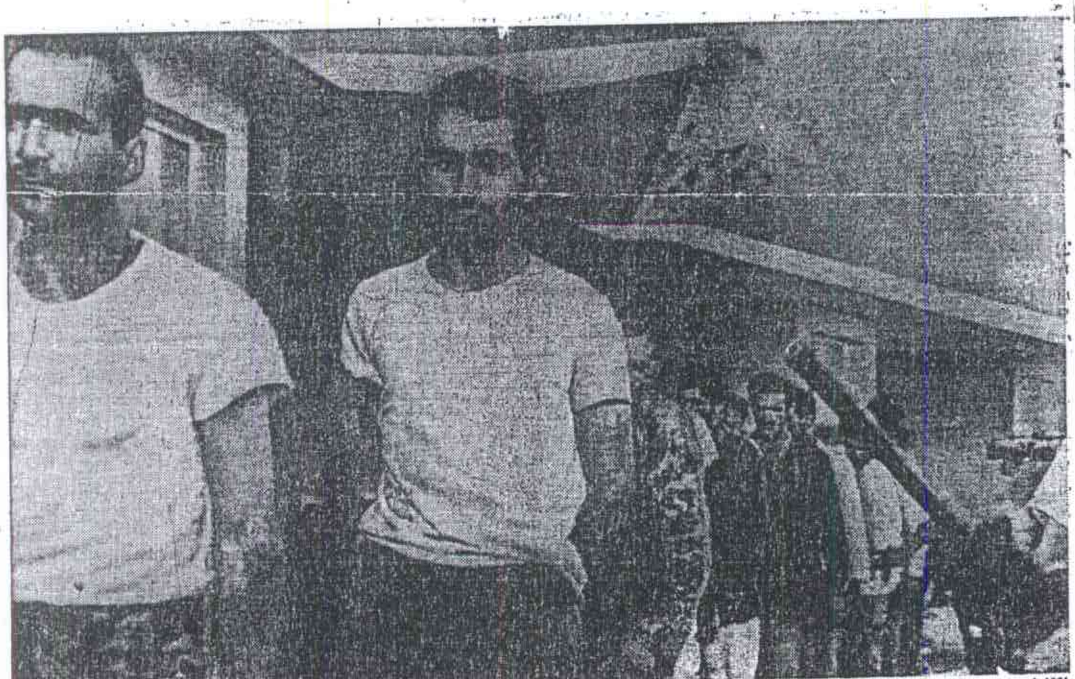

United Press International, 1961

Cuban invaders captured by Fidel Castro's forces in the failed Bay of Pigs operation in 1961 being marched off to prison. C.I.A. employees, an agency report on the invasion said, had treated the Cubans "like dirt."

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profit group, has unearthed the sole surviving volume, which was locked in the safe of the Director of Central Intelligence. The report, written by the C.I.A.'s inspector general, Lyman Kirkpatrick, after a six-month investigation, is a record of bungling by the best and the brightest and makes for chilling reading.

The C.I.A.'s leaders believed that it was President John F. Kennedy's failure to approve an attack on Cuba's air force to coincide with the landing of commandos that caused the deaths of nearly 1,500 raiders. And in their rebuttals to the report by Mr. Kirkpatrick, they wrote that his depiction of "unmitigated and almost willful bumbling and disaster" — in the words of Gen. Charles P. Cabell, then Deputy Director of Central Intelligence — was motivated by personal malice. Mr. Kirkpatrick had wanted to be the agency's spymaster, but his career advancement stalled when he contracted polio in the early 1950's.

The report said the operation, whose planning began in April 1960, started as a classic covert action "in which the hand of the United States would not appear." The plan called for a group of exiled Cuban leaders, supported by a C.I.A. cadre, to build political momentum slowly toward toppling Mr. Castro, who had taken power 16 months earlier.

Very quickly, "this operation took on a life of its own," the report said. "The agency was going forward without knowing precisely what it was doing."

The C.I.A.'s officers "became so wrapped up in the operation as such that they lost sight of ultimate goals." Their budget multiplied from $4.4 million to $46 million. Within a year, they created an unruly, ill-trained, crudely supported invasion force whose cover was blown, and whose existence had been broadly hinted at in newspaper reports before the operation took place. "Plausible denial" — the ability of the United States to lie convincingly about its role in the invasion — became "a pathetic illusion," the report said.

With crisscrossing lines of communication and control among bases and camps in Miami, Key West, New Orleans, Nicaragua and Guatemala, all under sporadic command from headquarters, the C.I.A created a "complex and bizarre organizational situation" that was doomed to fail.

The officers chosen to staff the huge operation were in many instances incapable; "very few spoke Spanish or had Latin-American background knowledge," the report said.

Even today, C.I.A. officials say that this lack of foreign languages and experience remains one of the biggest problems at the agency.

Agency employees treated the Cubans training to overthrow Mr. Castro "like dirt." The abuse left the hungry, barefoot, disillusioned trainees "wondering what kind of Cuban future they were fighting for."

The Revolutionary Council, the C.I.A.-created alternative to Mr. Castro, became the agency's "puppets," as described in the report. "Isolated in a Miami safe house, 'voluntarily' but under strong persuasion, the Revolutionary Council members awaited the outcome of a military operation which they had not planned and knew little about while agency-written bulletins were issued to the world in their name."

If the C.I.A. could not work with Cubans, Mr. Kirkpatrick warned prophetically, "how can the agency possibly succeed with the natives of Black Africa or Southeast Asia?"

President Kennedy had been in office just three months when the invasion took place. The report argued that he might not have fully grasped the details of the raid, because the C.I.A. did not fully explain them. "Detailed policy authorization for some specific actions was either never fully clarified or only resolved at the 11th hour," it said. "Even the central decision as to whether to employ the strike force was still somewhat in doubt up to the very moment of embarkation."

The C.I.A. convinced itself and the White House that the invasion would magically create in Cuba "an organized resistance that did not exist," composed of 30,000 Cubans who would "make their way through the Castro army and wade the swamps to rally to the liberators." This was self-deception, the report said, adding drily, "We are unaware of any planning by the agency or by the U.S. Government for this success."

On April 15, 1961, C.I.A. pilots knocked out part of Castro's air force, and were set to finish the job. At the last minute, on April 16, President Kennedy called off the air strikes, but the message did not reach the 1,511 commandos headed for the Bay of Pigs. Three days of fighting destroyed the invading force. A brigade commander sent his final messages: "We are out of ammo and fighting on the beach. Please send help," and: "In water. Out of ammo. Enemy closing in. Help must arrive in next hour."

It never came. Over the next few days two American teams and a crew of Cuban frogmen plucked 26 survivors off the beaches and reefs.

After the inquiry completed its work, the agency clearly viewed the report as poison: "In unfriendly hands, it can become a weapon unjustifiably to attack the entire mission, organization, and functions of the agency," warned General Cabell, the Deputy Director at the time. Nevertheless, the C.I.A. agreed to release the report as part of a slow process of making public parts of its past.

Read with hindsight, the accumulated weight of the details in Mr. Kirkpatrick's report makes a case that "the fundamental cause of the disaster" was the C.I.A.'s incompetence, not President Kennedy's failure to follow through with the air raids in support of the commandos.

The agency failed the President by failing to tell him "that success had become dubious and to recommend that the operation be therefore canceled," it said.

The consequence of canceling was chagrin: "The world already knew all about the preparations, and the Government's and the agency's embarrassment would have been public," the report said. The cost of continuing was "failure, which brought even more embarrassment, carried death and misery to hundreds" and wounded American prestige. "The choice was between retreat without honor and a gamble between ignominious defeat and dubious victory," the report said.

"The agency chose to gamble, at rapidly decreasing odds," in an operation sabotaged by bad intelligence, incompetent staffing, illusionary planning, and self-deception. In the future, it concluded, when the White House wanted to engage in major covert operations "which may profoundly affect world events," it should call the Defense Department, not the C.I.A.

The report was released under the Freedom of Information Act to the National Security Archive, which collects and publishes declassified Government documents. Peter Kornbluh, director of the archive's Cuba Documentation Project, called the report "one of the most important examples of self-criticism ever written inside the agency." He said it would be posted on Sunday at the archive's web site: http://www.seas.gwu.edu/nsarchive.

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NYT
2-22-98

The C.I.A. on the C.I.A.: A Scathing View

WASHINGTON, Feb. 21 — Following are excerpts from "The Inspector General's Survey of the Cuban Operation," a highly critical internal inquiry into the Central Intelligence Agency's Bay of Pigs invasion in 1961. The 150-page report, written in numbered sections, was one of the most secret documents of the cold war. It was released under the Freedom of Information Act to the National Security Archive, a nonprofit group that collects and publishes declassified Government reports.

31. The agency committed at least four extremely serious mistakes in planning:

a. Failure to subject the project, especially in its latter frenzied stages, to a cold and objective appraisal by the best operating talent available, particularly by those not involved in the operation, such as the Chief of Operations and the chiefs of the Senior Staffs. Had this been done, the two following mistakes (b and c, below) might have been avoided.

b. Failure to advise the President, at an appropriate time, that success had become dubious and to recommend that the operation be therefore canceled and that the problem of unseating Castro be restudied.

c. Failure to recognize that the project had become overt and that the military effort had become too large to be handled by the agency alone.

d. Failure to reduce successive project plans to formal papers and to leave copies of them with the President and his advisers and to request specific written approval and confirmation thereof.

32. Timely and objective scrutiny of the operation in the months before the invasion, including study of all available intelligence, would have demonstrated to agency officials that the clandestine paramilitary operations had almost totally failed, that there was no controlled and responsive underground movement ready to rally to the invasion force, and that Castro's ability both to fight back and to roll up the internal opposition must be very considerably upgraded.

33. It would also have raised the question of why the United States should contemplate pitting 1,500 soldiers, however well trained and armed, against an enemy vastly superior in number and armament on a terrain which offered nothing but vague hope of significant local support. It might also have suggested that the agency's responsibility in the operation should be drastically revised and would certainly have revealed that there was no real plan for the post-invasion period, whether for success or failure. . . .

37. Cancellation would have been embarrassing. The brigade could not have been held any longer in a ready status, probably could not have been held at all. Its members would have spread their disappointment far and wide. Because of multiple security leaks in this huge operation, the world already knew about the preparations, and the Government's and the agency's embarrassment would have been public.

38. However, cancellation would have averted failure, which brought even more embarrassment, carried death and misery to hundreds, destroyed millions of dollars' worth of U.S. property, and seriously damaged U.S. prestige. . . .

40. It is beyond the scope of this report to suggest what U.S. action might have been taken to consolidate victory, but we can confidently assert that the agency had no intelligence evidence that Cubans in significant numbers could or would join the invaders or that there was any kind of an effective and cohesive resistance movement under anybody's control, let alone the agency's, that could have furnished internal leadership for an uprising in support of the invasion. The consequences of a successful lodgment, unless overtly supported by U.S. armed forces, were dubious. . . .

41. The choice was between retreat without honor and a gamble between ignominious defeat and dubious victory. The agency chose to gamble, at rapidly decreasing odds.

42. The project had lost its covert nature by November 1960. As it continued to grow, operational security became more and more diluted. For more than three months before the invasion the American press was reporting, often with some accuracy, on the recruiting and training of Cubans. Such massive preparations could only be laid to the U.S. The agency's name was freely linked with these activities. Plausible denial was a pathetic illusion.