



# CUBA

ON THE  
BRINK



**CASTRO,  
THE MISSILE CRISIS,  
AND  
THE SOVIET COLLAPSE**

**JAMES G. BLIGHT,  
BRUCE J. ALLYN  
& DAVID A. WELCH**



discharged his duty as a revolutionary—how, exactly, he and Cuba sought to “make the revolution.” As we leave, many of our younger members struggle to keep pace with McNamara, our eldest, back to the conference room.

**TROYANOVSKY:** We wanted to have a recess, but Mr. McNamara is asking for the floor.

**MCNAMARA:** Mr. Chairman, I ask your permission for a thirty- or sixty-second intervention in relation to what Minister Escalante has said. As I indicated in my opening statement, I believe Mongoose was reprehensible. I said in Antigua it was stupid. I don't think there is any purpose in going over it today, and I don't wish to try to argue the issue. I want to make only two points. First, it's incorrect for Minister Escalante to say that President Kennedy ever approved the potential use of military force in connection with Mongoose. He never did. Nor did the Chiefs. Nor, I think, did the Special Group [(Augmented)] ever mean to. That does not make Mongoose other than reprehensible, stupid, and I would say irresponsible.

However, the purpose of this meeting, in part, was to understand why otherwise intelligent people—leave me out of it—but otherwise intelligent people engaged in such actions. In a sense, Eisenhower, Jack Kennedy, Robert Kennedy, Dean Rusk, and McGeorge Bundy were all associated with a series of operations which included the Bay of Pigs, Mongoose, and many other equally stupid, reprehensible, and apparently irresponsible actions. Why did a group of intelligent, responsible leaders engage in it? We haven't had one word on that subject. I urge we do so before we break. Thank you.

**TROYANOVSKY:** Thank you very much. I think we will have our recess now, and we'll meet again at 3:00. Excuse me, ladies and gentlemen, 2:30. Reconvene at 2:30.

#### U.S. PLANS AND INTENTIONS:

“... deeper into the military aspects ...”

So charged do the U.S. participants feel the atmosphere to be that they appear to overreact to the initial request of the session, posed by Gen-

subject”

intervention engen-  
exaggerated. This  
Antigua conference  
encountered there;  
of mindless U.S.  
during McNamara,  
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In fact, the docu-  
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conference three

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which proves to  
utter absurdity of  
and making us  
walling on these  
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in Latin America.  
book titled, “Cuban  
It was filled with  
rhaps, was more  
Castro to Amer-  
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While history has judged Kennedy harshly for the Bay of Pigs fiasco, Kennedy had, in fact, been pinned on the horns of a dilemma that he had inherited from the Eisenhower administration. He was reluctant to use American military force directly against Castro because of the ill will this would generate in Latin America. He knew that overt intervention in Cuba would undermine the improvement he sought in U.S. relations with Latin America through the Alliance for Progress. But as CIA director Allen Dulles argued vehemently, it would be difficult to turn back once preparations for an exile invasion were under way in Central America. If the invaders were pulled out and brought back to the United States, or if they were otherwise dispersed, they would blow the cover on the operation and alienate the right (who would conclude that Kennedy lacked nerve), the left (who would be appalled at the idea in the first place), and the Latin Americans (who would question the president's commitment to non-intervention). Perhaps most importantly, Khrushchev would conclude that Kennedy was soft on communism. Dulles feared that canceling the operation would therefore trigger communist takeovers throughout the hemisphere. Moreover, Dulles noted, it was also entirely possible that the exiles would resist being disarmed.<sup>75</sup>

The plan met strong opposition from many of the administration's Latin American specialists and top military advisers. Sen. J. William Fulbright wrote a detailed memorandum to the president leveling a full broadside against the scheme on legal, political, and moral grounds. "To give this activity even covert support is of a piece with the hypocrisy and cynicism for which the United States is constantly denouncing the Soviet Union in the United Nations and elsewhere," Fulbright wrote. "The point will not be lost on the rest of the world—nor on our own consciences."<sup>76</sup> But Kennedy decided that the landing should go ahead, with the United States keeping itself as far away from it as possible. He would later take full public responsibility for the fiasco, but he would thereafter harbor serious doubts about the competence of the CIA.

Covert operations against Castro continued, though apparently with little expectation of success on the part of senior policy makers. Operation Mongoose began in February 1962, and provided an outlet for the government's hostility toward the Castro regime—a "psychological salve for inaction," as Special Assistant for National Security McGeorge Bundy would later describe it.<sup>77</sup> But having been burned once by a large-scale attempt to unseat Castro, Kennedy was loath to try a frontal assault a second time. He settled on a policy of harassment,



saber-rattling, and diplomatic isolation intended to keep Castro off balance and to contain him. The harassment included running operatives back and forth between Cuba and Florida, blowing up factories, and staging hit-and-run attacks against the Cuban coast. The saber-rattling included bolstering the deployment of American troops in the region, buzzing Cuban air fields, flying high-altitude reconnaissance missions over the island, and staging threatening exercises (including one called PHIBRIGLEX-62, in which marines invaded the mythical Republic of Vieques to unseat a mythical dictator called "Ortsac"—Castro spelled backward). Kennedy completed Cuba's diplomatic isolation at Punta del Este in January 1962, when the OAS declared Castro's government incompatible with the inter-American system, excluded Cuba from the OAS, and imposed an arms embargo.

#### American "Imperialism": Two Perspectives

Such were the depths to which U.S.-Cuban relations had fallen on the eve of the Cuban missile crisis. Rarely, during the previous century and a half, had those relations been better than cordial; never had they been bilaterally friendly. Curiously, though, no matter what the state of relations at any given time, they always appeared to be better from the American perspective than from the Cuban. The United States generally felt that it had exercised forbearance throughout the colonial phase of Cuba's history; it was convinced it had done Cuba an important service in the Spanish-American war; it sincerely believed that it had treated Cuba with patience and equanimity ever since; and it resented—because it did not understand—Castro's anti-Americanism.

The American occupation of Spain's former colonies was undoubtedly an imperialism of sorts. But the dominant contemporary view in American historiography was that it was a "benevolent imperialism," "an imperialism against imperialism. It did not last long and it was not really bad."<sup>78</sup> Had voice been given to the perception common in Cuba today that the United States waited just until Cuban insurgents had brought Spain to her knees and then opportunistically snatched victory from the hands of the patriots, only to supplant one foreign rule with another, the sentiment would have been dismissed in the United States as at least ungrateful, and probably delusional. By the same token, few in Cuba would have credited the claim of Professor Bemis that Cubans "hoped for the intervention of their great friend and neighbor, the republic of the mainland, to free them from their monarchial mistress in the Old World."<sup>79</sup> There were those in Cuba

who had indeed hoped for it, but it was difficult for them to see the timing given the professionalization of the Cuban army that had begun two years earlier. It was also difficult not to be skeptical of the intervention, which seemed to serve American interests more efficiently than it served Cuban interests. It was difficult (especially for South American interventionists) to see the intervention as a means of liberating the colonies or dependence on the United States. "We have not interfered," the United States said, "in the self-denying with respect to the United States that the United States has favored annexation of them at its convenience."

Even more puzzling was Teller's resolution had any disposition or intention to control over the said island. Teller asserts its determinative influence on government and control over the island. Teller maintains that "[t]hese islands in Asia hardened to a certain degree. This was an evaluation of the United States. As a result of the intervention and Teller's resolution, the first and fourth provisions were completely incongruous: the United States had a foreign foothold in the Caribbean."

Bemis goes on to say that the United States in the exercise of its power was an emblem of pride and arrogance. "It is the attitude in the United States toward Cuba. The urge to intervene was bridled, curbed, and checked by the competition to imperialism that could have made. From the United States was as blatant an act of imperialism as ever imagined. What Be-