

Capital Reading

'Bay of Pigs' Sweeps Away Myths About Cuban Invasion

Reviewed by Karl E. Meyer

An editorial writer for The Washington Post, Meyer is co-author of "The Cuban Invasion."

THE BAY OF PIGS. By Haynes Johnson. Norton. 368 pp. \$5.95.

THIS VOLUME admirably closes a gap in the public record concerning what Haynes Johnson rightly calls the most badly bungled military operation since the Light Brigade charged into Balaklava. While it doesn't wholly explain the reason why, it sweeps away many of the myths that still cling to the Cuban invasion.

Johnson is a competent staff writer for The Washington Star. He and his publisher had

the enterprising idea of interviewing leaders and survivors of the invading force to establish what happened while memories were fresh.

Though Johnson had a free hand in writing the book, the story he relates is endorsed by four of the prominent leaders of Brigade 2506: Manuel Artime, Jose Perez San Roman, Erneido Oliva and Enrique Ruiz-Williams.

This, then, is Brigade officers' own version of the grotesque debacle on the Bay of Pigs, and as such the book will be a primary source for historians in years to come.

What is their story? In its salient aspects, it does not contradict previously published accounts. It does add devastating detail, all the more credible since the tone is calm and since the four leaders have little to gain by taking on the CIA.

And it is the CIA that emerges as the principal architect of the disaster, which had its genesis in March, 1960, when President Eisenhower authorized the agency to train a force of Cuban exiles for use against the Castro regime.

THE CUBANS were recruited in Miami and sent to camps in Guatemala, where the force grew and so did the plan. But not wholly with presidential assent. It was Mr. Eisenhower's understanding that he was authorizing only guerrilla training.

But according to John-

son, the CIA decided to drop the guerrilla approach and train an army along conventional lines — and sent out the order for this four days before the 1960 election apparently without troubling to inform the President.

That is the first depth-charge in the book. Others include:

At the end of March, 1961, after President Kennedy had taken office, an army colonel working for CIA told the Cubans that "politicians" or "chiefs above" or "forces in the Administration" were opposing the invasion.

If the invasion was not approved, San Roman was informed, "you come here and make some kind of show, as if you were putting us, the advisors, in prison, and you go ahead with the program as we



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have talked about it, and we will give you the whole plan, even if we are your prisoners."

• Contrary to explicit assurances to the President, the CIA never informed the Cuban leaders of the detailed battle plan, or of the alternative strategy devised in the event the plan misfired. Mr. Kennedy also was assured that no Americans would take part; the first man ashore was an American frogman.

These are only a few of the unsettling revelations in a tale of incompetence, egregious stupidity and even insubordination — strong words, surely, but supported by a narrative that should be read by every member of Congress.

The tale is not without a brighter side. Though the book is manifestly sympathetic to Brigade 2506 (named after the serial number of a Cuban who died in training camp), it convincingly lays to rest the canard that the Cubans were mere cowardly mercenaries.

They fought well, they stuck together in Castro's prison until the United States paid for their release, and whatever their faults they were more victims than free agents. One vignette is especially moving — the hitherto untold story of the 22 Cubans who drifted without food or

water for 15 days until their sailboat neared New Orleans. Only 12 survived.

THE CHIEF FAULT of the book is that it fails to place the entire mad venture into historical and political context. Many anti-Castro Cubans were opposed to the entire approach implicit in the CIA scheme; their views are not represented in these pages. Nor is it fair to fault Sen. J. W. Fulbright for a supposedly equivocal stand in opposing the invasion without mentioning his memorandum to Mr. Kennedy which was hardly equivocal.

These are blemishes in an otherwise first-rate piece of reporting. "The real question posed by the Bay of Pigs," Johnson writes, "is not whether the Cubans would have won had they sufficient support, but whether they could have fashioned a political triumph after their military victory."

On the evidence of this book, the answer must be negative. Throughout, the real offense of the CIA was that it treated all-too-credulous Cubans as stooges and puppets to be manipulated by shadowy masters.

It was not lack of the mythical "aircap" that doomed the invasion — it was total lack of respect for either principles or people.