

BAY OF PIGS REVISITED: Lessons from a Failure

LATE in 1962, White House Aide Theodore C. Sorensen relayed to President John Kennedy a request that a "distinguished author" be allowed to see the files on the U.S.-sponsored Bay of Pigs invasion that had ended in disaster about a year and a half before. Kennedy refused. "This isn't the time," he told Sorensen. "Besides, we want to tell that story ourselves."

Now, apparently, is the time—and two members of Kennedy's White House staff are telling the story themselves. One is Ted Sorensen, whose account forms the first installment in *Look* magazine's serialization of his forthcoming book about Kennedy. The other is Arthur M. Schlesinger Jr., whose own book is being serialized by *LIFE*. Their recollections will certainly not be the last; but jointly, and with remarkably few contradictions between them, they do provide the most detailed account to date. What emerges is not only the story of an appalling failure—a failure of preparation, of command and, in the end, of nerve. At a time when U.S. intervention abroad is again a major issue, the story also becomes a classic example of how not to go about the business of intervening.

A Terrible Idea

Sorensen, who was Kennedy's top staff technician both in the Senate and the White House, notes that his account is "limited by the fact that I knew nothing whatever of the operation until after it was over," although subsequently Kennedy poured his heart out to him. Schlesinger, who had left Harvard to become a presidential adviser, says that he considered the whole Bay of Pigs plan to be a "terrible idea" while it was under discussion, and had so told the President in memos and in private conversation.

Both memoirists assign to Kennedy what Sorensen calls "many and serious mistakes." Both admire Kennedy's insistence on bearing the public blame for the fiasco. Sorensen recalls how Kennedy told a news conference the obvious fact that he was "the responsible officer of government," after remarking ruefully: "Victory has a hundred fathers and defeat is an orphan." Yet Sorensen also remembers how, while walking in the White House garden the same day, Kennedy "told me, at times in caustic tones, of some of the other fathers of defeat who had let him down." The "fathers" were the new President's top-level advisers, particularly in the Pentagon and Central Intelligence Agency, most of them Eisenhower Administration holdovers. By the Sorensen-Schlesinger account, these advisers misadvised, misled and misinformed Kennedy. They are even charged with having overawed him. Schlesinger speaks of the "massed and caparisoned authority of his senior officials" and quotes Kennedy as saying after the event: "You always assume that the military and intelligence people have some secret skill not available to ordinary mortals."

In their defense of Kennedy, Sorensen and Schlesinger may have inadvertently done him a disservice—by suggesting how easily he allowed himself to be misled. More important, they call into question the basic decision-making process of American government. For Schlesinger insists that Kennedy was a prisoner of events, surrounded by "a collection of officials prepared to sacrifice the world's growing faith in the new American President in order to defend interests and pursue objectives of their own." And according to Sorensen, the whole Bay of Pigs project "seemed to move mysteriously and inexorably toward execution without either the President's being able to obtain a firm grip on it or reverse it." Still, whatever weaknesses there may have been—or may remain—in government decision-making, there seems nothing wrong with the apparatus that firm leadership at the top cannot cure. The trouble at the time, both chroniclers argue, was the President's newness. He had been in

office only twelve weeks and, writes Sorensen: "He did not fully know the strengths and weaknesses of his various advisers. He had not yet geared the decision-making process to fulfill his own needs, to isolate the points of no return."

Schlesinger and Sorensen stress the fact that early in 1960 President Eisenhower gave a go-ahead to the U.S. Central Intelligence Agency to train, supply and support anti-Castro Cuban exiles in Guatemala. It went without saying that those exiles would eventually strike at Cuba and try to overthrow Castro. Ike crossed no *i*'s and dotted no *i*'s as to the specifics of the plan. In Sorensen's words, Kennedy "inherited the plan, the planners and, most troubling of all, the Cuban exile brigade—an armed force, flying another flag, highly trained in secret Guatemalan bases, eager for one mission only."

Sorensen reports that Kennedy, "when briefed on the operation by the CIA as President-elect in Palm Beach, had been astonished at its magnitude and daring. He told me later on that he had grave doubts from that moment on." Schlesinger also reports that Kennedy was deeply dubious of the whole idea. But at one of the formal meetings that Kennedy held on the subject after he became President, he was persuaded by the plan's advocates that "the simplest thing, after all, might be to let the Cubans [meaning the exiles] go where they yearned to go—to Cuba." He also was not unmindful of what benefits a successful invasion could bring, and in early April all the hot inside talk in Washington was that "the Kennedys would knock off Castro soon."

Trying to Keep It Quiet

Perhaps the most persuasive of the invasion advocates was CIA Director Allen Dulles, who, according to Sorensen, reminded Kennedy of the success of the CIA-sponsored overthrow of a pro-Communist Guatemalan government in 1954. Said Allen Dulles to Kennedy: "I stood right here at Ike's desk and told him I was certain our Guatemalan operation would succeed. And, Mr. President, the prospects for this [Cuba] plan are even better than they were for that one." There was a strong suggestion that Kennedy could not afford to back away from a long-prepared anti-Castro project and appear to be soft on Communism—softer than the Republicans had been. If the Cuban exile brigade were disbanded, it was argued, they would fan out all over Latin America, and explain how the U.S. "had lost its nerve" in the fight against Communism. "Having created the brigade as an option," says Schlesinger, "the CIA now presented its use against Cuba as a necessity." Later, Kennedy told Schlesinger: "I probably made a mistake in keeping Allen Dulles on. It's not that Dulles is not a man of great ability. He is. But I have never worked with him and therefore I can't estimate his meaning when he tells me things . . . Dulles is a legendary figure, and it's hard to operate with legendary figures." Kennedy also said: "I made a mistake in putting Bobby into the Department of Justice. He is wasted there . . . Bobby should be in CIA."

In any event, when the time came, Kennedy approved the proposed invasion. According to Schlesinger, the President strictly stipulated that "the plans be drawn on the basis of *no U.S. military intervention*." Sorensen recalls that stipulation with slight but highly significant differences. Kennedy, he said, insisted that there be no "direct, overt" participation of "American armed forces in Cuba."

Overt was the key word. Sorensen says that what Kennedy wanted—and was misled into thinking he would get—was a "quiet, even though large-scale, infiltration of 1,400 Cuban exiles back into their homeland"; an air strike or so would have been the "only really noisy enterprise."

In the interests of keeping things quiet, Kennedy vetoed

the original plan—approved by the Joint Chiefs of Staff—for the exiles to land at Trinidad, a town on the southern coast of Cuba, 178 miles southeast of Havana with, as Schlesinger says, the “advantages of a harbor, a defensible beachhead, remoteness from Castro’s main army, and easy access to the protective Escambray Mountains.” But Kennedy thought a Trinidad landing would be “too spectacular.”

The CIA planners therefore proposed other possible landing sites, and the Bay of Pigs was chosen. Sorensen reports that the Joint Chiefs failed to inform “either Kennedy or McNamara that they still thought Trinidad preferable,” while Schlesinger recalls that the Chiefs said they still preferred Trinidad—but said it “softly.” At one point Dean Rusk suggested that the operation be launched from Guantánamo, thereby providing the invaders with an opportunity for retreat; but the Joint Chiefs rejected that idea, and Rusk later complained to Schlesinger that “the Pentagon people” were willing to risk “the President’s head” but not the U.S. base.

Again, by the accounts of both Sorensen and Schlesinger, Kennedy was done in by his advisers. He was assured that the invasion might well set off an anti-Castro uprising in Cuba—which constituted a bad misreading of the political situation. Moreover, he had been told all along that if the invasion as such failed, the anti-Castro forces could melt into the mountains and fight as guerrillas. According to Sorensen, the trouble was that Kennedy, who could not have looked at a map very carefully, did not realize that from the Bay of Pigs, “the 80-mile route to the Escambray Mountains, to which he had been assured they could escape, was so long, so swampy and so covered by Castro’s troops, that this was never a realistic alternative.”

Everyone was agreed upon one thing: the invasion would have no chance of success unless Castro’s own little air force was knocked out beforehand. Kennedy gave permission for Cuban-piloted B-26s, flown out of Nicaragua nearly 600 miles from Cuba, to strike at Castro’s airstrips on April 15, two days before the actual invasion. An elaborate “cover” story—to the effect that the planes were actually flown by defectors from Castro’s own air force—was devised. As Sorensen says, the B-26s were “World War II vintage planes . . . possessed by so many nations, including Cuba, that American sponsorship would be difficult to prove.”

That first B-26 flight attacked on schedule, with indifferent results. Still according to the plan, a second B-26 bombing strike against Castro’s airfields had been laid on for D-morning itself. But the “defector” cover for the first raid, as Sorensen puts it, “was quickly torn apart—which the President realized he should have known was inevitable in an open society.” It was at about that point that the realization finally dawned on Kennedy: he had approved a plan on the supposition that it would be “both clandestine and successful” but which was, in fact, “too large to be clandestine and too small to be successful.”

The Air Issue

With the U.S. caught in the act of sponsoring the first B-26 raid, reports Schlesinger, Secretary of State Dean Rusk, backed by McGeorge Bundy, convinced the President that the D-day morning raid “would put the U.S. in an untenable position.” Everyone, says Sorensen, would have regarded it as “an overt, unprovoked attack by the U.S. on a tiny neighbor.” Kennedy canceled the second strike; he changed his mind later, but after the strike was reinstated, it was rendered useless by bad weather. Sorensen carefully points out that Kennedy did not—as is often maintained—“cancel U.S. air cover” for the landing, for the simple reason that such U.S. air cover had never been planned; the cancellation involved only the second strike against Cuban airports.

The results of this cancellation are in dispute. Schlesinger says that the “second strike might have protracted the stand on the beachhead from three days to ten.” Sorensen writes that “there is no reason to believe that Castro’s air force, having survived the first air strike and been dispersed into hiding, would have been knocked out by the second one.” But Richard M. Bissell Jr., at the time of the Bay of Pigs the CIA deputy who planned the operation, takes another view

—as do most professional military men. Now a United Aircraft Corp. executive, Bissell argued last week in a Washington Evening Star interview that the scrub of the second strike may have made the critical difference: “If we had been able to drop five times the tonnage of bombs on Castro’s airfields, we would have had a damned good chance.”

Apart from the unsuccessful effort to knock off Castro’s little air force before the battle began, it was well recognized that the invasion force would require its own air cover. For that, Kennedy at first stipulated that those same, Cuban-piloted B-26s do the job. On D-day plus one, it became clear that the invasion force was desperately pinned down on the beach by unexpectedly stiff fire and Castro air attacks. Then, in a post-midnight meeting, Kennedy, as Sorensen says, “agreed finally that unmarked Navy jets could protect the B-26s when they provided the cover the next morning.” Schlesinger elaborates a bit: the President authorized “a flight of six unmarked jets from the Carrier Essex over the invasion area . . . Their mission would be to cover a new B-26 attack from Nicaragua. They were not to seek air combat or ground targets, but could defend the Cuban brigade’s planes from air attack.”

That was cutting it pretty close. Anyhow, it didn’t work; through some sort of slip-up, the U.S. Navy jets arrived on the scene about an hour after the Cuban exiles’ B-26s, which by then had mostly been shot down.

Questions of Commitment

Meanwhile, exile-Cuban supply ships, which were supposed to carry ammunition to the men on the beach, had been either sunk or scattered by Castro’s planes, and the crews threatened to mutiny rather than proceed to Cuba—unless the U.S. was willing to provide air and naval cover. Some of the Cuban exile leaders believed all along that the U.S. would have to come in fully on their side rather than let the operation fail. Schlesinger suggests that the CIA “unconsciously supposed” the same. Indeed Kennedy was under strong pressure to throw in U.S. air and naval forces. He refused, arguing that a U.S. invasion of Cuba would be far worse in its consequences than a temporary loss of prestige resulting from the failure at the Bay of Pigs—where 80 men died and 1,200 were captured. “What is prestige?” Kennedy asked. “Is it the shadow of power or the substance of power?” But it wasn’t merely U.S. prestige that was at stake; it was a chance, perhaps never to return, to dispose of the single Communist regime in the Western hemisphere, a government bent on spreading subversion through Latin America.

Kennedy learned a lot from the disaster. “The impact of failure,” says Schlesinger, “shook up the national security machinery,” and Sorensen adds that it brought about “basic changes in personnel, policy and procedures.” But Sorensen also quotes Kennedy as lamenting long after the event: “All my life I’ve known better than to depend on the experts. How could I have been so stupid, to let them go ahead?”

It is certainly true that he was much tougher and much sharper after the Bay of Pigs, and much more effective in the October 1962 missile confrontation against Cuba and the Soviet Union. But the lessons of the Bay of Pigs remained to haunt him and the U.S. The lessons were many. Secrecy and deviousness are necessary in the fight against Communism—but it is naive to assume that a nation like the U.S. can launch a sizable military operation and not be found out. It is useful to appeal to dissidents inside Communist countries—but given the known nature of Communist regimes, it is foolhardy to count on uprisings. It is right to make use of militant anti-Communists wherever they are—but it is impossible for the U.S. to achieve a major policy objective in a war by proxy. It is fine to use unorthodox and imaginative methods—but wrong to place essentially military decisions in the hands of amateurs.

Above all, it is deadly to start something one is not prepared to finish. In coping with the Dominican situation Lyndon Johnson may have used larger forces than necessary; but once he moved, he moved with power and decisiveness to assure the outcome, which was to prevent the establishment of a second Communist regime in the hemisphere.