KENNEDY'S WORST DISASTER

The full, uncensored story of how JFK was misled into making the worst mistake of his life—approving the landing at the Bay of Pigs. Sorensen reveals for the first time how the late President showed his bitterness against the CIA and the military, and why he never stopped blaming himself for this enormous error.

BY THEODORE C. SORENSEN

IN THE EARLY months of 1961, John F. Kennedy found himself in the eye of a hurricane. Sitting alone in the unnatural quiet that becalms the summit of power, beset by economic and military handicaps and quarrels within the free world, he saw the international horizon explode about him in one storm after another.

The worst disaster of that disaster-filled period, the incident that showed John Kennedy that his luck and his judgment had human limitations, and the experience that taught him invaluable lessons for the future, occurred on April 17 in the Zapata Swamp at the Cuban Bay of Pigs. A landing force of some 1,400 anti-Castro Cuban exiles, organized, trained, armed, transported and directed by the United States Central Intelligence Agency (CIA), was crushed in less than three days by the vastly more numerous forces of Cuban dictator Fidel Castro. America's tremendous military might was useless, but America's involvement was impossible to deny. Both publicly and privately, the President asserted sole responsibility. Many wondered, nevertheless, how he could have approved such a plan.

Indeed, the largest question in his own mind after it was all over, he told one reporter, was: "How could everybody involved have thought such a plan would succeed?"

When I relayed to the President late in 1962 the request of a distinguished author that he be given access to the files on the Bay of Pigs, the President replied in the negative.

"This isn't the time," he said. "Besides, we want to tell that story ourselves."

This is the time to tell that story—at least those parts about which I can speak with confidence. I am limited by the fact that I knew nothing of the operation until after it was over. When I asked the President a few days earlier about the bare hint I had received from another meeting, he replied with an earthy expression that too many advisers seemed frightened by the prospects of a fight, and stressed somewhat uncomfortably that he had no alternative. But in the days that followed the fiasco, the President talked to me about it at length—in the Mansion, in his office and as we walked on the White House lawn. He was aghast at the enormity of his error, angry at having been badly advised by some and let down by others, and anxious, he said, that I start giving

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some time to foreign affairs. "That's what's really important these days," he added.

What was really important in the Bay of Pigs affair was the very "gap between decision and execution, between planning and reality" that he had deplored in his first State of the Union speech. Kennedy was capable of choosing a wrong course but never a stupid one; and to understand how he came to make this decision requires a review not merely of the facts, but of *the facts and assumptions that were presented to him.*

The Eisenhower Administration authorized early in 1960 the training and arming of a Cuban exile army of liberation under the direction of the CIA. Shortly before the Presidential election of 1960, it was decided (although Eisenhower was apparently not informed of the decision) that this should be a conventional war force, not a guerrilla band, and its numbers were sharply increased.

On January 20, 1961, John 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. Unlike an inherited policy statement or executive order, this inheritance could not be simply disposed of by Presidential rescission or withdrawal. When briefed on the operation by the CIA as President-elect in Palm Beach, he had been astonished at its magnitude and daring. He told me later that he had grave doubts from that moment on. But the CIA authors of the landing plan not only presented it to the new President, but, as was perhaps natural, vigorously advocated it. He was, in effect, asked whether he was as willing as the Republicans to permit and assist these exiles to free their own island from dictatorship, or whether he was willing to liquidate well-laid preparations, leave Cuba free to subvert the hemisphere, disband an impatient army in training for nearly a year under miserable conditions, and have them spread the word that Kennedy had betrayed their attempt to depose Castro.

Are you going to tell this "group of fine young men," as Allen Dulles posed the question later in public, "who asked nothing other than the opportunity to try to restore a free government in their country . . . ready to risk their lives . . . that they would get no sympathy, no support, no aid from the United States?"

Would the President let them choose for themselves between a safe haven in this country and a fighting return to their own, or would he force them to disband against their wishes, never to be rallied again?

Moreover, the President had been told, this plan was now or never, for three reasons: first, because the brigade was fully trained, restive to fight and difficult to hold off; second, because Guatemala was under pressure to close the increasingly publicized and politically controversial training camps, and his only choice was to send the exiles back to Cuba, where they wished to go, or bring them back to this country, where they would broadcast their resentment. And third, because Russian arms would soon build up Castro's forces, Cuban airmen trained behind the Iron Curtain as MIG pilots would soon return to Cuba, and large numbers of crated MIG's had already arrived on the island. (With an excess of candor during the week before the landing, the President revealed the importance of this factor in his thinking when he stated in a TV interview, "If we don't move now, Mr. Castro may become a much greater danger than he is to us today.")

Finally, the President was told, the use of the exile brigade would make possible the toppling of Castro without actual aggression by the United States, without seeming to outsiders to violate our principles of nonintervention, with no risk of involvement and with little risk of failure.

"I stood right here at Ike's desk," Dulles said to Kennedy, as Kennedy told me later, "and told him I was certain our Guatemalan operation would succeed" (the operation of June, 1954, that restored a non-Communist government to Guatemala). "And, Mr. President, the prospects for this plan are even better than they were for that one."

With heavy misgiving, little more than a week before the plan was to go into effect, President Kennedy, having obtained the written endorsement of Gen. Lyman Lemnitzer and Adm. Arleigh Burke, representing the Joint Chiefs, and the verbal assent of Secretaries Dean Rusk and Robert McNamara, gave the final go-ahead signal. He did not regard Castro as a direct threat to the United States, but neither did he see why he should "protect" Castro from Cubans embittered because their revolution had been sold out to the Communists. Cancellation of the plan at that stage, he feared, would be interpreted as an admission that Castro ruled with popular support and would be around to harass Latin America for many years to come. His campaign pledges to aid anti-Castro rebels had not forced his hand, as some suspected, but he did feel that his disapproval of the plan would be a show of weakness inconsistent with his general stance.

"I really thought they had a good chance," he told me afterward, explaining it this way: If a group of Castro's own countrymen, without overt U.S. participation, could have succeeded in establishing themselves on the island, proclaimed a new government, rallied the people to their cause and ousted Castro, all Latin America would feel safer. And if instead they were forced to flee to the mountains, there to carry on guerrilla warfare, there would still have been a net gain.

The principal condition on which he insisted before approving the plan was to rule out any direct, overt participation of American armed forces in Cuba. Although it is not clear whether this represented any change in policy, this decision—while in one sense permitting the disaster that occurred—in another helped to prevent a far greater one. For had the U.S. Navy and Air Force been openly committed, no defeat would have been permitted, a full-scale U.S. attack would ultimately have been required, and—assuming a general war with the Soviets could have been avoided—there was no point in beginning with a Cuban brigade in the first place. Once having openly intervened in the air and on the sea, John Kennedy would not have permitted the Cuban exiles to be defeated on the ground.

"Obviously," he said later, "if you are going to have United States air cover, you might as well have a complete United States commitment, which would have meant a full-fledged invasion by the United States."

The results of such an overt unilateral intervention, "contrary to our traditions and to our international obligations," as the President said, would have been far more costly to the cause of freedom throughout the hemisphere than even Castro's continued presence. American conventional forces, moreover, were still below strength; and while an estimated half of our available Army combat divisions were tied down resisting guerrillas in the Cuban mountains, the Communists could have been on the move in Berlin or elsewhere in the world. Had such intervention appeared at all likely to be needed, Kennedy would never have approved the operation.

This decision not to commit U.S. forces emphasized the assumption underlying the pleas for the plan by its authors that it would succeed on its own. The decision also led to other restrictions designed to make the operation more covert and our involvement more concealed, restrictions that in fact impaired the plan's military prospects.

Yet no one in the CIA, Pentagon or Cuban exile movement raised any objection to the President's basic condition. On the contrary, they were so intent on action that they were either blind to danger or willing to assume that the President could be pressured into reversing his decision once the necessity arose.

Their planning, it turned out, proceeded almost as if open intervention by the United States were assumed, but their answers to the President's specific questions did not. Could the exile brigade achieve its goals without our military participation? he asked. He was assured in writing that it could—a wild misjudgment, a statement of hope at best. Were the members of the exile brigade willing to risk this effort without our military participation, the President asked, and to go ahead with the realization that we would not intervene if they failed? He was assured that they were—a serious misstatement, due at least to bad communications on the part of the CIA liaison officers. But as the result of these assurances, the President publicly pledged on April 12: ". . . there will not be, under any conditions, any intervention in Cuba by United States armed forces, and this government will do everything it possibly can—and I think it can meet its responsibilities—to make sure that there are no Americans involved in any actions inside Cuba . . . the basic issue in Cuba is not one between the United States and Cuba; it is between the Cubans themselves. And I intend to see that we adhere to that principle . . . this administration's attitude is so understood and shared by the anti-Castro exiles from Cuba in this country."

That pledge helped avoid any direct Ameri-

can attack the following week, thus limited our violation of international law and—despite pressures from the CIA and military—was never reversed or regretted by the President. But he was shortly to realize that he should have instead canceled the whole operation.

CHAPTER TWO

EARLY IN THE MORNING of Monday, April 17, 1961, the members of the Cuban exile Brigade 2506—some 1,400 to 1,500 Cubans of every race, occupation, class and party, well trained, well led and well armed—achieved tactical surprise in their place of landing, fought ably and bravely while their ammunition lasted, and inflicted heavy losses on a Castro force that soon numbered up to 20,000 men. The proximate cause of their defeat, according to the full-scale investigation later conducted under the chairmanship of Gen. Maxwell D. Taylor, was a shortage of ammunition, and the reasons for that shortage illustrate all the shortcomings of the operation.

The men had ample supplies with them, but, like most troops in their first combat, said General Taylor, they wasted ammunition in excessive firing, particularly upon encountering more immediate opposition than expected. A ten-day supply of ammunition, along with all the communications equipment and vital food and medical supplies, was on the freighter *Rio Escondido*, but that freighter was sunk offshore by Castro's tiny air force, effectively led by two or three rocket-equipped jet trainers (T-33's) on the morning of the landing, along with another supply-laden freighter, the *Houston*.

Additional supplies and ammunition were carried by two other freighters, the *Atlántico* and the *Caribe*. But, although the President's rule against Americans in the combat area was violated in other instances, no Americans were on board these freighters or in a position to control their movements. When their sister ships were sunk, these two, ignoring the order to regroup fifty miles from shore, fled south so far so fast that, by the time the U.S. Navy intercepted them, the *Caribe* was too far away to get back in time and be of help. By the time the *Atlántico* returned Tuesday night and transferred her ammunition supplies into the five small boats prepared to run them fifty miles in to the beach, it was too late to complete the run under cover of darkness. Certain that they could not survive another Castro air attack when dawn broke, the Cuban crews threatened to mutiny unless provided with a U.S. Navy destroyer escort and jet cover. With the hard-pressed exiles on the beach pleading for supplies, the convoy commander requested the CIA in Washington to seek the Navy's help; but CIA headquarters, unable to keep fully abreast of the situation on the beach and apparently unaware of the desperate need for ammunition in particular, instead called off the convoy without consulting the President.

That was the only request for air cover formally made from the area, and it never reached the President. Yet that very night, in a somber postmidnight meeting in the Cabinet Room, the CIA and Joint Chiefs were asking him to reverse his public pledge and openly introduce American air and naval power to back the brigade on the beach. The President, still unwilling to precipitate a full-scale attack by this country on Cuba, and mindful of his public pledge of nonintervention and his global responsibilities, agreed finally that unmarked Navy jets could protect the anti-Castro force of B-26's when they provided air cover the next morning. These B-26's were capable of providing air cover for no more than an hour. But, receiving their directions from the CIA, they arrived on the scene an hour before the jets, who received their directions from the Navy. Whether this tragic error was due to a difference in time zones or instructions, the B-26's were soon downed or gone, the jet mission was invalidated before it started, and without ammunition, the exiles were quickly rounded up.

While the lack of ammunition led directly to disaster, Castro's control of the air had led directly to the lack of ammunition. The landing plan had not neglected to provide for air control. There had been, on the contrary, unanimous agreement that the Castro air force be removed. But confusion persists to this day about the President's "canceling the air cover" that U.S. jets were to have provided.

Actually, no U.S. Air Force jet participation had ever been planned, much less canceled. Nor was there any cancellation of any other combat air cover over the battle front. Instead, the plan was to destroy Castro's air force on the ground before the battle began, and then to provide air support, with an anti-Castro "air force" consisting of some two dozen surplus planes flown by Cuban exiles. That plan failed.

The exile air arm, other than transports, was composed solely of lumbering B-26's as part of the covert nature of the plan. These World War II vintage planes were possessed by so many nations, including Cuba, that American sponsorship would be difficult to prove, and the prelanding attack on Cuban airfields could thus be attributed to defecting Castro pilots. No Florida, Puerto Rican, or other bases nearer than Nicaragua were to be used, for similar reasons. But the B-26's were slow, unwieldly, unsuited to air cover and constantly developing engine trouble. The fuel used flying between Nicaragua and Cuba restricted them to 45-60 minutes over the island. The limited number of exile crews, exhausted by the long, dangerous flights and overcome on the final day by fear and futility, had to be replaced in part on that day by volunteers from their American instructors, four of whom gave their lives.

Although one reason for selecting the Bay of Pigs site was its airstrip, Castro's superior ground forces and ground fire made it almost completely useless. Supplies dropped from the air blew into the jungle or water, and half of the usable B-26 force was shot down over the beach on the first day by Castro's T-33's.

The failure to destroy Castro's planes on the ground in two strikes before the fight started affected control of both the air and the beach. The first strike went off as planned early Saturday morning, April 15. But its effectiveness was limited by the attempt to pretend it was conducted by pilots deciding to defect that day from Castro. Only B-26's were used, no American napalm was used, and the planes had to fly in from Nicaragua and return, except for one flown to Florida to act out the cover story.

The cover story was even less successful than the air strike. It was quickly torn apart—which the President realized he should have known was inevitable in an open society—not only by Castro's representatives but by a penetrating press. Adlai Stevenson's denials that Saturday afternoon at the UN were disproven within 24 hours by photographs and internal inconsistencies in the story, contrary to all the assurances given the President that the strike could be accomplished without anyone knowing for some time where the attackers came from, and with nothing to prove that they weren't new defectors from Castro. The whole action was much bigger news than anticipated. The world was aroused by this country's deliberate deception. No one would have believed that the second strike, scheduled for dawn Monday after the landing party was ashore, was anything other than an overt, unprovoked attack by the U.S. on a tiny neighbor. The Soviet Union said American intervention would not go unmet; our Latin-American friends were outraged.

As a result, the President was urged on Sunday by his foreign-policy advisers—but without a formal meeting at which the military and CIA could be heard—to call off the Monday-morning strike in accordance with the previously agreed-upon principle of avoiding overt American involvement. The President concurred in that conclusion. The second strike was canceled. The CIA objected strongly, but, although given an opportunity, chose not to take the matter directly to the President. All hoped that the first strike had done enough damage to Castro's air power, as had at first been reported. After the events on Monday made clear that these hopes were in vain, the second strike was reinstated that night, but a cloud cover made this postponement fatal. The last opportunity to neutralize the air over the beach by destroying the T-33's and other planes was gone.

In retrospect, General Taylor concluded that, both in the planning stages and on Sunday, the military importance of the air strike and the consequences of its cancellation should have been made clearer to the President by the responsible officers. But in fact, the first strike, designed to be the key, turned out later to have been remarkably ineffective, and there is no reason to believe that

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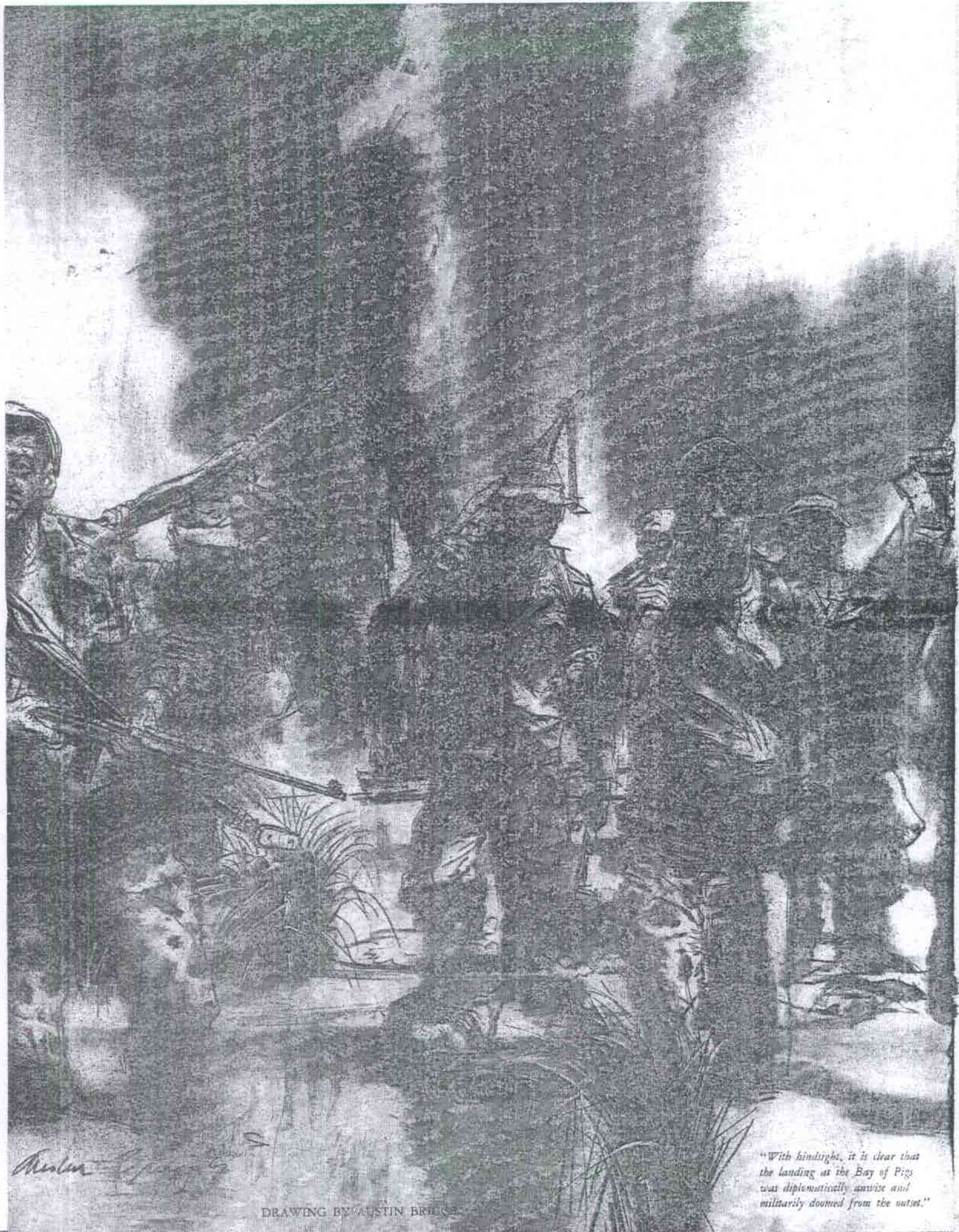
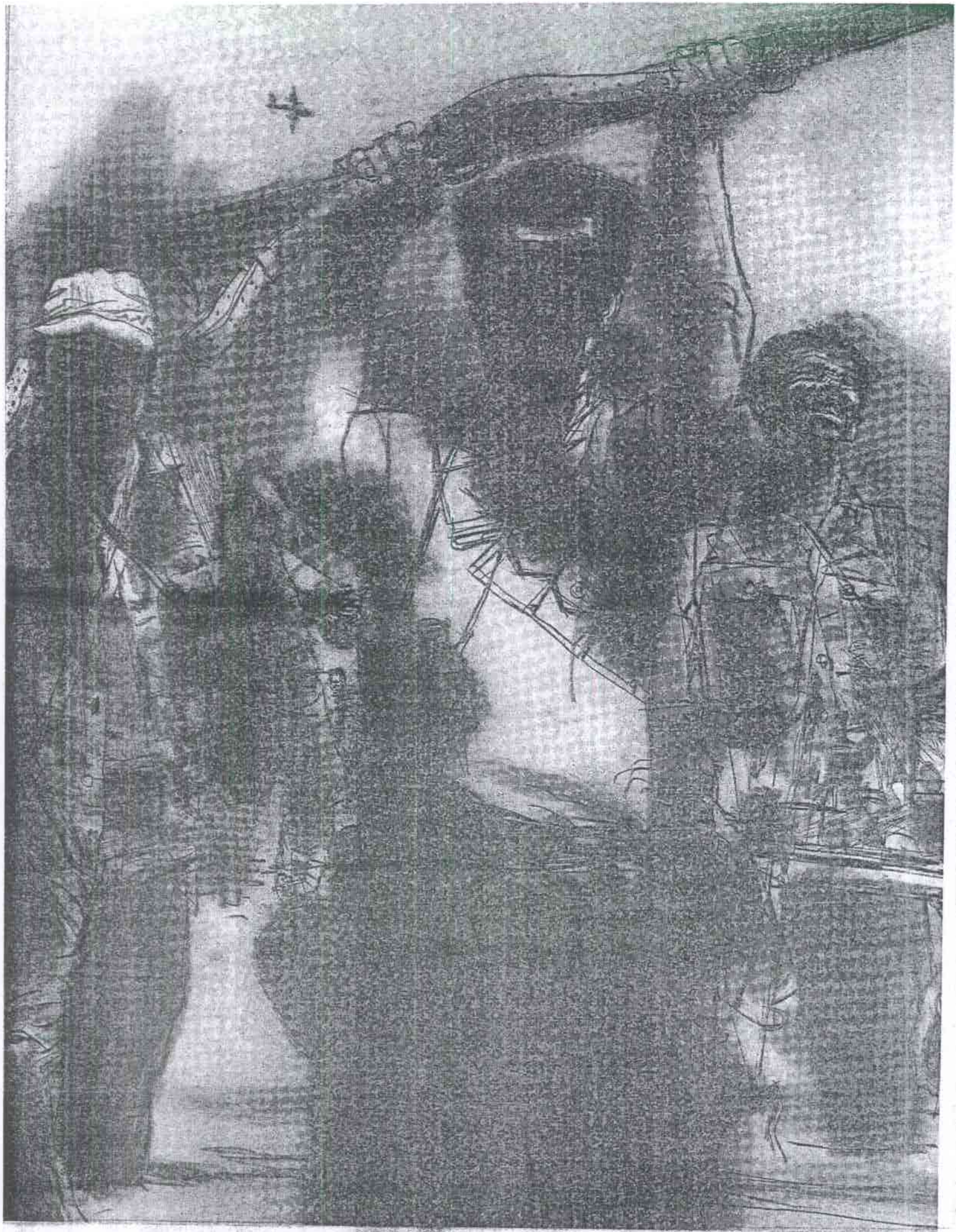


DRAWING BY AUSTIN BRIGGS

"With hindsight, it is clear that the landing at the Bay of Pigs was diplomatically unwise and militarily doomed from the outset."



Castro's air force, having survived the first air strike and been dispersed into hiding, would have been knocked out by the second one.

The President's postponement of the Monday-morning air strike thus played only a minor role in the venture that came to so inglorious an end on Wednesday afternoon. It was already doomed long before Monday morning, and he would have been far wiser, the President told me later, if when the basic premises of the plan were already being shattered, he had canceled the entire operation and not merely the second air strike. For it was clear to him by then that he had in fact approved a plan bearing little resemblance to what he thought he had approved. Therein lies the key to the Bay of Pigs decision.

CHAPTER THREE

With hindsight, it is clear that what in fact the President had approved was diplomatically unwise and militarily doomed from the outset. What he thought he was approving appeared at the time to have diplomatic acceptability and little chance of outright failure. That so great a gap between concept and actuality should exist at so high a level on so dangerous a matter reflected a shocking number of errors in the whole decision-making process, errors that permitted bureaucratic momentum to govern instead of policy leadership.

1. The President thought he was approving a quiet, even though large-scale, infiltration of 1,400 Cuban exiles back into their homeland. He had been assured that the plan as revised to meet his criteria was an unspectacular and quiet landing of patriots, plausibly Cuban in its essentials, of which the air strike was the only really noisy enterprise that remained. Their landing was, in fact, highly publicized in advance and deliberately trumpeted as an "invasion," and their numbers deliberately and grossly overstated—in part by exile groups and officials hoping to arouse the Cuban people to join them, in part by Castro to inflate first his danger and then his victory, and in part by headline writers to whom "invasion" sounded more exciting than a landing of 1,400 men. The CIA even dictated communiqués to a public-relations firm representing the exiles' political front. After all the military limitations accepted in order to keep this nation's role covert, that role was not only obvious but exaggerated.

2. The President thought he was approving a plan whereby the exiles, should they fail to hold and expand a beachhead, could take up guerrilla warfare with other rebels in the mountains. They were, in fact, given instructions to fall back on the beaches in case of failure; the immediate area was not suitable for guerrilla warfare, contrary to assurances given the President; the vast majority of the brigade members had not been given any guerrilla training, again contrary to assurances; and 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. It was never even planned by the CIA officers in charge of the operation, and they neither told the President that they thought this option was out, nor told the exiles that this was the President's plan.

3. The President thought he was permitting the Cuban exiles, as represented by their Revolutionary Council and brigade leaders, to decide whether they wished to risk their own lives and liberty for the liberty of their country without any overt American support. Most members of the brigade were in fact under the mistaken impression, apparently from their CIA contacts, that American armed forces would openly and directly assist them, if necessary, to neutralize the air (presumably with jets), make certain of their ammunition and prevent their defeat. They also mistakenly assumed that a larger exile force would land with them, that the Cuban underground or guerrillas would join them and that another landing elsewhere on the island would divert Castro's forces. (A small diversionary landing was, in fact, scheduled, but called off after two tries.) Their assumptions were not made known to the President, just as his were not made known to them; and the Revolutionary Council was similarly kept largely uninformed on the landing and largely out of touch with the brigade. Its President, Dr. José Miró Cardona, who believed that only American armed might could overturn Castro, did not pass on the message he received from Kennedy's emissaries that no American military help would be forthcoming.

4. President Kennedy thought he was approving a plan calculated to succeed with the help of the Cuban underground, military desertions and, in time, an uprising of a rebellious population. In fact, both Castro's popularity and his police-state measures, aided by the mass arrests that promptly followed the bombing and landing, proved far stronger than the operation's planners had claimed. The planners, moreover, had no way to alert the underground without alerting Castro's forces, and cooperation was further impaired because some of the exiles' left-wing leaders were mistrusted by the CIA, just as some of their right-wing leaders and brigade members were mistrusted by the Cuban underground. As a result, although the brigade was aided after its landing by some defectors and villagers, no coordinated uprising or underground effort was really planned or possible, particularly in the brief time the brigade was carrying the fight. In short, the President had given his approval with the understanding that there were only two possible outcomes—a national revolt or a flight to the hills—and in fact neither was remotely possible.

5. The President thought he was approving a plan rushed into execution on the grounds that Castro would later acquire the military capability to defeat it. Castro, in fact, already possessed that capability. Kennedy was told that Castro had only an obsolete, ineffective air force not in combat condition, and had no communications in the Bay of Pigs-Zapata Swamp area and no forces nearby. All these reports were wrong: Expected mass defections did not materialize; Castro's T-33 jet trainers were much more effective than predicted; and Castro's forces moved to the beachhead and crushed the exile force with far greater strength, equipment and speed than all the estimates had anticipated. Indeed, the jet trainers—which were largely responsible for the ammunition losses and other failures—had been largely overlooked by the planners.

The President, having approved the plan with assurances that it would be both clandestine and successful, thus found in fact that it was too large to be clandestine and too small to be successful. Ten thousand exiles might have done it—or 20,000—but not 1,400, as bravely and brilliantly as they fought.

General Taylor's review found the whole plan to have been militarily marginal: There were too few men in the brigade, too few pilots in the air arm, too few seconds-in-command to relieve fatigued leaders, too few reserves to replace battle losses and too many unforeseen obstacles. The brigade relied, for example, on a nighttime landing through uncharted reefs in boats with outboard motors. Even with ample ammunition and control of the air, even with two more air strikes twice as large, the brigade could not have broken out of its beachhead or survived much longer without substantial help from either American forces or the Cuban people. Neither was in the cards, and thus a brigade victory at the Bay of Pigs was never in the cards either.

These five fundamental gaps between what the President actually approved and what he thought he was approving arose from at least three sources:

1. The newness of the President and his administration. He did not fully know the strengths and weaknesses of his various advisers. He did not yet feel he could trust his own instincts against the judgments of recognized experts. He had not yet geared the decision-making process to fulfill his own needs, to isolate the points of no return, to make certain he was fully informed before they were passed, and to prevent preshaped alternatives from being presented to him too late to start anew. Nor were his advisers as frank with him, or as free to criticize each other's work, as they would later become.

2. Supposed pressures of time and secrecy permitted too little consideration of the plan and its merits by anyone other than its authors and advocates. Only the CIA and the Joint Chiefs had an opportunity to study and ponder the details of the plan. Only a small number of officials and advisers even knew of its existence; and in meetings with the President and this limited number, memoranda of operations were distributed at the be-

ginning of each session and collected at the end, making virtually impossible any systematic criticism or alternatives.

The whole project seemed to move mysteriously and inexorably toward execution without the President's being able either to obtain a firm grip on it or reverse it. Under both Eisenhower and Kennedy, it grew, changed and forced decisions without any clear statement of policy or procedure. No strong voice of opposition was raised in any of the key meetings, and no realistic alternatives were presented, although consideration was given to putting the action off until a true government-in-exile could be formed to give it a more genuine "civil war" flavor. No realistic appraisal was made of the chances for success or the consequences of failure. The problems of turning back a preconceived project ready to go, supposedly without overt American involvement, seemed much more difficult than permitting it to go ahead.

3. Finally, these gaps arose in part because the new administration had not yet fully organized itself for crisis planning, enabling the precommitted authors and advocates of the project in the CIA and Joint Chiefs of Staff to exercise a dominant influence.

While not all his associates agreed, Kennedy's own feeling was that, inasmuch as he had personally polled each individual present at the "decisive" meeting, no amount of formal NSC, Operations Coordination Board, or Cabinet meetings would have made any difference. (In fact, this type of operation would never have been considered in a large, formal meeting.) "The advice of every member of the Executive Branch brought in to advise," he commented wryly a year and a half later, "was unanimous—and the advice was wrong." In fact, the advice was not so unanimous or so well-considered as it seemed. The Joint Chiefs of Staff, whose endorsement of the military feasibility of the plan particularly embittered him, gave it only limited, piecemeal study as a body, and individually differed in their understanding of its features. Inasmuch as it was the responsibility of another agency and did not directly depend on their forces, they were not as close or critical in their examination as they might otherwise have been, and depended on the CIA's estimates of Castro's military and political strength. Moreover, they had originally approved the plan when it called for a landing at the city of Trinidad at the foot of the Escambray Mountains, and when Trinidad was ruled out as too conspicuous, they selected the Bay of Pigs as the best of the alternative sites offered without informing either Kennedy or McNamara that they still thought Trinidad preferable.

The CIA, for its part, although served by many able military officers, did not have the kind of full military staff required for this kind of operation. It was not created or equipped to manage operations too large to remain covert; and both the CIA and the President discovered too late the impossibility of directing such an operation step by step from Washington, over a thousand miles from the scene, without more adequate, direct and secure communications.

The CIA's close control of the operation, however, kept the President and the Cuban exile force largely uninformed of each other's thinking; and its enthusiasm caused it to reject the clear evidence of Castro's political and military strength that was available from British and State Department intelligence and even from newspaper stories.

Both the CIA and the Joint Chiefs were moved more by the necessity of acting swiftly against Castro than by the necessity for caution and success. Answers to all the President's doubts about the military and intelligence estimates came from those experts most committed to supporting the plan, and he had no military intelligence expert of his own in the White House.

Instead of the President telling the bureaucracy that action was necessary and that they should devise certain means, the bureaucracy was telling the President that action was necessary and that the means were already fashioned—and making his approval, moreover, appear to be a test of his mettle. It is wrong now—and was wrong then—to expect the CIA and the military to have provided the necessary objectivity and skepticism about their own plan.

Unfortunately, among those privy to the plan in both the State Department and the White House, doubts were entertained but never pressed, partly out of fear of being labeled "soft" or undaring in the eyes of their colleagues, partly out of lack of familiarity with the new President and their roles, partly out of a sense of satisfaction with the curbs placed on United States participation. The CIA and the Joint Chiefs of Staff, on the other hand, had doubts about whether the plan had been fatally weakened by those very curbs, but did not press them.

Yet nothing that I have set forth above should be read as altering John Kennedy's verdict that the blame was his. He did not purchase, load or fire the gun, but he gave his consent to its being fired, and under his own deeply held principles of executive responsibility, only a plea of "guilty" was possible.

Moreover, his own mistakes were many and serious. He should never have believed that it would be arrogant and presumptuous of him, newly arrived on the scene, to call off the plans of the renowned experts and the brave exiles. He should never have permitted the project to proceed so early in his first year, before he knew the men he was listening to and while he was still full of deep-rooted doubts. He should never have permitted his own deep feelings against Castro (unusual for him) and considerations of public opinion—specifically, his concern that he would be assailed for calling off a plan to get rid of Castro—to overcome his innate suspicions. He should have tried to keep the brigade in some other camp in view of the impossibility of keeping it in Guatemala, while considering its future more carefully; and even had he disbanded it, the consequences would have been mild compared to those of the course he chose. Since he was unwilling to conduct an overt operation through the Defense Department, he should have abandoned it altogether as beyond the CIA's capability.

He should have insisted on more skepticism from his staff. He should have realized that, without wartime conditions of censorship, his hope of keeping quiet a paramilitary operation of this magnitude was impossible in an open society.

He should have reexamined the whole plan, once all the publicity about a big invasion began appearing. In fact, the Cuban refugee community in Miami, the American press and the Castro government were all talking about the "secret" training camps and invasion plans long before those plans were definite.

Finally, he should have paid more attention to his own politically sound instincts and to the politically knowledgeable men who did voice objections directly, such as J. William Fulbright and Arthur Schlesinger, Jr., on matters of Cuban and Latin-American politics and the composition of a future Cuban government, instead of following only the advice of Latin-American experts Adolf Berle, Jr., and Thomas Mann.

While weighing with Dean Rusk the international consequences of the plan's being quietly and successfully carried out, which they decided were acceptable, he should also have weighed the consequences of the plan being neither quiet nor successful—for those consequences were unacceptable. But for once, John Kennedy permitted his hopes to overcome his doubts, and the possibilities of failure were never properly considered.

CHAPTER FOUR

When failure struck, it struck hard. Tuesday's post-midnight meeting in the Cabinet Room was a scene of somber stocktaking. The President, still in his white tie and tails after the annual Congressional reception, was stunned by each new revelation of how wrong he had been in his expectations and assumptions. He would not agree to the military-CIA request for the kind of open commitment of American military power that would necessitate, in his view, a full-scale attack by U.S. forces—that, he said, would only weaken our hand in the global fight against communism over the long run. He dispatched Schlesinger and Berle as personal emissaries to the angry exile political leaders, who had been held incommunicado by the CIA in Florida.

Finally, around 4 a.m., after ordering the ill-fated "air cover for the air cover," and talking halfheartedly with those aides who remained after all officials departed, he walked out onto

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the South Lawn and meditated briefly alone.

On Wednesday, in a solid day of agonizing meetings and reports as the brigade was being rounded up at Zapata, he gave orders for the U.S. Navy and Air Force to rescue as many as possible; and he talked, at Schlesinger's suggestion, with the exile political leaders flown in from Florida. He found them remarkably understanding of his resolve to keep the fight between Cubans, and they found him, they remarked later, deeply concerned and understanding, particularly for those with sons in the brigade.

"I lost a brother and a brother-in-law in the war," the President told them. "I know something of how you feel." Words alone could not express how he felt. I observed, in the days and months that followed, that he felt personally responsible for those who had lost their lives—miraculously few compared with Castro's heavy losses—and that he was determined above all else both to prevent the execution and to seek the liberation of the 1,113 men his government had helped send to their imprisonment.

In public and with most of his new associates, the President remained hopeful and calm, rallying morale, looking ahead and avoiding the temptation to lash out in reproach or recrimination. He asked General Taylor to chair an investigation to determine not *who* was wrong and deserved to be punished, but *what* was wrong and had to be righted. As both mobs and diplomats the world round decried American imperialism, deception and aggression, he remarked privately that many of those leaders most anxious to see Castro removed had been among the first to assail the U.S. for regarding tiny Cuba as a threat. Nevertheless, he held his tongue in public.

Despite this outward composure, so necessary to the country at that hour, he was beneath it all angry and sick at heart. In later months, he would be grateful that he had learned so many major lessons—resulting in basic changes in personnel, policy and procedures—at so relatively small and temporary a cost. But as we walked on the South Lawn Thursday morning, he seemed to me a depressed and lonely man. To guard national unity and spirit, he was planning a determined speech to the nation's editors that afternoon and a series of talks with every Republican leader. The Bay of Pigs had been—and would be—the worst defeat of his career, the kind of outright failure to which he was not accustomed.

He knew that he had handed his critics a stick with which they would forever beat him; that his quick strides toward gaining the confidence of other nations had been set back; that Castro's shouting boasts would dangerously increase the cold-war frustrations of the American people; and that he had unnecessarily worsened East-West relations just as the test-ban talks were being resumed.

"There's an old saying," he later told his press conference, "that victory has a hundred fathers and defeat is an orphan. . . . I am the responsible officer of the Government, and that is quite obvious." But as we walked that Thursday morning, he told me, at times in caustic tones, of some of the other fathers of this defeat who had let him down. By taking full blame upon himself, he was winning the admiration of both career servants and the public, avoiding partisan investigations and attacks, and discouraging further attempts by those involved to leak their versions and accusations. But his assumption of responsibility was not merely a political device or a constitutional obligation. He felt it strongly, sincerely, and repeated it as we walked.

"How could I have been so far off base?" he asked himself out loud. "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?"

His anguish was doubly deepened by the knowledge that the rest of the world was asking the same question.

In the next issue of LOOK, Sorensen gives a unique close-up of the late President in *The Kennedy I Knew*. He tells of Kennedy's indifference to money and his frequent votes against his own—and his father's—pocketbook. He reveals that JFK regarded reporters as his natural friends and newspapers as his natural enemies. And he describes Kennedy's bitter doubts about the value of the operation that nearly ended his life.