

WITH  
KENNEDY  
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DISCARDED

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tempt a post-mortem on the motives and competence of those who did advise the President. Short of conceding the obvious, that the operation was a fiasco of the first order from start to finish, I will leave it to those who did participate to write the sorry history of their proceedings. I will deal only with those events in which I did play a part—events that were to have a damaging effect on JFK's future relations with the American press.

To declare in mid-April of 1961 that I knew nothing of an impending military action against Cuba except what I read in the newspapers or heard on the air was to claim an enormous amount of knowledge.

Reports had begun appearing that the United States was training a brigade for military action against Castro as early as October 1960—three months before President Kennedy took office. The first article had appeared in a Guatemalan newspaper, *La Hora*, and had swiftly been followed by stories in *The Nation*, *Time*, the *New York Times*, and other U.S. newspapers.

In the weeks before the invasion, hardly a day passed without a story appearing in some newspaper, or broadcast over some radio or television station. It is fair to say that some of the press went after the story as if it were a scandal at city hall, or a kidnapping—not a military operation whose entire success might depend on the elements of surprise and secrecy. Newsmen sought out Cuban refugees in cafes and hotel lobbies in Miami to pump them for the latest news from relatives serving with the brigade. Through such "enterprise," they were able to publish much information of tactical importance, including exact estimates of the brigade's strength.

The volatile leaders of the Cuban Revolutionary Council in exile—the political arm of the brigade—were just as heedless of security. Only nine days before the landing, the council's president, Dr. José Miró Cardona, told the press in Miami that an uprising against Castro was "imminent." And the very next day, he appealed to Cubans still in their homeland to take up arms against the dictator. The only information Castro didn't have by then was the exact time and place of the invasion.

JFK was livid. He said to me in his office a week before the invasion: "I can't believe what I'm reading! Castro doesn't need agents over here. All he has to do is read our papers. It's all laid out for him." I left him, still not knowing that D-Day already was set.

My first involvement was on Saturday, April 15. That morning, eight B-26s flew a series of ineffectual bombing raids against air bases in Cuba, from Puerto Cabezas, Nicaragua. The pilots, of course, were rebels but the planes wore the insignia of Castro's air force. There was much consternation when two of them made emergency landings at Key West Naval Air Station and Miami International Airport. One pilot said he was a detector from the Cuban air force and had bombed his own base as he fled to freedom. The raid, of course, was the first and only pre-invasion

air strike against Cuba and was undertaken with the full knowledge and consent of the President. But I didn't know that and told reporters at my press briefing that "our only information comes from the wire service stories we have read. We have no direct relations with Cuba and therefore have no firsthand information. We are trying to determine what the situation is."

Aldai Stevenson was as much in the dark as I was. Our chief delegate told the United Nations in New York that "these pilots and certain other crew members have apparently defected from Castro's tyranny." Castro promptly defied President Kennedy to bring the pilots before the UN. And Miró told the world that "spectacular things have begun to happen."

Governor Stevenson later told me that this had been the most "humiliating experience" of his years in government service. He was only partially mollified by President Kennedy's explanation that the failure to inform him of the true nature of U.S. involvement in the Bay of Pigs invasion was "a communications failure." Stevenson felt that he had been made a fool of, and that his integrity had been seriously damaged. One of the ironies of the matter was that Stevenson's very able public relations adviser, Clayton Fritchey, had been watching the articles in the *New York Times* about an impending attack on Cuba. He had become convinced that these accounts were authentic, and one evening over cocktails asked Stevenson if "you have been holding out on me?" Stevenson replied that he knew nothing and asked Fritchey if he had any facts. Fritchey replied that all he knew was what he read in the *New York Times*. Stevenson and Fritchey then contacted Arthur Schlesinger, Jr., who had the assignment at the White House for liaison with the United Nations. On the Saturday a week before the invasion, Schlesinger and a top operative of the CIA went to New York and gave Stevenson a partial briefing. Stevenson later told me, however, that "I was never told the full extent of the plan."

The stage was set for the least covert military operation in history. The three days it took Castro to crush the rebels were the grimmest I can remember at the White House. Certainly, the Cuban missile crisis of the following year brought us much closer to war but the atmosphere then was of initiative and decision. Now, however, we could not influence the course of events, short of actual military intervention. We could only watch and wait—and the smell of disaster was in the air.

I saw the President five minutes after arriving at the White House on Monday morning, April 17. "We'll have no comment on what's happening down there," he said. "We're watching developments. That's all."

Over the next seventy-two hours I was in and out of his office at least a hundred times with the latest flashes of the wire service tickers. He was eager for news the first day. But as the reports from the beachhead became progressively worse, he would merely glance at the lead paragraphs,



with other administration press officers, I issued an open invitation to Congressman Moss to attend. He was at the first meeting and agreed that a close working relationship among top-level government information officers would enhance, not inhibit, the flow of information. It is worth noting, too, that early that first year Congressman Moss sent me a list of sixteen categories of executive information which had been withheld from the press under former administrations. Among them were suppression of polls taken among business leaders on the impact of pending tax legislation; the refusal of certain agencies to reveal the salaries of employees or to discuss contracts which had not gone to the lowest bidder; the insistence of certain advisory commissions on secret proceedings; and, generally, an overclassification of many files that would conceal them from the public for many years after the incumbent President had left office.

It was Congressman Moss' recommendation that we take a new look at the restrictions. We did and the wraps were promptly taken off all but four of the categories. Congressman Moss considered this a significant accomplishment by the Kennedy administration, and went out of his way to praise us in a report by his subcommittee.

But all of this was merely preliminary skirmishing. The major battle came the week after the Bay of Pigs. I must again preface what follows with the statement that JFK never tried to pass the buck for the disaster. The blame was his and he was willing to accept it ("Victory has one hundred fathers but defeat is an orphan").

The press' actions immediately following the disaster did nothing to improve the President's temper. He held a press conference on April 21—two days after the rebel surrender. There was still high-level concern in Washington over possible Soviet retaliation and the abrupt worsening of our relations with important allies; and JFK did not intend to be drawn into speculation that might prolong the crisis. "I know that many of you have further questions about Cuba," was his opening remark. "But I do not think that any useful national purpose would be served by my going into the Cuban question this morning. . . ." Most of the reporters went along but one was insistent on knowing whether Secretary Rusk and Under Secretary of State Chester Bowles had been against the decision. JFK replied only that "the facts will come out in due time."

But back in his office later, the President had a more pungent comment.

"What the hell do they want me to do—give them the roll call vote? I can't go into that without compromising everybody involved and they ought to know that. If I'm going to knock some heads together, now isn't the time to do it with everybody looking down the barrel at us?"

The A.M. newspapers were critical of his refusal to go into the Cuban question at his press conference, and he was still burning when I saw him in mid-morning.

"What could I have said that would have helped the situation at all? That we took the beating of our lives? That the CIA and the Pentagon are stupid? What purpose do they think it would serve to put that on the record?"

He shook his head. "We're going to have to straighten all this out, and soon. The publishers have to understand that we're never more than a miscalculation away from war and that there are things we're doing that we just can't talk about."

I then made a suggestion to the President that I would later regret. He was to speak six days later, on April 27, to the Bureau of Advertising of the American Newspaper Publishers Association at the Waldorf-Astoria in New York.

"Why not lay it on the line there?" I said. "It's a major forum and the timing will punch up the importance you assign to it. It could open up the whole area to serious discussion."

He agreed to do it and told me to relay my thinking on content to Ted Sorensen, who would write the speech. I gave Ted a long memo summarizing the freedom of information conflict between past Presidents and the press and outlining the steps we had taken to open up channels of information. He drafted a brilliant argument in support of the President's position, and one that will be as valid in the year 2061 as it was in 1961. It began with an admonition to the press that it must recognize "our common responsibilities in the face of a common danger: the totality of the Communist challenge to our survival and to our security. . . ."

"This deadly challenge imposes upon our society two requirements of direct concern both to the press and to the President—two requirements that may seem almost contradictory in tone, but which must be fulfilled if we are to meet this national peril. I refer, first, to the need for far greater public information; and, second, to the need for far greater official secrecy."

"The very word 'secrecy' is repugnant in a free and open society; and we are as a people inherently and historically opposed to secret societies, to secret oaths, and to secret proceedings. . . . No official of my administration, whether his rank is high or low, civilian or military, should interpret my words here tonight as an excuse to censor the news, to stifle dissent, to cover up our mistakes, or to withhold from the press and the public the facts they deserve to know."

"But I do ask every publisher, every editor, and every newsmen in the nation to re-examine his own standards, and to recognize the nature of our country's peril. In time of war, the government and the press have customarily joined in an effort, based largely on self-discipline, to prevent unauthorized disclosures to the enemy. In time of 'clear and present danger,' the courts have held that even the privileged rights of the First Amendment must yield to the public's need for national security."



"If the press is awaiting a declaration of war before it imposes the self-discipline of combat conditions, then I can only say that no war ever posed a greater threat to our security. If you are awaiting a finding of 'clear and present danger,' then I can only say that the danger has never been more clear and its presence has never been more imminent.

"It requires a change in outlook, a change in tactics, a change in missions—by the government, by the people, by every businessman or labor leader, and by every newspaper. For we are opposed around the world by a monolithic and ruthless conspiracy that relies primarily on covert means for expanding its sphere of influence—on infiltration instead of invasion, on subversion instead of elections, on intimidation instead of free choice, on guerrillas by night instead of armies by day. It is a system which has conscripted vast human and material resources into the building of a tightly knit, highly efficient machine that combines military, diplomatic, intelligence, economic, scientific, and political operations.

"Its preparations are concealed, not published. Its mistakes are buried, not headlined. Its dissenters are silenced, not praised. No expenditure is questioned, no rumor is printed, no secret is revealed. It conducts the cold war, in short, with a wartime discipline no democracy would ever hope or wish to match.

"Nevertheless, every democracy recognizes the necessary restraints of national security—and the question remains whether those restraints need to be more strictly observed if we are to oppose this kind of attack as well as outright invasion. For the facts of the matter are that this nation's foes have openly boasted of acquiring through our newspapers information they would otherwise hire agents to acquire through theft, bribery, or espionage; that details of this nation's covert preparations to counter the enemy's covert operations have been available to every newspaper reader, friend and foe alike; that the size, the strength, the location, and the nature of our forces and weapons, and our plans and strategy for their use, have all been pin-pointed in the press and other news media to a degree sufficient to satisfy any foreign power; and that, in at least one case, the publication of details concerning a secret mechanism whereby satellites were followed required its alteration at the expense of considerable time and money.

"The newspapers which printed these stories were loyal, patriotic, responsible, and well-meaning. Had we been engaged in open warfare, they undoubtedly would not have published such items. But in the absence of open warfare, they recognized only the tests of journalism and not the tests of national security. And my question tonight is whether additional tests should not now be adopted.

"Every newspaper now asks itself, with respect to every story: 'Is it news?' All I suggest is that you add the question: 'Is it in the interests of national security?' . . . And should the press of America consider and

recommend the voluntary assumption of specific new steps or machinery, I can assure you that we will cooperate wholeheartedly with those recommendations . . ."

The reaction was violent. The press chose to ignore the content of the speech and to regard its timing—eleven days after the Bay of Pigs—as a presidential scolding for its pre-invasion reports on the training of the rebel brigade and the imminence of the landings. JFK was accused, in effect, of blaming the press for the outcome of the operation. Angry editorials across the country read into his speech a forewarning of official censorship or, at the very least, a demand for self-censorship. Still others took him to task for not revealing to the nation the full picture of our relations with Cuba. If he had, their argument went, he could have built public support for active American intervention at the Bay of Pigs, thus assuring the success of the invasion.

One of the most thoughtful, and least strident, of the editorials criticizing JFK ran in the Raleigh (North Carolina) *News and Observer*. Editor Jonathan Daniels wrote me: "I don't think any editor in America has been more enthusiastic in his support of President Kennedy and his program than I have been. I am eager to help in the things I believe he can do for America and the world. But, quite frankly, I was deeply disturbed by his remarks to the publishers in New York . . ."

His editorial led off with the comment: ". . . President Kennedy could not have chosen a worse time to lecture the press for a lack of 'self-restraint' in printing the news. His remarks to American publishers came hot on the heels of disclosures that, unknown to the press and the public, this country has been involved in a military adventure which not only cost the lives of many of our friends but also made this nation look both hypocritical and ineffectual in the eyes of the world.

"Undoubtedly, where a free press exists in a free country, facts may be published which will carry information to an enemy in whose country a strictly censored press keeps much hidden from the people and the world. Freedom does involve dangers which totalitarianism can avoid. And even in a free country dangers may sometimes justify the suppression or censorship of news. When and where that is necessary, the American press has shown that it will cooperate. No owners or operators of the news media, however, have any right—let alone any 'duty'—to decide what the people should know . . . President Kennedy should be thinking more about how the free, informed American people can contribute to the struggle, not how 'greater official secrecy' can be imposed upon them with the connivance of reporters and officials together . . ."

Daniels is one of America's great editors but even he was unwilling to enter into a dialogue with the President on how a free society can protect itself from its enemies and, at the same time, protect the people's right to know what their government is doing.