
The Presidency of
**JOHN F.
KENNEDY**



James N. Giglio

UNIVERSITY PRESS OF KANSAS

1991

IES

Socolofsky

nald
vn
ald
land
rgreaves
son
a Lois Peterson
n
rt B. Smith

ith
el
boom
is D. Doenecke
ch, Jr.
Allan B. Spetter
uld
uld
oletta
ements
avid L. Wilson
usold
cCoy
Elmo Richardson
glio
Borner
aufman

cans."¹⁴ He urged Kennedy to pursue restraint. Schlesinger, in two separate memoranda to the president in early April, also questioned two premises: that because the equipment and personnel of the invasion force were Cuban, the United States would not be held accountable and that the invasion would touch off a mass insurrection, leading to the overthrow of Castro. Schlesinger feared a protracted stalemate, resulting in political pressure for American armed forces to sustain the rebellion. This, of course, would destroy the "reawakening world faith in America." Yet Schlesinger remained silent during the crucial meetings at the White House because of a reluctance to challenge openly the conventional wisdom. His efforts to work through Robert Kennedy also failed. Robert, whom the president brought into the operation belatedly, told Schlesinger that he "thought that [Schlesinger] was performing a disservice" in raising questions at such a late date.¹⁵

Dean Acheson, one of the few outsiders Kennedy consulted, did not mince words, however. The reputed cold warrior must have surprised the president when he responded that he did "not think it was necessary to call in Price, Waterhouse [public accountants] to discover that 1,500 Cubans weren't as good as 25,000 Cubans." It seemed to him that "this was a disastrous idea."¹⁶ How many others might have expressed strong reservations may never be known. Some never had the opportunity. Adlai Stevenson, head of the United States delegation to the UN, surely would have responded negatively if he had been consulted fully. He had written Kennedy on 31 January that he had heard that Castro's popularity was much stronger than the administration thought. The politically sensitive Theodore Sorensen of the White House staff knew nothing until invasion day.

Of even more concern were the increasing newspaper leaks as D-day drew near, making any effort to maintain secrecy a cruel joke. On 7 April, the *New York Times* reported that between five thousand and six thousand men had been training in the United States and Guatemala for the purpose of liberating Cuba. A livid Kennedy publicly disclaimed the possibility of a large invasion and denied the planned use of American troops. At the same time the administration successfully pressured the media not to publish stories that threatened the national security. Ironically, weeks afterward Kennedy told Turner Catledge, the *Times'* managing editor, that if that newspaper had ignored the administration's requests, "you would have saved us from a colossal mistake."¹⁷

What led Kennedy to make the most regrettable decision of his public career? Unquestionably, the CIA exerted the greatest influence. Kennedy, an admirer of Ian Fleming's James Bond thrillers, had an overly exalted view of that agency. Dulles's assertion in late March that he felt more

confident about the Bay
throw of the leftist A
Kennedy. Kennedy di
analogy was, as the l
operation. In any case
invincibility, overshad
government in Indone

Kennedy also mis
vasion's success, undo
Yet for some reason
later recalled asking A
thing work?" Burke ha
reading about "Thirty"
"I thought he was tr
privately labeled the

Still, Burke repre
that apparently chara
it group-think, a term
hold, stifling indepe
because of the great
Roswell Gilpatric, th
ence; Bissell became
McNamara intellectu
of familiarity with K
circumscribed respo
express doubts or
Eisenhower seemed
greatest military mar
who had criticized Ik
"smell of hierarchy"
newness, inexperie
tion. Schlesinger cou
tance to speak out.

Perhaps the pro
ity and reduced insti
bureaucratic safegu
pounded the proble
in the cabinet, whe
Afterward Labor Se
ing that body: "Th
consulted on this on
to you and your ir

DY

lesinger, in two separate meetings at the White House, also questioned the invasion's strategy, leading to the stalemate, resulting in a loss of world faith in America."

At the conventional wisdom meetings at the White House, the conventional wisdom also failed. Robert Kennedy belatedly, told the staff he was performing a dis-

ney consulted, did not think it was necessary to discover that 1,500 seemed to him that "this it have expressed strong opinion had the opportunity. Negotiation to the UN, surely not consulted fully. He had thought that Castro's popularity might be a political asset. The politically sensitive staff knew nothing until

newspaper leaks as D-day by a cruel joke. On 7 April, thousands and six thousand invaded Guatemala for the purpose of disclaiming the possibility of American troops. At the time, the media not to be security. Ironically, weeks before the *Times'* managing editor, in response to the administration's requests, "you must not."

Notable decision of his public relations greatest influence. Kennedy, however, had an overly exalted view of the March that he felt more

confident about the Bay of Pigs success than he had about the CIA overthrow of the leftist Arbenz Guatemalan government in 1954 bolstered Kennedy. Kennedy did not know, however, how misleading Dulles's analogy was, as the latter had had misgivings about the Guatemalan operation. In any case, Guatemala had contributed to the CIA's aura of invincibility, overshadowing the agency's failure to sack the Sukarno government in Indonesia in 1958.

Kennedy also mistakenly thought the JCS were confident of the invasion's success, undoubtedly because that is what he wanted to believe. Yet for some reason the chiefs suppressed their misgivings. Kennedy later recalled asking Adm. Arleigh Burke prior to the invasion, "Will this thing work?" Burke had indicated that "the plan is good." "Hell, I'd been reading about 'Thirty Knot' Burke for a long time," Kennedy commented. "I thought he was tremendous."¹⁸ This was the same Burke who had privately labeled the CIA plan as "weak" and "sloppy."

Still, Burke represented only one aspect of an "assumed consensus" that apparently characterized the key meetings. Social psychologists call it group-think, a term describing the herd instinct that occasionally takes hold, stifling independent thought. That phenomenon ripened partly because of the great prestige of Dulles and Bissell. Dulles—according to Roswell Gilpatric, the deputy secretary of defense—provided the ambience; Bissell became the convincing advocate who could take on a McNamara intellectually. Dulles and Bissell aside, the participants' lack of familiarity with Kennedy and with each other also contributed to the circumscribed responses, creating a hesitancy to raise questions or to express doubts or concerns. Above all, the enormous shadow of Eisenhower seemed to cover the room. No one wished to challenge "the greatest military man in America," least of all an inexperienced president who had criticized Ike for not confronting Castro. Peter Wyden refers to a "smell of hierarchy" that permeated the cabinet room because of the newness, inexperience, and unfamiliarity in the Kennedy administration. Schlesinger confirms that impression in alluding to his own reluctance to speak out.

Perhaps the problem goes deeper. Kennedy's penchant for informality and reduced institutional checks created a situation where insufficient bureaucratic safeguards existed, and the excessive security only compounded the problem. At the very least he might have discussed the plan in the cabinet, where more frank give-and-take would have transpired. Afterward Labor Secretary Arthur Goldberg chided Kennedy for ignoring that body: "There are two people in the Cabinet you should have consulted on this one . . . men who know some things and who are loyal to you and your interests." Kennedy asked who they were. "Orville

Freeman and me," Goldberg responded.¹⁹ Freeman, a former marine who had made amphibious landings, understood how tough they could be under the best of circumstances; Goldberg explained that his own World War II intelligence background also would have been of use.

Other considerations drove Kennedy forward, however. In mid-April he had sent marine colonel Jack Hawkins to Central America as an outside evaluator whose briefing, according to Robert Kennedy, was the "most instrumental paper in convincing the president to go ahead." Hawkins, a decorated veteran of Tarawa, claimed that "he had never seen such an effective military force" and recommended forcefully that they go ahead with the landing.²⁰ No advice needed more qualification. The high spirits of the troops could not erase the facts that they lacked sufficient preparation (only about 135 out of 1,400 were soldiers and some had never fired a rifle) and that they differed vehemently over political objectives. The Cuban brigade also posed a potential problem in the event of the invasion's cancellation: Guatemala did not want the Cubans. It would not do to bring them to the United States, where they could criticize the president for his lack of courage or resolve. Kennedy explained to Schlesinger that if the government had to get rid of the brigade, it was "much better to dump them in Cuba than in the United States."²¹

Moreover, Kennedy sincerely believed that Castro had subverted a democratic and nationalistic revolution. In order to curb communism in Cuba, the original purposes of the revolution had to be restored. Schlesinger, who had acquiesced in the decision to invade, provided the rationale in a State Department White Paper that sought to identify the United States with social and economic reform within the hemisphere. The logic and facts were self-serving enough that one historian later labeled the paper "an unfortunate example of how history was misconstrued to serve political ends."²²

In the end Kennedy consented because his prior actions, statements, and beliefs had put him into a position where he had no other practical choice. Even Sorensen later acknowledged that a "disapproval of the plan would be a show of weakness inconsistent with his general stance."²³ If Kennedy had occasional apprehensions and doubts, as his supporters suggest, those emotions had nothing to do with the morality or rightness of the operation. Kennedy wanted it to succeed badly; ultimately he thought it would. He was banking on the phenomenal luck he had had since 1956. Associates, wrote Schlesinger, thought he had the "Midas touch."

In retrospect the Bay of Pigs invasion had no chance of success. Scholars have rightly called it "the perfect failure." Several monumentally fallacious assumptions characterized the operation from the very

beginning. Kennedy that Cuban rebels could Bissell matched that n permit the invasion l Only afterward did I JFK had adopted—h ceeded uncertainly to sity of what he was d Dulles had hoped for materialized. Further ship of Castro and l which were more th.

The operation b left Guatemala. The bombers from Nicar Castro's air force. A s original plan, might l first assault caused C and round up thous surprise the Bay of l nedy, advised by Ru for the morning of th U.S. cover had been April strike, as a re Florida, instead of Stevenson innocent tion from Cuba, only rassed Stevenson h minister at the UN th to a large scale inva decision to prohibit from resigning. Ke B-26s could now be

Despite the ina the CIA and the vic the invasion procee detection. Much so and militia to the ar outmoded landing pected reefs; some tionally, Castro's T-fighter plane sank a

a former marine tough they could ed that his own been of use.

However. In mid-ral America as an Kennedy, was the nt to go ahead." he had never seen efully that they go ification. The high y lacked sufficient nd some had never olitical objectives. in the event of the ubans. It would not could criticize the neddy explained to the brigade, it was ited States."²¹

tro had subverted a curb communism in ad to be restored. nvade, provided the ight to identify the hin the hemisphere. t one historian later ow history was mis-

or actions, statements, ad no other practical isapproval of the plan s general stance."²³ If e morality or rightness l badly; ultimately he nenal luck he had had ht he had the "Midas

no chance of success. e." Several monumen- peration from the very

beginning. Kennedy and his immediate advisers erroneously believed that Cuban rebels could become guerrillas in the Escambrays. Dulles and Bissell matched that misconception by assuming that Kennedy would not permit the invasion to fail, even if it meant using U.S. military forces. Only afterward did Dulles understand that Cuba was an "orphan child JFK had adopted—he had no real love and affection for it [and] proceeded uncertainly towards defeat . . . only half sold on the vital necessity of what he was doing."²⁴ Despite knowing better both Kennedy and Dulles had hoped for a popular insurrection against Castro, which never materialized. Furthermore, the CIA grossly underestimated the leadership of Castro and the military proficiency of his army and air force, which were more than a match for the Cuban brigade.

The operation broke down tactically even before the invasion force left Guatemala. The first air strike (D-2) on 15 April—eight old B-26 bombers from Nicaragua—had managed to destroy about 50 percent of Castro's air force. A second rebel strike, proposed for the next day in the original plan, might have completed the destruction. As it turned out the first assault caused Castro to disperse his aircraft, institute a military alert, and round up thousands from the underground. Whatever element of surprise the Bay of Pigs incursion might have had was now lost. Kennedy, advised by Rusk and Bundy, also rejected an air strike scheduled for the morning of the invasion on the seventeenth, largely because the U.S. cover had been blown away. One rebel Cuban plane from the 15 April strike, as a result of engine problems, had landed in Key West, Florida, instead of returning to Nicaragua. Chief UN delegate Adlai Stevenson innocently parroted the CIA story that the aircraft was a defection from Cuba, only to find out otherwise. Even more galling, the embarrassed Stevenson had to listen to the harangue of the Cuban foreign minister at the UN that "this act of imperialistic piracy" was "the prelude to a large scale invasion attempt . . . by the United States."²⁵ Kennedy's decision to prohibit the additional air strike probably kept Stevenson from resigning. Kennedy's action, however, frustrated Bissell, whose B-26s could now be used only for air cover over the beachhead on D-day.

Despite the inadequacy of that cover Kennedy ignored the urgings of the CIA and the vice-president to employ United States fighter cover as the invasion proceeded. Meanwhile, the Cuban brigade faced immediate detection. Much sooner than expected Castro had ordered his regulars and militia to the area. His remaining aircraft also attacked the invaders' outmoded landing craft, many of which were damaged from the unexpected reefs; some men had to swim to shore without weapons. Additionally, Castro's T-33 jet trainers shot down four B-26s, and a Sea Fury fighter plane sank a ship containing the ammunition reserve and most of

the communication equipment. Everything that could go wrong did; lack of coordination, proper planning, and effective leadership had made this a disaster in every respect.

By the second day, Tuesday, 18 April, it seemed clear that the operation would fail. The day before Kennedy had returned from Glen-Ora, the family Virginia home, where he could exercise plausible denial. Outwardly he seemed calm and cool; the remarkable self-control that had carried him through earlier personal crises remained with him. On the eighteenth he attended a scheduled cabinet meeting and talked for about twenty-five minutes, covering every aspect of the operation, including his understanding of why it had failed. According to Fred Dutton he never asked the cabinet members to rally around or to avoid criticism, nor did he "give them a public line they were to take."²⁶ Afterward he walked out on the grass, where his brother met him; inwardly he was hurting. Robert Kennedy later commented that he noticed that the president "kept shaking his head, rubbing his hands over his eyes. We'd been through a lot . . . together, and he was more upset this time than he was any other."²⁷ Both Bissell and Dulles were visibly shaken. The former, who had a habit of twisting his hands, was, according to Robert, "twisting them even more by the time this was over." Dulles, while visiting Nixon's home on the nineteenth, was asked if he wanted a drink; he responded, "I certainly would—I really need one. This is the worst day of my life!"²⁸ Talking to Nixon, he blamed the invasion's failure on Kennedy's last-minute cancellation of the rebel air strikes.

In retrospect, what doomed the invasion was not that at all; both Bissell and Bundy eventually admitted as much. The problem went beyond the weakness of the rebel air power. Castro had a vastly superior ground force, including tanks, which eventually would have prevailed even if his air force had been destroyed. Only American military intervention would have saved the operation, and this was exactly what Nixon, whom Kennedy obligatorily consulted on 20 April, recommended. Nixon advised him to "find a proper legal cover . . . and go in." He then provided the justification, including "protecting American citizens living in Cuba and defending our base at Guantánamo. . . . I believe that the most important thing at this point is that we do whatever is necessary to get Castro and communism out of Cuba."²⁹

Kennedy argued that American action in Cuba would cause Khrushchev to "probe and prod" in Berlin and elsewhere, but Nixon quickly pooh-poohed that appraisal. The extent to which Kennedy understood the irony of this exchange in the light of the 1960 campaign may never be known. Nevertheless, later that week the president also visited with Eisenhower at Camp David amid Maryland's Catoctin Mountains,

where he explained to He did not ask Ike for received, when Eisen United States support our foreign affairs." I ership as a "Profile in

Kennedy satisfied Right in his handling convinced that the U had lost trust and p actions. Rightists be everything necessary would appear weak Nixon clearly reflect can leader express Brazilian ambassade ros of Brazil oppose been carried through an impression of we are two ways of bei might"—and in the been achieved."³¹

Yet Kennedy ha moderate, he felt th cratic principles of t the cause. The Unite this could be done, come directly involv tion between indire critics of the Bay of distinctions—least c

Convinced of t with that criticism. hundred fathers an sponibility for the proper thing to do. approval rating in t

What most con twelve hundred of been captured; the personally respons working through h

ved the East German
ommunist response,
quent West German
len, and others rein-
by stopping the flow
ad off confrontation.
Union in its sphere of
ermans probably had
action was inhumane.

w; West Berlin Mayor
; General Clay to West
rles Bohlen to prevent
also went to reaffirm
attle group of fifteen
lin was designed to do
ained anxious, as the
n Gate to be greeted by
ntatives later in the day,
nce, for poise, and for
for faith in your allies,
oes not stand alone."²⁶
imitations in the West's
onn's traditional goal of
tion would accept a de
uld a de jure policy that
away? Unquestionably
he pressure in the weeks
Kennedy's intentions to
, then, marked only the
continued unabated well

esting on 30 August, fol-
to improve superpower
Khrushchev to do so be-
Chinese collaboration and
. In July Khrushchev had
it on disarmament, that he
oviets soon embarked on
or explosions occurred be-
under pressure to follow

suit, eventually announced that military security dictated the United States' resumption of nuclear testing, which would occur underground.

Yet Kennedy also sought ways to resume negotiations with the Soviet Union. Beginning in August, Soviet and East German military personnel had interfered with air access into West Berlin, dropping chaff to upset American radar and projecting blinding search lights from the ground on incoming planes. In early September Kennedy settled on a negotiating position in which he proposed the internationalization, under UN control, of the Autobahn to Berlin; a UN plebiscite in Berlin; the submission of the legal conflict to the World Court; and a nonaggression pact between NATO and Warsaw Pact powers. The invitation to the Soviets went through Ambassador Thompson. The president asked Rusk to take charge of the talks, cautioning him to be flexible and reasonable. Above all, Kennedy continued, "make the framework of our proposals as fresh as possible—they should *not* look like warmed over stuff from 1959."²⁷

By September Khrushchev turned to a "back-channel" personal correspondence with Kennedy to bypass his own hardliners. Kennedy's military buildup, the world reaction to Soviet atmospheric testing, and the unresolved crisis in Berlin undoubtedly concerned him. He, too, wished for the resumption of negotiations. His confidential letters generally went to Kennedy's press secretary Pierre Salinger or to Robert Kennedy, surreptitiously delivered by Khrushchev loyalists Georgi Bolshakov, editor and spy, and Mikhail Kharlamov, press spokesman for Andrei Gromyko. Kharlamov prefaced the delivery of the first letter with the comment, "The storm in Berlin is over." A pajama-clad Kennedy, in a New York hotel prior to his UN speech, read the letter proposing rapprochement. After repeatedly reviewing it with Salinger, Kennedy finally remarked, "If Khrushchev is ready to listen to our views on Germany, he's not going to recognize the Ulbricht regime—not this year, at least—and that's good news."²⁸ Indeed by 17 October Khrushchev, in a speech before the Twenty-second Congress of the Communist party, terminated the deadline for the German peace treaty.

Kennedy's response to Khrushchev's initiatives took several forms. He wrote that before there could be an early summit on Berlin, there must be good faith in Laos. According to Salinger, Khrushchev promised this in a subsequent missive, which rambled for twenty-six pages, adding, in effect, that "you and I, Mr. President, are . . . reasonable men, we agree that war between us is unthinkable. We have no choice but to put our heads together and find ways to live in peace."²⁹ Kennedy also delivered probably his best speech since the inaugural before the General Assem-