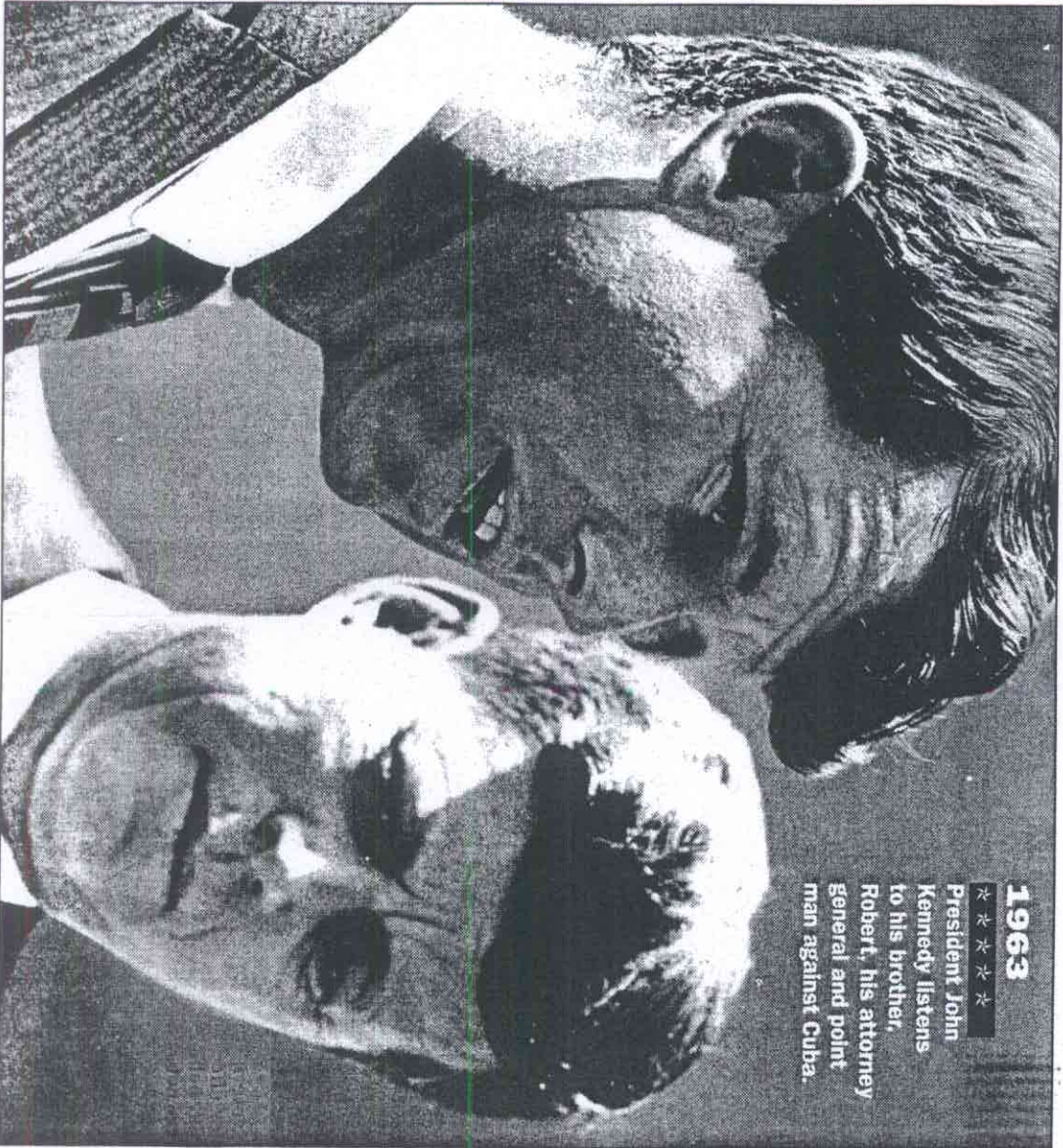


*Dublin News 17/10/98*

**JFK & RFK:**

# THE CUBA PLOT



**1963**  
President John Kennedy listens to his brother, Robert, his attorney general and point man against Cuba.



**Ever since he uncovered the truth about the massacre in My Lai in South Vietnam in 1969, Seymour Hersh has been one of the country's most prominent investigative reporters. But none of his assignments has prompted as much anticipation and controversy as 'The Dark Side of Camelot,' his shattering expose on John Kennedy and his presidency. In this explosive new book, Hersh shines a light on the long-held secrets of the Kennedy White House. Today, in the third installment, Hersh chronicles how JFK and RFK, who have already established an 'executive action,' or political assassination, unit at the CIA, redouble their efforts to kill Cuban leader Fidel Castro in the wake of the U.S.' humiliation at the Bay of Pigs.**



**R**OBERT KENNEDY, fresh from his crucial back-channel role in the Berlin crisis, took on yet another assignment in the fall of 1961: He became the driving force in a renewed American effort to murder Fidel Castro and overthrow his government. His enthusiasm for the assignment and his insistence on getting it done made the 35-year-old attorney general the most feared, and despised, official in the government — especially at the Central Intelligence Agency. But everyone involved understood that Bobby Kennedy was doing his brother's bidding.

"The Kennedys were on our back constantly to do more damage to Cuba, to cause an uprising, to get rid of Castro and the Castro regime," the CIA's Samuel Halpern, who served as the executive assistant to three deputy directors for clandestine operations, told me in one of our interviews for this book. "They were just absolutely obsessed with getting rid of Castro. . . . Me and my buddies kept asking over and over again, 'Why are we doing this? We're not getting anywhere.' We didn't know why we were doing what we were doing, but we were told to do it, so we did it. We were good soldiers."

Halpern, who began his intelligence career with the Office of Strategic Services in 1943, was brought to Washington from the Far East in the fall of 1961 and was eventually designated executive officer for the Cuba task force, as the CIA's bureaucracy grew in response to the White House's demand to oust Castro. Within months, what soon became the largest CIA station in the world was in operation on the campus at the University of Miami, with 600 American case officers monitoring the activities of an estimated 3,000 Cuban exiles on the payroll. Scores of guerrilla teams infiltrated Cuba by boat, collecting intelligence and attempting to carry out hit-and-run sabotage. The Kennedy administration had changed its approach. The Bay of Pigs had called for a military invasion by a large and well-armed exile force and the murder of Castro, provoking an uprising on the island. The new plan, which became known as

Operation Mongoose, relied on propaganda, economic sabotage and the infiltration of small-unit exile teams to create the conditions for an internal revolt. To run the operation, Jack Kennedy sought out Edward G. Lansdale, an Air Force general famed for his exploits as a covert operator in the Philippines and South Vietnam (he was said to be the model for "The Quiet American," Graham Greene's 1955 novel about Saigon). William Harvey, still responsible for executive action, was the CIA's point man on Mongoose — and the revived assassination plotting against Castro. Johnny Roselli and his friends in the Mafia would now be working directly for Harvey and once again trying to get poison pills into Havana.

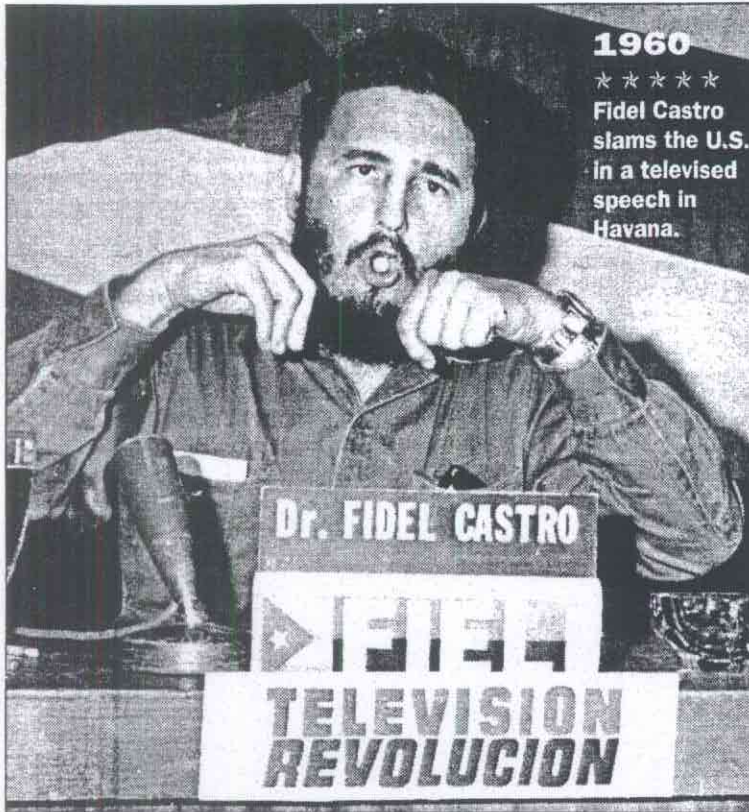
The pressure was on at the CIA, whose anti-Castro operatives the Kennedys held in contempt after the failure at the Bay of Pigs. "You don't know what pressure is until you get those two sons of bitches laying it on you," Halpern told me. "We felt we were doing things in Cuba because of a family vendetta and not because of the good of the United States."

Even as the Mongoose project was taking form, the CIA's Richard Bissell, soon to leave the agency's payroll, was given his marching orders: Get on with eliminating Castro. There was a brutal meeting in the White House, Bissell later confided to Halpern. "Bissell said he had been called over to the White House and met with the President and his brother," Halpern told me. "He was chewed out and told to get off his ass and do something about the Castro regime — and Castro. What they said was, in effect, that he hadn't done anything since the Bay of Pigs and it was time to get back into action. They expected him to continue to do the same kinds of things that the Bay of Pigs was supposed to do — to get rid of Castro."

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Jack and Bobby Kennedy were not being subtle about what they wanted done to Castro. On Jan. 19, 1962, with Operation Mongoose finally in place, Bobby Kennedy convened what he called a "How it all got started" meeting. Careful notes, later declassified, were taken by the CIA's Richard Helms, soon to be named to replace Bissell as deputy director for plans, in charge of clandestine operations. Kennedy was quoted as saying that Cuba carried "the top priority in the





U.S. government. All else is secondary. No time, money, effort or manpower is to be spared. Just the day before," Bobby added, according to Helms' notes, the President had told him that "the final chapter [on Castro] has not been written. It's got to be done and will be done."

Bill Harvey formally took over the CIA's Cuba task force in February 1962, renamed it Task Force W and began running what he always thought, he told the Church Committee, was a continuation of the ongoing Castro assassination operation that had started before the Bay of Pigs. In early April, Harvey met with Johnny Rosselli in New York and gave him CIA-produced poison pills intended for Castro. Rosselli told the committee he informed Harvey at the meeting that the Cuban exile operatives had expanded the hit list to include Che Guevara and Castro's brother, Raul. Rosselli testified that Harvey approved the targets, saying, "Everything is all right." The CIA also arranged for a shipment of long-range rifles with night scopes

and other equipment, including radios and snip radar, to be delivered in May to the Cuban hit team in Miami. The murder plotting continued unabated until February 1963, Harvey testified, although he had grave doubts by September whether the assassination would ever take place. And, once again, the mob did not deliver.

"Bill Harvey was a rough and tough SOB," Sam Halpern told me. "but when push came to shove, he couldn't deliver either. He had no more expertise than you and I in eliminating anybody. We never killed anyone," Halpern added, "but not for lack of trying."

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In September 1961, Kennedy announced that Allen Dulles would be replaced as CIA director by John McCone, a rich California Republican





**1961**  
★★★★★  
**Cuban exiles strategize in the Caribbean jungle.**



★★★★★  
**Kennedys put the heat on CIA's Richard Blissell.**

known as a rigid Cold Warrior. McCone shared the Kennedys' hatred for the Cuban premier. But when it came to Cuba, Walter Elder, McCone's executive assistant at the CIA, recalled in an interview for this book, even McCone "always regarded Bobby as looking over his shoulder." Robert Kennedy, Elder added, "decided that

Castro had rendered a personal insult to the Kennedy family by the action of the Bay of Pigs, and so Bobby led the charge. It was really almost an act of revenge for the humiliation, not only to the United States, but to the Kennedy family. That was sacred to Bobby."

Mongoose, including Task Force W, cost American taxpayers at least \$100 million. The operation did nothing to jeopardize the security of Fidel Castro or his standing with the Cuban population. Many Mongoose operations defied common sense. After a Soviet freighter malfunctioned and was forced to pull into a Caribbean port to off-load its cargo of Cuban sugar, a CIA scientist broke into a warehouse and injected the sugar with a chemical to ruin the taste. "It was childish," Halpern says now. "But we were doing something under the pressure."

Bobby Kennedy, increasingly impatient with the lack of progress in Cuba, decided in the early spring of 1962 to run his own operation. He once again moved into the back channel, as he had done with the Soviets, this time working with the Mafia. On his orders, an experienced clandestine CIA operative named Charles Ford was assigned as the attorney general's personal agent. Kennedy's unprecedented request went up the chain of command to Gen. Marshall Carter, the new deputy CIA director, for approval. Ford spent the next 18 months, until the assassination of President Kennedy, making secret trips, at Bobby Kennedy's direction, to Mafia chieftains in the United States and Canada, while continuing to



**1960**  
★★★★★  
**Fidel Castro (l.) and Nikita Khrushchev unite with a comrade clasp.**



serve with Harvey and Halpern on Task Force W. "Bobby was absolutely convinced," Halpern told me, "that the mob had a stay-behind system in Cuba since they had so many assets left there. There were the casinos and gambling dens and prostitution rings and God knows what else. Kennedy thought that by tapping into those stay-

behind units we could get some decent intelligence on what's going on in Cuba. The concept was crazy. The Mafia couldn't have set up a stay-behind system; it's too hard. Also, Castro had a great internal security system and you couldn't work contacts in the cities. That's why we" — in Task Force W — "operated in the countryside."

"I know," Halpern said, "he went to places like Chicago, San Francisco, Miami — wherever Bobby sent him — including one trip to Canada." Ford, obviously following instructions from Kennedy, relayed nothing to his nominal superiors in Task Force W. "We never got a single solitary piece of [written] information," Halpern said. Charlie Ford's

reports, if they still exist, presumably are among the millions of pages of Robert F. Kennedy papers that have yet to be released by the John F. Kennedy Library.

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Halpern said he and his colleagues had an ongoing concern for Ford's security. "We like to control our meeting places," he explained. "We don't like to walk into an unknown place." The husky and dark-skinned Ford, who had served in Japan and knew a great deal about the CIA's extensive operations there, was given identity papers and a careful cover story in the hope that his identity as a clandestine CIA officer would not become known to the Mafia.

"I don't know how Bobby Kennedy squared that in his own mind," Halpern said. "On the one hand, he allegedly was going after the Mafia to destroy them; on the other hand, he was using them for information about Cuba. Maybe it was a deal he made with them. Who knows?" Ford, who died in the late 1980s, never discussed — even years later — his missions for Kennedy, Halpern said.

All of this — the helter-skelter sabotage, the continued assassination efforts and the military planning and exercising — was seen and fully noted by the Cubans and their benefactors in the Soviet Union. The American aggression played a role in Nikita Khrushchev's decision to move Soviet nuclear missiles and launchers into Cuba, triggering the missile crisis of October 1962. It "now seems likely," the renowned Cold War historian John Lewis Gaddis of Yale University wrote in 1997, that "Khrushchev's chief purpose had not

been to snuff the strategic balance," as the White House claimed it was at the time, but rather to save the Cuban revolution. . . . There has long been ample evidence that the Kennedy administration was trying to get rid of Castro by all means short of an invasion. Given the unprecedented level of American military activity in the Caribbean in the months and particularly the weeks before the crisis broke, it seems foolish to claim that the next step would never have been taken, especially if one of the CIA's many assassination plots against Castro had actually succeeded.

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**TOMORROW**

**JFK's troublesome party girl**



**Samuel Halpern:**

**'We felt we were doing things in Cuba because of a family vendetta and not because of the good of the United States.'**

