

Cuban Catastrophe And Cold War Crisis

BAY OF PIGS: The Untold Story. By Peter Wyden. Simon and Schuster. 352 pp. \$12.95

THE BRINK: Cuban Missile Crisis, 1962. By David Detzer. Crowell. 299 pp. \$11.95

By KARL E. MEYER

IN OUR TIME, three military expeditions—Gallipoli, Suez, and the Bay of Pigs—bear the special odium of failure, and of the trio the Cuban invasion was easily the most inglorious. The Turks, after all, were nearly beaten at Gallipoli in 1915, a fact unknown to the Allied leaders who failed to press their advantage. If the Suez War was a disaster for the British and French, the Israelis nevertheless swept through the Sinai in a dazzling campaign in 1956.

Simply as a military operation, law and morality aside, the Bay of Pigs expedition in 1961 was uniquely inept. It was based on the grossest intelligence miscalculations (even the presence of coral reefs on the beachhead was somehow ignored), and despite the heavy investment of U.S. prestige in the outcome, the invasion force was decimated in 36 hours. As Theodore Draper once remarked, the Cuban invasion was that rare thing in history—a perfect failure.

It had a true domino effect. Persuaded that the Kennedy administration was talking loudly but carrying a small stick, the Soviet leadership covertly shipped nuclear weapons to Cuba, bringing on the missile crisis of 1962. The Central Intelligence Agency, badly tarnished by the Bay of Pigs, added to its disrepute by its clumsy sponsorship of assassination plots against Fidel Castro, thereby lending a gratuitous credibility to theories of Cuban involvement in the murder of John F. Kennedy. Even-

KARL E. MEYER is co-author of *The Cuban Invasion* and author of *The Art Museum: Power, Money and Ethics* among other books.

tually, in a sardonic epilogue, some of the same operatives who bungled the Cuban invasion years later bungled the Watergate break-in, leading to the fall of Richard M. Nixon, a godfather of the Bay of Pigs plan.

It was by any measure a watershed, and even at the distance of 18 years, the question of who blundered, and why, is of compelling importance. Peter Wyden, a publisher and a former *Newsweek* correspondent, offers the most thorough autopsy to date in a readable account filled with fresh detail. The pity is that Wyden has chosen to tell the story in the you-are-there tradition of Cornelius Ryan, thus giving us anecdote at the expense of meaning. His book is a rich pudding of fact without much of a theme.

Earlier accounts stand up surprisingly well. Wyden's day-to-day reconstruction, based on extensive interviews with hitherto reticent resources, supports and supplements the story already told by Arthur M. Schlesinger Jr. (in *A Thousand Days*, 1965), Theodore C. Sorensen (in *Kennedy*, 1965) and Haynes Johnson in his admirable and similarly-titled *The Bay of Pigs* (1964).

What is impressive about the latest retelling is the devastating testimony it provides about American incompetence in covert "dirty tricks" operations. The CIA is very much the product of its Anglophile founders who learned their craft as admiring disciples of the British during World War II. But by comparison with England, the United States is a heterogeneous society governed by a sprawling federal bureaucracy and served by an aggressively indiscreet press. There is in Britain a clublike complicity among spies, press, and government that has no parallel in America.

Viewed in this perspective, the Bay of Pigs was a characteristic American foul-up, the product of cando activism, inter-agency feuding, and bureaucratic doubletalk. The best that can be said about the Cuban invasion is that President Kennedy, with some courage, allowed it to fail, sparing us a Caribbean Vietnam.

Typically, the invasion plan was conceived within the CIA in 1960 by Richard M. Bissell Jr., a brilliant

(Continued on page 4)

WORLD

SUNDAY, JUNE 17, 1979

CI

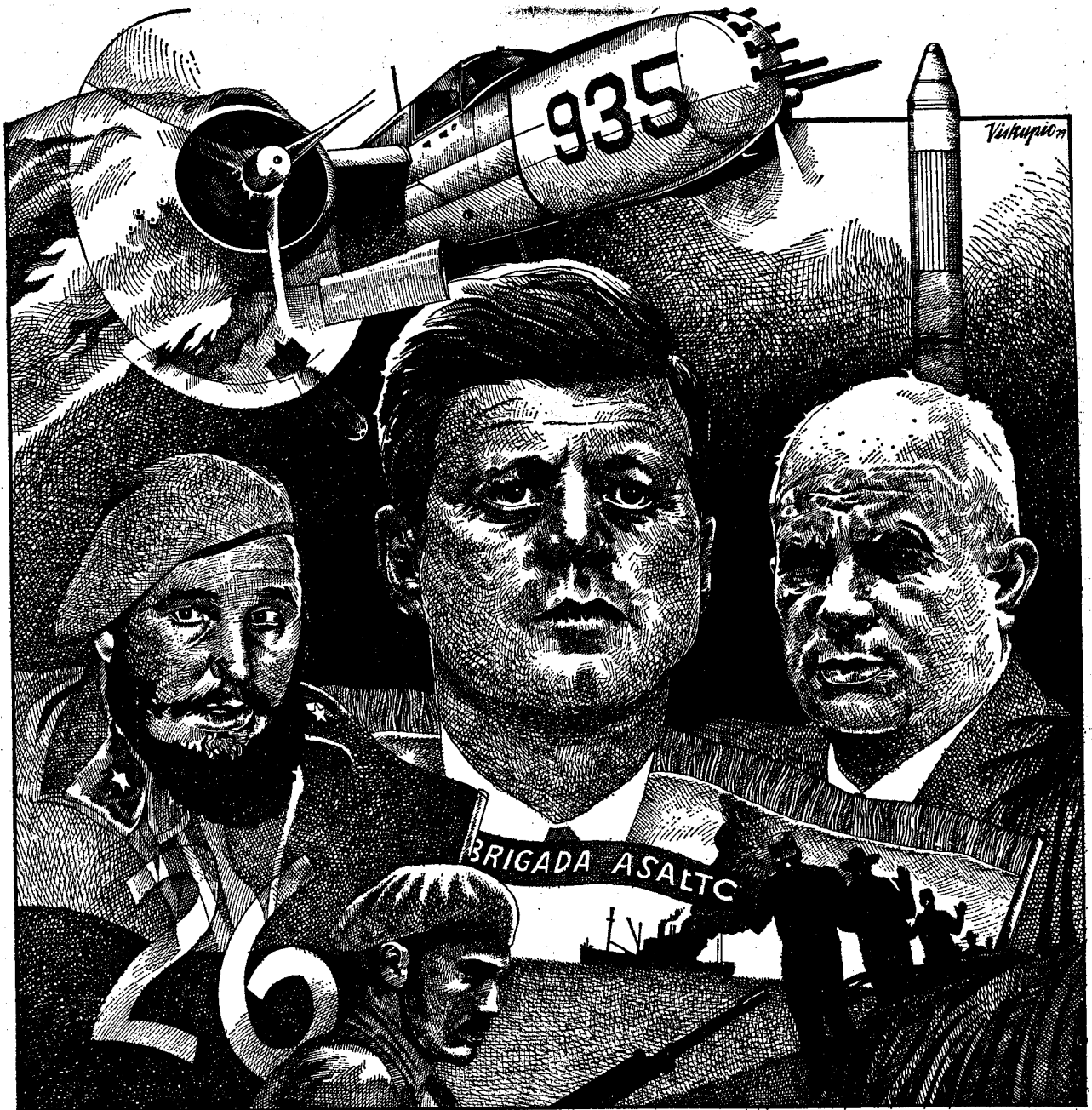


Illustration by Gary Viskupic for The Washington Post

Cuban Catastrophe and Cold War Crisis

(Continued from page 1)

Yale-trained economist who was most at home with graphs and hardware (it was Bissell who masterminded the successful U-2 overflights). The original idea was to recruit anti-Castro exiles into a guerrilla force for multiple infiltrations. By mid-1960, that scheme had swelled into something far more grandiose: a Guatemala plantation was converted into a boot camp for an army of some 1,500 Cubans, trained, equipped, and led by the CIA.

Bissell, like most of the Americans in charge, had little special knowledge of Cuba or Latin America. Compounding his problem, other CIA divisions, when asked for personnel, routinely assigned second-raters to the Cuban operation, one of them being Howard Hunt (who liked to greet recruits with a cheery, "Welcome aboard, Chico"). The Americans tended to see the operation as a logistic problem, a repetition of the "Guatemala scenario" in which a handful of CIA-backed exiles had overthrown the left-wing Arbenz regime in 1954. At the camp, American "advisors" were given the best housing and an exclusive bar, and shrugged off political squabbles among the Cubans as a nuisance.

That this brigade could overthrow Castro and his militia of 100,000, and could do so while preserving American "deniability," was rightly viewed as fantasy even within the CIA. Tellingly, the astute Richard Helms, a future CIA director, declined to sign on, and even though Vice-President Nixon favored using the Cuban brigade, the outgoing President Eisenhower cannily equivocated, leaving the miniature army to his successor.

Even before his inauguration, John F. Kennedy was informed by CIA Director Allen Dulles that he had a "disposal problem." What did he propose to do with an exile army itching to take on Castro, whom Kennedy had repeatedly attacked during the campaign? Press accounts of the CIA operation had already surfaced, and the

Guatemalan government was threatening to close down the training camp. If the president cancelled the operation, it would seem as if he had turned tail and in effect was protecting Castro from the anti-Communist exiles.

Still, the untried administration could have been spared the Cuban debacle if the CIA plan had been realistically appraised by the military. In Wyden's account, the most culpable of blunderers were the Joint Chiefs of Staff, who had been asked by Kennedy to give a hard-headed opinion of the operation's feasibility. From the outset, the president had specifically ruled out any overt U.S. assistance—the "missing" air cover of subsequent myth was never envisioned; it was supposed to be an all-Cuban enterprise, or at least to look that way.

An experienced senior officer, Brig. Gen. David W. Gray, was named by the Joint Chiefs as head of a committee to study the CIA scheme. After examining what was called "the Trinidad plan," involving a dawn landing at a shore city in southern Cuba, and after hearing the most optimistic CIA forecasts, Gray was highly dubious. He informed the Joint Chiefs that the overall prospects were at best "fair," by which he meant "thirty in favor and seventy against." But those figures were omitted from the formal report submitted by the Joint Chiefs to the White House on February 3, 1961. Here is how the report was worded: "This plan has a fair chance of ultimate success and, even if it does not achieve immediately the full results desired, could contribute to the eventual overthrow of the Castro regime."

As the pressure for a decision intensified, the same cagily upbeat note was sounded by the Joint Chiefs, who gave their approval to the Bay of Pigs as the eventual invasion site and who accepted successive White House modifications intended to lessen the political risks of overt U.S. intervention. On the basis of Wyden's detailed account, one may justifiably surmise that the

Joint Chiefs saw the risky invasion as a pretext and prelude for full-scale American intervention.

Wyden indirectly quotes Arthur Schlesinger as observing that false assumptions aggravated the disaster: "The military assumed the President would order American intervention. The President assumed they knew he would refuse to escalate the miniature war." Stated more bluntly, the military seem to have believed that Kennedy

"The Bay of Pigs attests that we court disaster and ridicule when we betray our own values and ineptly stoop to deceive."

was employing their kind of coded doubletalk in which foul means fair.

If the president was shaken by the disingenuousness of his military advisers, he was appalled by the crudeness and incompetence of the operation's CIA commandants. A Cuban Revolutionary Council, which was ostensibly in charge, was held in custody during the invasion in a Florida airport while a Madison Avenue publicist issued "war communiques" in its name. The anti-Castro underground in Cuba was never informed of the invasion date, and its leaders had no chance of aiding the exile army.

A pre-invasion strike by rebel B-26s was doubly bungled. Not only did the bombers fail to destroy all of Castro's tiny air force, but the CIA also failed to inform U.N. Ambassador Adlai Steven-

son of the truth behind the flimsy "cover"—that the B-26s came from Guatemala, and that the pilots were not in fact "Cuban defectors." At a U.N. debate, Stevenson was made to seem a fool or liar.

Despite presidential orders to the contrary, American personnel took a direct part in the invasion—the first frogman ashore was Gray Lynch, a CIA agent. Only two years later did President Kennedy finally learn that American pilots, acting on Bissell's authority, had participated in combat; four U.S. fliers were killed at the Bay of Pigs. (When Kennedy discovered the fact, he grimly told his Air Force aide, "You've got a lot of asses to chew!")

Most unforgivably, the Cuban exiles were repeatedly and expressly misled by CIA "advisors" about the limited nature of the American commitment; the invaders went into battle believing that the U.S. Navy, which was poised offshore, would, if necessary, provide a backup.

It is conceivable that the president might have approved naval intervention if the Cuban brigade had established a beachhead. But, hazarding fortune, the CIA had stored the entire ammunition supply for the rebels in a single vessel in the seven-ship flotilla. When the supply ship *Houston* was bombed and sunk by one of Castro's Sea Furies, the Bay of Pigs tragi-comedy was over. By D-day plus 3, or April 20, the invaders had been cleared from the swamps of Playa Larga and Girón. In all, Castro wound up with 1,189 prisoners, who were freed two years later after the U.S. paid a privately-raised ransom of trucks and medical supplies.

Two conclusions are implicit in Wyden's postmortem. The underlying ar-

rogance of the Bay of Pigs operation was rooted in what he bluntly calls "the gook syndrome," the inability on the part of the CIA and the military to take supposedly "lesser breeds" seriously. At the lowest level, this led to a grotesque underestimation of Cuban military capability; few foresaw that Castro could so swiftly mobilize his militia for a counterstrike, or that his pilots—equipped with obsolete Sea Furies and jet trainers—would devastate the beachhead. Still more fundamental was the complacent indifference to the revolutionary élan that gripped Cuba and gave Castro the allure of a nationalist demigod. As he himself prophetically remarked after the battle, Americans do not have "a guerrilla mentality."

Our guerrilla wars are fought in the bureaucracy, the weapons being slick briefings, save-your-rear memoranda, and technocratic jargon. Every American president must struggle continuously for a plain answer to an honest question from an officialdom more concerned with turf than truth. The easy intimacy that prevailed during World War II at Bletchley Park, the British "dirty tricks" factory, is unimaginable in Washington.

Certainly one positive result of the Bay of Pigs was President Kennedy's insistence, during the 1962 Cuban missile crisis, on coherence of command and clarity in communications. In the absence of the ad hoc ExCom, as the Executive Committee of the National Security Council was called, events might have taken a disastrous direction when Kennedy ordered a risky naval blockade to compel the Soviet Union to withdraw missiles from Cuba. The whole story is competently retold in *The Brink*, written by a

young academic who has drawn on the Kennedy archives for additional details. David Detzer is not a revisionist (he fails to ask what might have happened if Nikita Khrushchev had not backed down) and his account is essentially a retouching of Elie Abel's *The Missile Crisis* (1966) and Robert F. Kennedy's *Thirteen Days* (1969).

Still, Detzer did unearth this telegram from a Columbia professor to Arthur Schlesinger, dispatched on Friday, Oct. 26, when the outcome of the crisis was in doubt: "Any further delay in bombing missile sites fails to exploit Soviet uncertainty." The advice, which was not taken, was offered by Zbigniew Brzezinski.

It may be finally remarked that the president's conduct of the missile crisis was in striking contrast to the Bay of Pigs. The American case was candidly presented and backed up by persuasive evidence, and at Kennedy's behest leeway was left for a rational compromise. Though the president formally rejected a swap of Turkish for Cuban missiles, it is significant (as Detzer points out) that Robert F. Kennedy informally advised Soviet Ambassador Anatoly Dobrynin that the American missiles in Turkey would be removed "within a short time."

In the missile crisis, above all, the onus for deception lay with the Soviet Union, not with us. Surely the evidence of three decades is by now overwhelming: from Cuba to the Congo, from Southeast Asia to South America, we have a limited national talent for clandestine subversion. It is not our bag, and there should be no shame in admitting as much. The Bay of Pigs attests that we court disaster and ridicule when we betray our own values and ineptly stoop to deceive. □