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Maxwell D. Taylor

Analogies (II): Was Desert I Another Bay of Pigs?

In the aftermath of the failure to rescue our hostages in Tehran, there has been a frequent tendency to find similarities between it and the Bay of Pigs fiasco in the early months of the Kennedy administration. Having served as chairman of the Cuba Study Group established by President Kennedy to investigate the causes of the latter failure, I too have been interested in sorting out some of the analogies and differences of the two episodes.

At the outset, one is struck by certain broad similarities. Both were spectacular failures with wide repercussions, both domestic and international. In both cases, the tasks undertaken were difficult—for the Cuban Brigade, to effect in its first combat a landing on a hostile shore, one of the most delicate operations in the military repertory.

The task of the hostage rescue mission was even more complex and, by its nature, was highly exposed to unpredictable contingencies—a commando raid moving by night nearly 1,000 miles through unfriendly and unfamiliar country to free prisoners in the embassy compound in Tehran, there to overcome the guards as quickly and quietly as possible and then to whisk the captives to safety outside the country.

Despite the obvious difficulties and risks, at the outset both presidents were highly confident of success in their undertakings and correspondingly dismayed by their failures. Each unhesitatingly assumed full personal responsibility for the reversal.

But there are also sharp contrasts between the two operations, and even apparent similarities, under examination, reveal notable differences of cause or effect. For example, while both operations were difficult, much of the difficulty of the Bay of Pigs was self-imposed.

From the beginning, President Kennedy had insisted that the operation must be "covert," i.e., that the American involvement must be concealed or plausibly deniable. Hence there could be no visible American participation—no American advisers with the Cuban Brigade, no assistance at sea from the U.S. Navy and no air support by aircraft other than old fighter-bombers, B26s, which Cuban rebels rising against Castro could conceivably have obtained in the world secondhand arms market without U.S. assistance. In the course of the operation, the president's desire to conceal the American hand behind this diaphanous veil of "covertness" led to serious restraints being imposed upon the military effectiveness of the limited forces available to carry out the mission.

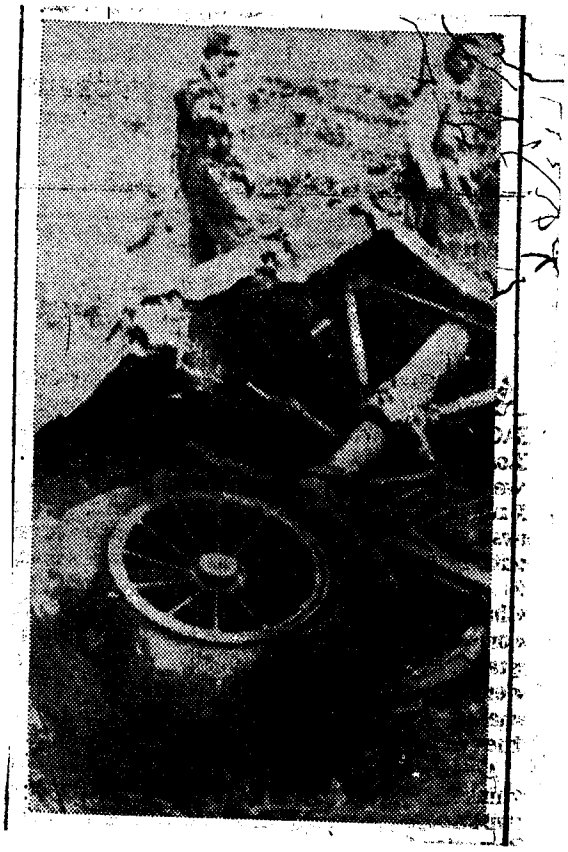
So far as we know, at this writing, the rescue mission in Iran suffered from no similar handicap. It had the advantage of a clear channel of military command extending from the president to the secretary of defense and the Joint Chiefs of Staff, then to a unified task force commander, and finally to Col. Beckwith, the commando team commander. There was no question as to the responsibility of the military for what took place in the field.

In contrast, in the Cuban venture it was the CIA, not the Department of Defense, that was the agency responsible for the conduct of the operation, using for the purpose an improvised command and communication system that invited the trouble that promptly arose in exercising control. The role of the JCS was that of advisers on the sidelines, offering comments from time to time on selected aspects of the operation but never formulating an integrated evaluation of the overall merit of the plan and its probability of success.

This matter of the probability of success as perceived by the leaders of these two operations is an interesting aspect to explore. In their minds, what was meant by success and what were their expectations of achieving it?

In discussions after the fact with President Kennedy's principal advisers, I was struck by the fuzziness of their concept of what the Cuban expedition was supposed to accomplish. All agreed that the initial purpose was to establish a beachhead in the Bay of Pigs, but then what? There was a vague hope among most that a successful landing might trigger a popular uprising resulting in the eventual overthrow of Castro. But if such were not the case, there was never a clear plan as to how to proceed. President Kennedy and a few of his advisers had understood that, if threatened by defeat, the brigade would exercise the so-called "guerrilla option," i.e., a break-out to the nearby swamps and hills in guerrilla bands to join the anti-Castro dissidents believed to be in the region.

Unhappily, the brigade apparently had heard nothing of this option—certainly it had received no training in its execution. So when the soldiers ran out of ammunition, they retreated to the beaches hoping for rescue craft that, never having been included in the plan, never came to their aid. In the meantime, whatever confidence President Kennedy had initially in success had vanished by the end of the first day of combat.



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It is difficult to make a parallel analysis of the state of mind of President Carter and his colleagues. One handicap is that, while asserting their belief prior to the operation that its chance of success was "good," "excellent" or "militarily feasible," they have never defined what they mean by success. Obviously, complete success would have been the freeing of all the hostages and their safe return home with few or no casualties. But success is seldom if ever complete. In the Mayaguez incident, the nation appeared to feel a success had been scored although the Marines lost more men in connection with the operation than the number of American captives rescued. So in the Iranian affair, I imagine that most citizens and probably most government officials would have been satisfied if the commandos had rescued most of the hostages pretty much regardless of the military losses suffered.

If the latter were the standard set, we would still be unable to understand the confidence of our senior officials in achieving such success in an enterprise deemed impossible only a few months before. Our inability may stem from our lack of knowledge of the plan for the operation beyond Desert I, where the mission aborted, and of the undisclosed assets ("friendlies," motor vehicles, informers, air support, etc.) that are rumored to have been available to help the commandos on their way to Tehran. Although it would seem that the going would get harder as they approached their destination, where final success would be decided, our senior authorities state that the participants were highly confident of the outcome of the assault on the embassy and the evacuation of the prisoners. They add that the first leg, the 500-mile helicopter flight to Desert I, was considered the most hazardous part of the whole job.

At this point, I must confess myself baffled in trying to understand official confidence in the outcome of this operation. Their greatest concern, we are told, was over a 500-mile helicopter flight far from any likely armed enemy rather than over the high probability of a bloody hand-to-hand combat in the darkness of the embassy compound in the heart of a hostile city, with our hostages uninformed of what was taking place. Yet for all its importance, only seven helicopters were initially considered necessary for the 500-mile flight, an eighth having been added as a second thought. Yet these same authorities presumably made the concurrent decision that, if the number of available helicopters ever dropped below six, the mission would be aborted. I find it extremely hard to understand confidence in any plan so fragile that the loss of one or two helicopters would be certain to cause it to fail. It is equally difficult to understand embarking on an enterprise of such world consequence with such a thin margin of safety.

We have heard much about the use of fail-safe devices to reduce the risks of the operation. No such device was available in the case of the Bay of Pigs. Although President Kennedy had always been uneasy about the whole business and had set back the date of the landing twice, he never sought to turn back the brigade once it was headed toward Cuban soil. As a matter of fact, because of the precarious state of the communications, I am not sure that a cancellation would have been possible.

The fail-safe procedure used in Iran has much to recommend it, particularly in an operation so clearly divided into distinct phases, all of which had to succeed in sequence to obtain mission success. However, it also raises the question of the possible effect on leaders when escape hatches are so readily accessible. In the course of history, the successful commander has often been the kind of man who deliberately burns his bridges behind him to prevent thought of anything but victory.

One would hope that at a proper time President Carter would conduct a post-mortem review of the rescue mission as President Kennedy did of the Bay of Pigs. On the latter occasion, the president assembled in the White House all the senior participants, had them briefed on the report of the Cuba Study Group and then conducted a frank discussion of errors made and lessons learned. The criticism of individuals and agencies was often sharp but evoked no excuses or signs of resentment from delinquent officials. As President Kennedy said with some relief as they departed, "At least nobody got mad." The disaster of the Bay of Pigs was bitter medicine for the young Kennedy team, but the bond formed by shared adversity contributed in some measure to their later success in the Cuba missile crisis.

It would be more difficult for President Carter, in an election year to conduct such a private, in-house self-examination. If he did so, I suspect that the major lesson taught by the failure of the rescue mission would be essentially the same as in the Bay of Pigs. In both cases, the decision to act was not accompanied by a determination to succeed, followed by an allocation of resources more than enough to assure success. In both cases, our government tried to do too much with too little and with insufficient regard for the eternal verities of Murphy's Law.

The writer, now retired from the Army, was chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff during the Kennedy and Johnson administrations.