

Washington: The Bay of Pigs and Vietnam

By TOM WICKER

WASHINGTON, July 22—There is a grim, cautionary note for President Johnson in the sad unfolding of so many personal accounts of the Bay of Pigs disaster. All of these memoirs agree on one thing—Mr. Kennedy mistrusted the whole invasion plan he inherited but was unable to halt it for longer study or cancel it altogether.

He was unable to do so because the project was a sort of Frankenstein's monster that, once created, went out of control. Richard Bissell, who planned the operation for the Central Intelligence Agency, now discloses that it was even feared that the invasion brigade, trained in Central America, well-armed and "highly motivated," could not be stopped from a rampage against Guatemala or Nicaragua if it was restrained from attacking Cuba.

Kennedy's Fear

But Mr. Kennedy was unable to cancel a project he feared in his heart was wrong primarily because he could not accept the psychological and political consequences at home and abroad. Theodore C. Sorensen, writing in *Look*, makes this appallingly plain.

The President feared that

cancellation would be "interpreted as an admission that Castro ruled with popular support and would be around to harass Latin America for many years to come." And "he felt that his disapproval of the plan would be a show of weakness inconsistent with his general stance." He was even confronted with the question from the plan's advocates whether he would be less resolute against Castro than the Republican Administration that had conceived the invasion scheme.

Campaign Pledge

Mr. Sorensen says that Mr. Kennedy was not influenced by his campaign pledge to "strengthen the non-Bastista democratic anti-Castro forces in exile, and in Cuba itself, who offer eventual hope of overthrowing Castro." But that statement and others had done much to heighten the holy war atmosphere in which, a few months later, Mr. Kennedy found himself unwilling to cancel the Bay of Pigs.

And on Oct. 29, 1960, he had said at Philadelphia: "If the people of the world ever begin to get the idea that our high noon was in the past, that the balance of power and the flow of history is moving in the direction of our adversaries, we have lost then a decisive battle.

We depend upon the free support of free people, but they also depend upon a leadership which is certain, which has power, which has strength."

That view, we can assume, must have influenced him as he contemplated the consequences of calling off the invasion—an act which it would have been no more possible to keep secret than was the final catastrophe.

But it was a wiser President who, after the failure was clear, told Arthur Schlesinger Jr. and James Reston that he would resist the pressure to commit American forces, overthrow Castro and recover the prestige lost at the Bay of Pigs.

"What is prestige?" he asked. "Is it the shadow of power or the substance of power? We are going to work on the substance of power."

Shadow and Substance

President Johnson and his most trusted advisers now are conducting an intensive review of the war in Vietnam, presumably focusing on the question whether to expand greatly the direct American participation in the fighting. But the real problem for them is to distinguish between the shadow and the substance of power.

No doubt Mr. Johnson would be assailed now if he stopped

short of committing the nation to a full-scale ground war in Southeast Asia—just as Mr. Kennedy would have been attacked had he canceled the Cuban invasion. No doubt anything less than such a war would be considered in some quarters of the world as weakness—just as disbanding the exile brigade would have been in 1961. And perhaps Mr. Johnson is unconsciously influenced by his own hortatory remarks about the national honor—just as John Kennedy may have been influenced by his rhetoric.

These things may be true but it is certainly true that a full commitment of American power—even non-nuclear power—to a war in South Vietnam could in an instant become another Frankenstein's monster.

President Kennedy came eventually to ask himself, about the Bay of Pigs: How could I have been so wrong? The answer, it now is clear, is that he feared the shadows rather than the substance.

President Johnson's task now is to cut through graver shadows and find the substance of what is required of this nation in Vietnam. If that should prove to be something less than bloody war, he will enhance—not impair—the true strength of America by recognizing it.