

The bay of pigs invasion essay



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The story of the failed invasion of Cuba at the Bay of Pigs is one of mismanagement, overconfidence, and lack of security. The blame for the failure of the operation falls directly in the lap of the Central Intelligence Agency and a young president and his advisors. The fall out from the invasion caused a rise in tension between the two great superpowers and ironically 34 years after the event, the person that the invasion meant to topple, Fidel Castro, is still in power. To understand the origins of the invasion and its ramifications for the future it is first necessary to look at the invasion and its origins.

Part I: The Invasion and its Origins.

The Bay of Pigs invasion of April 1961, started a few days before on April 15th with the bombing of Cuba by what appeared to be defecting Cuban air force pilots. At 6 a. m. in the morning of that Saturday, three Cuban military bases were bombed by B-26 bombers. The airfields at Camp Libertad, San Antonio de los Baos and Antonio Maceo airport at Santiago de Cuba were fired upon.

Seven people were killed at Libertad and forty-seven people were killed at other sites on the island.

Two of the B-26s left Cuba and flew to Miami, apparently to defect to the United States. The Cuban Revolutionary Council, the government in exile, in New York City released a statement saying that the bombings in Cuba were “. . . carried out by ‘ Cubans inside Cuba’ who were ‘ in contact with’ the top command of the Revolutionary Council” The New York Times reporter covering the story alluded to something being wrong with the whole situation when he wondered how the council knew the pilots were coming if the pilots had only decided to leave Cuba on Thursday after “. . . a suspected betrayal by a fellow pilot had precipitated a plot to strike” Whatever the case, the planes came down in Miami later that morning, one landed at Key West Naval Air Station at 7: 00 a. m. and the other at Miami International Airport at 8: 20 a. m. Both planes were badly damaged and their tanks were nearly empty. On the front page of The New

York Times the next day, a picture of one of the B-26s was shown along with a picture of one of the pilots cloaked in a baseball hat and hiding behind dark sunglasses, his name was withheld. A sense of conspiracy was even at this early stage beginning to envelope the events of that week.

In the early hours of April 17th the assault on the Bay of Pigs began. In the true cloak and dagger spirit of a movie, the assault began at 2 a. m. with a team of frogmen going ashore with orders to set up landing lights to indicate to the main assault force the precise location of their objectives, as well as to clear the area of anything that may impede the main landing teams to be added when they arrived. At 2: 30 a. m. and at 3: 00 a. m. two battalions came ashore at Playa Girn and one battalion at Playa Larga beaches. The troops at Playa Girn had orders to move west, northwest, up the coast and meet with the troops at Playa Larga in the middle of the bay. A small group of men were then to be sent north to the town of Jaguey Grande to secure it as well.

When looking at a modern map of Cuba it is obvious that the troops would have problems in the area that was chosen for them to land at. The area around the Bay of Pigs is a swampy marsh land area which would be hard on the troops. The Cuban forces were quick to react and Castro ordered his T-33 trainer jets, two Sea Furies, and two B-26s into the air to stop the invading forces. Off the coast was the command and control ship and another vessel carrying supplies for the invading forces. The Cuban air force made quick work of the supply ships, sinking the command vessel the Marsopa and the supply ship the Houston, blasting them to pieces with five-inch rockets. In the end the 5th battalion was lost, which was on the Houston, as well as the supplies for the landing teams and eight other smaller vessels. With some of the invading forces' ships destroyed, and no command and control ship, the logistics of the operation soon broke down as the other supply ships were kept at bay by Castro's air force. As with many failed military adventures, one of the problems with this one was with supplying

the troops.

In the air, Castro had easily won superiority over the invading force. His fast moving T-33s, although unimpressive by today's standards, made short work of the slow moving B-26s of the invading force. On Tuesday, two were shot out of the sky and by Wednesday the invaders had lost 10 of their 12 aircraft. With air power firmly in control of Castro's forces, the end was near for the invading army.

Over the 72 hours the invading force of about 1500 men were pounded by the Cubans. Castro fired 122mm. Howitzers, 22mm. cannon, and tank fire at them. By Wednesday the invaders were pushed back to their landing zone at Playa Girn. Surrounded by Castro's forces some began to surrender while others fled into the hills. In total 114 men were killed in the slaughter while thirty-six died as prisoners in Cuban cells. Others were to live out twenty years or more in those cells as men plotting to topple the government of Castro.

The 1500 men of the invading force never had a chance for success from almost the first days in the planning stage of the operation. Operation Pluto, as it came to be known as, has its origins in the last dying days of the Eisenhower administration and that murky time period during the transition of power to the newly elected president John F. Kennedy.

The origins of American policy in Latin America in the late 1950s and early 1960s has its origins in American's economic interests and its anticommunist policies in the region. The same man who had helped formulate American containment policy towards the Soviet threat, George Kennan, in 1950 spoke to US Chiefs of Mission in Rio de Janeiro about Latin America. He said that American policy had several purposes in the region, . . . to protect the vital supplies of raw materials which Latin American countries export to the USA; to prevent the ' military exploitation of Latin America by the enemy' The Soviet Union; and to avert ' the

psychological mobilization of Latin America against us.’

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By the 1950s trade with Latin America accounted for a quarter of American exports, and 80 per cent of the investment in Latin America was also American. The Americans had a vested interest in the region that it would remain pro-American.

The Guatemalan adventure can be seen as another of the factors that lead the American government to believe that it could handle Casto. Before the Second World War ended, a coup in Guatemala saw the rise to power of Juan Jose Arvalo. He was not a communist in the traditional sense of the term, but he “. . . packed his government with Communist Party members and Communist sympathizers.” In 1951 Jacobo Arbenz succeeded Arvalo after an election in March of that year. The party had been progressing with a series of reforms, and the newly elected leader continued with these reforms. During land reforms a major American company, the United Fruit Company, lost its land and other holdings without any

compensation from the Guatemalan government. When the Guatemalans refused to go to the International Court of Law, United Fruit began to lobby the government of the United States to take action. In the government they had some very powerful supporters. Among them were Foster Dulles, Secretary of State who had once been their lawyer, his brother Allen the Director of Central Intelligence who was a share holder, and Robert Cutler head of the National Security Council. In what was a clear conflict of interest, the security apparatus of the United States decided to take action against the Guatemalans.

From May 1st, 1954, to June 18th, the Central Intelligence Agency did everything in its power to overthrow the government of Arbenz. On June 17th to the 18th, it peaked with an invasion of 450 men lead by a Colonel Carlos Castillo Armas. With the help of air support the men took control of the country and Arbenz fled to the Mexican Embassy. By June 27th, the country was firmly in control of the invading force. With its success in Guatemala, CIA had the

confidence that it could now take on anyone who interfered with American interests.

In late 1958 Castro was still fighting a guerilla war against the corrupt regime of Fulgencio Batista. Before he came to power, there was an incident between his troops and some vacationing American troops from the nearby American naval base at Guantanamo Bay. During the incident some US Marines were held captive by Casto's forces but were later released after a ransom was secretly paid. This episode soured relations with the United States and the chief of U. S. Naval Operations, Admiral Burke, wanted to send in the Marines to destroy Castro's forces then but Secretary of State Foster Dulles disagreed with the measures suggested and stopped the plan.

Castro overthrew Batista in 1959. Originally Castro was not a communist either and even had meetings with then Vice-President Richard Nixon. Fearful of Castro's revolution, people with money, like doctors, lawyers, and the mafia, left Cuba for the United

States. To prevent the loss of more capital Castro's solution was to nationalize some of the businesses in Cuba. In the process of nationalizing some business he came into conflict with American interests just as Arbenz had in Guatemala. ". . . legitimate U. S. Businesses were taken over, and the process of socialization begun with little if any talk of compensation." There were also rumours of Cuban involvement in trying to invade Panama, Guatemala, and the Dominican Republic and by this time Castro had been turn down by the United States for any economic aid. Being rejected by the Americans, he met with foreign minister Anasta Mikoyan to secure a \$100 million loan from the Soviet Union. It was in this atmosphere that the American Intelligence and Foreign Relations communities decided that Castro was leaning towards communism and had to be dealt with.

In the spring of 1960, President Eisenhower approved a plan to send small groups of American trained, Cuban exiles, to work in the underground as guerrillas to overthrow Castro. By the fall, the

plan was changed to a full invasion with air support by exile Cubans in American supplied planes. The original group was to be trained in Panama, but with the growth of the operation and the quickening pace of events in Cuba, it was decided to move things to a base in Guatemala. The plan was becoming rushed and this would start to show, the man in charge of the operation, CIA Deputy Director Bissell said that,

. . . There didn't seem to be time to keep to the original plan and have a large group trained by this initial cadre of young Cubans. So the larger group was formed and established at La finca, in Guatemala, and there the training was conducted entirely by Americans .

. . .

It was now fall and a new president had been elected.

President Kennedy could have stopped the invasion if he wanted to, but he probably didn't do so for several reasons. Firstly, he had campaigned for some form of action against Cuba and it was also

the height of the cold war, to back out now would mean having groups of Cuban exiles travelling around the globe saying how the Americans had backed down on the Cuba issue. In competition with the Soviet Union, backing out would make the Americans look like wimps on the international scene, and for domestic consumption the new president would be seen as backing away from one of his campaign promises. The second reason Kennedy probably didn't abort the operation is the main reason why the operation failed, problems with the CIA.

Part II: Failure and Ramifications.

The failure at the CIA led to Kennedy making poor decisions which would affect future relations with Cuba and the Soviet Union.

The failure at CIA had three causes. First the wrong people were handling the operation, secondly the agency in charge of the operation was also the one providing all the intelligence for the operation, and thirdly for an organization supposedly obsessed with security the operation had security problems.

In charge of the operation was the Director of Central Intelligence, Allan Dulles and main responsibility for the operation was left to one of his deputies, Richard Bissell. In an intelligence community geared mainly for European operations against the USSR, both men were lacking in experience in Latin American affairs. Those in charge of Operation Pluto, based this new operation on the success of the Guatemalan adventure, but the situation in Cuba was much different than that in Guatemala. In Guatemala the situation was still chaotic and Arbenz never had the same control over the country that Castro had on Cuba. The CIA had the United States Ambassador, John Puerifoy, working on the inside of Guatemala coordinating the effort, in Cuba they had none of this while Castro was being supplied by the Soviet block. In addition, after the overthrow of the government in Guatemala, Castro was aware that this may happen to him as well and probably had his guard up waiting for anything that may indicate that an invasion was imminent.

The second problem was the nature of the bureaucracy itself.

The CIA was a new kid on the block and still felt that it had to prove itself, it saw its opportunity in Cuba. Obsessed with secrecy, it kept the number of people involved to a minimum. The intelligence wing of CIA was kept out of it, their Board of National Estimates could have provided information on the situation in Cuba and the chances for an uprising against Castro once the invasion started. Also kept out of the loop were the State Department and the Joint Chiefs of Staff who could have provided help on the military side of the adventure. In the end, the CIA kept all the information for itself and passed on to the president only what it thought he should see. Lucien S. Vandebroucke, in *Political Science Quarterly* of 1984, based his analysis of the Bay of Pigs failure on organizational behaviour theory. He says that the CIA “. . . supplied President Kennedy and his advisers with chosen reports on the unreliability of Castro’s forces and the extent of Cuban dissent.” Of the CIA’s behaviour he concludes

that,

. . . By resorting to the typical organization strategy of defining the options and providing the information required to evaluate them, the CIA thus structured the problem in a way that maximized the likelihood the president would choose the agency's preferred option . .

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The CIA made sure the deck was stacked in their favour when the time came to decide whether a project they sponsored was sound or not. President Kennedy's Secretary of State at the time was Dean Rusk, in his autobiography he says that,

. . . The CIA told us all sorts of things about the situation in Cuba and what would happen once the brigade got ashore. President Kennedy received information which simply was not correct. For example, we were told that elements of the Cuban armed forces would defect and join the brigade, that there would be popular uprisings

throughout Cuba when the brigade hit the beach, and that

if the exile force got into trouble, its members would

simply melt into the countryside and become guerrillas,

just as Castro had done

As for senior White House aides, most of them disagreed with

the plan as well, but Rusk says that Kennedy went with what the CIA

had to say. As for himself, he said that he “. . . did not serve

President Kennedy very well . . .” and that he should have

voiced his opposition louder. He concluded that “. . . I should

have made my opposition clear in the meetings themselves because he

Kennedy was under pressure from those who wanted to proceed.”

When faced with biased information from the CIA and quiet advisors,

it is no wonder that the president decided to go ahead with the

operation.

For an organization that deals with security issues, the CIA's

lack of security in the Bay of Pigs operation is ironic. Security

began to break down before the invasion when The New York Times

reporter Tad Szulc “. . . learned of Operation Pluto from Cuban friends. . .” earlier that year while in Costa Rica covering an

Organization of American States meeting. Another breakdown in security was at the training base in Florida,

. . . Local residents near Homestead air force base had seen Cubans drilling and heard their loudspeakers at a farm. As a joke some firecrackers were thrown into the compound

The ensuing incident saw the Cubans firing their guns and the federal authorities having to convince the local authorities not to press charges. Operation Pluto was beginning to get blown wide open, the advantage of surprise was lost even this early in the game.

After the initial bombing raid of April 15th, and the landing of the B-26s in Florida, pictures of the planes were taken and published in newspapers. In the photo of one of the planes, the nose of it is opaque whereas the model of the B-26 the Cubans

really used had a plexiglass nose,

. . . The CIA had taken the pains to disguise the B-26

with “ FAR” markings Cuban Air Force, the agency

overlooked a crucial detail that was spotted immediately

by professional observers

All Castro’s people had to do was read the newspapers and they’d

know that something was going to happen, that those planes that had

bombed them were not their own but American.

In The New York Times of the 21st of April, stories about the

origins of the operation in the Eisenhower administration appeared

along with headlines of “ C. I. A. Had a Role In Exiles’ Plans”

revealing the CIA’s involvement. By the 22nd, the story is

fully known with headlines in The New York Times stating that “ CIA

is Accused by Bitter Rebels” and on the second page of that

day’s issue is a full article on the details of the operation from

its beginnings.

The conclusion one can draw from the articles in The New York

Times is that if reporters knew the whole story by the 22nd, it can be expected that Castro's intelligence service and that of the Soviet Union knew about the planned invasion as well. Tad Szulc's report in the April 22nd edition of The New York Times says it all, . . . As has been an open secret in Florida and Central America for months, the C. I. A. planned, coordinated and directed the operations that ended in defeat on a beachhead in southern Cuba Wednesday

It is clear then that part of the failure of the operation was caused by a lack of security and attention to detail on the part of the Central Intelligence Agency, and misinformation given to the president.

On the international scene, the Bay of Pigs invasion lead directly to increased tensions between the United States and the Soviet Union. During the invasion messages were exchanged between Kennedy and Khrushchev regarding the events in Cuba. Khrushchev accused the Americans of being involved in the invasion and stated

in one of his messages that a,

. . . so-called “ small war” can produce a chain reaction

in all parts of the world . . . we shall render the Cuban

people and their Government all necessary assistance in

beating back the armed attack on Cuba

Kennedy replied giving American views on democracy and the

containment of communism, he also warned against Soviet involvement

in Cuba saying to Khrushchev,

. . . In the event of any military intervention by

outside force we will immediately honor our obligations

under the inter-American system to protect this

hemisphere against external aggression

Even though this crisis passed, it set the stage for the next

major crisis over Soviet nuclear missiles in Cuba and probably lead

to the Soviets increasing their military support for Castro.

In the administration itself, the Bay of Pigs crisis lead to

a few changes. Firstly, someone had to take the blame for the

affair and, as Director of Central Intelligence, Allen Dulles was forced to resign and left CIA in November of 1961 Internally, the CIA was never the same, although it continued with covert operations against Castro, it was on a much reduced scale.

According to a report of the Select Senate Committee on Intelligence, future operations were “. . . to nourish a spirit of resistance and disaffection which could lead to significant defections and other by-products of unrest.” The CIA also now came under the supervision of the president’s brother Bobby, the Attorney General. According to Lucien S. Vandembroucke, the outcome of the Bay of Pigs failure also made the White House suspicious of an operation that everyone agreed to, made them less reluctant to question the experts, and made them play “ devil’s advocates” when questioning them. In the end, the lessons learned from the Bay of Pigs failure may have contributed to the successful handling of the Cuban missile crisis that followed.

The long term ramifications of the Bay of Pigs invasion are a

little harder to assess. The ultimate indication of the invasions failure is that thirty-four years later Castro is still in power.

This not only indicates the failure of the Bay of Pigs invasion, but American policy towards Cuba in general. The American policy, rather than undermining Castro's support, has probably contributed to it. As with many wars, even a cold one, the leader is able to rally his people around him against an aggressor.

When Castro came to power he instituted reforms to help the people and end corruption, no longer receiving help from the Soviet Union things are beginning to change. He has opened up the Cuban economy for some investment, mainly in telecommunications, oil exploration, and joint ventures. In an attempt to stay in power, he is trying to adapt his country to the new reality of the world. Rather than suppressing the educated elite, he is giving them a place in guiding Cuba. The question is, will they eventually want more power and a right to control Cuba's fate without Castro's guidance and support? If the collapse of past

regimes is any indication, they will eventually want more power.

When Castro came to power in 1959, the major opponents in

America to him, as with Guatemala, were the business interests who

were losing out as a result of his policies. The major pressure for

the Americans to do something came, not only from the Cuban exiles

in Florida, but from those businesses. Today, the tables are turned

and businesses are losing out because of the American embargo

against Cuba. It is estimated that if the embargo were lifted, \$1

billion of business would be generated for US companies that first

year. Right now, 100 firms have gone to Cuba to talk about doing

business there after the embargo is lifted. Will American

policy change toward Cuba because of pressure from business

interests and growing problems with refugees from Cuba? Given the

reasons why the United States got involved in Latin American

politics in the first place, it is very likely that their position

will change if they can find a face saving way to do so. American

policy at this time though is still stuck in the cold war, the

chairmen of the Senate Foreign Relations Committee Jesse Helms said that,

. . . Whether Castro leaves Cuba in a vertical or horizontal position is up to him and the Cuban people.

But he must and will leave Cuba

The failure of the Bay of Pigs invasion was caused by misinformation and mismanagement, the consequences of that was egg in the face for the Americans and an increase in tension between the superpowers at the height of the cold war. We will only have to wait and see if the Americans have really learned their lesson and will not miss another opportunity to set things right in Cuba.

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