

Bendell Award

Deception and Decisions: The Central Intelligence Agency, Two Presidents, and the Bay of Pigs Invasion

Nathan Heiman

In 1959, Fidel Castro rose to power in Cuba after overthrowing dictator Fulgencio Batista. Castro and his revolutionary group, the 26th of July Movement, were viewed with suspicion by President Dwight D. Eisenhower and his administration, and by the end of the year, Castro's regime presented a grave problem to the outgoing president due to the far left-leaning politics of the group. The fear of Communism spreading throughout the Western Hemisphere in the relatively early stages of the Cold War was prevalent in American politics throughout the 1950s, and preventing such a fear from becoming a reality was a top priority. The possibility of a communist government only ninety miles away from the United States mainland did not sit well with Eisenhower or any other top national security official. The officials were well aware of the ramifications of Cuba becoming a strategic puppet for the Soviet Union, and they were willing to entertain any ideas to neutralize Castro and his regime. One such concept included President Dwight David Eisenhower authorizing the Central Intelligence Agency to plot the overthrow of the Cuban government. However, throughout the planning stage of the mission, the misinformation provided by the CIA to Presidents Eisenhower and John F. Kennedy, as well as Kennedy's own poor decisions in the weeks leading up to the invasion, ultimately doomed its chances for success.

The reason the Central Intelligence Agency was chosen by President Eisenhower to execute the removal of Castro stemmed from two factors. First, the mission statement of the Agency is not only to provide intelligence, but also be able to "perform certain other functions as directed by the National Security Council."¹ The second, and probably most important factor, was the Agency's success in a prior operation during the Eisenhower presidency.

In 1954, the Central Intelligence Agency was able to accomplish the toppling of the left-leaning Guatemalan government led by Jacobo Arbenz Guzmán. The Eisenhower Administration proceeded with action after claiming the shipment of Czech and German arms to Guatemala violated the 130-year-old Monroe Doctrine. The CIA not only started a campaign of bombing strategic locations in Guatemala, but also an intense psychological operation of jamming radio frequencies to confuse and incite the officers in Guatemala's army into leading a revolt.²

While the CIA would base their operation in Cuba on the Guatemalan plan, a revolutionary in Guatemala would learn from the failure he encountered and apply the new knowledge seven years later in Cuba. Indeed, through Ché Guevara's experience in Guatemala, he became Fidel Castro's right hand man in suppressing the invasion at the Bay of Pigs.³

¹ Grayston L. Lynch, *Decision for Disaster: Betrayal at the Bay of Pigs* (Washington: Brassey's, Inc., 1998), 13.

² Trumbull Higgins, *The Perfect Failure: Kennedy, Eisenhower, and the CIA at the Bay of Pigs* (New York: W.W. Norton & Co., 1987), 35.

³ *Ibid.*

Four years after overthrowing the leftist Guatemalan government, the spread of Communism once again worried Eisenhower, this time in Cuba. President Fulgencio Batista had lost the respect of his people, and Castro's guerilla movement experienced growing popular support. On January 1, 1959, Fidel Castro became the leader of Cuba. Once firmly in power, Castro proclaimed the revolutionary ideals of free speech, free elections, privatization of the economy and so forth. However, such ideals never became reality. He made his proclamations to buy time to create ties with Communist nations, particularly the Soviet Union.

The truth behind the revolutionary ideals, however, is something entirely different. After installing Communists into his cabinet and internal police force, Castro executed hundreds of anti-revolution supporters without due process. He promised free elections within eighteen months to allow for political parties to reorganize, but that time frame was pushed back to two years and then four. Also, within the first two years of control, Fidel Castro nationalized both Cuban and American private businesses.

Unfortunately, the State Department initially had become smitten with the charming, yet enigmatic leader of Cuba. When his revolutionary movement against Batista began, Castro befriended Herbert Matthews, a reporter for the influential *New York Times*. Matthews' glowing articles on the guerilla leader generated public sympathy for Castro's cause. When Fidel Castro came to power, the same charm worked on Roy Rubottom, the head of Latin American Affairs inside the State Department. Rubottom was emphatic in the belief that the United States should work with the new government of Cuba.⁴

The Central Intelligence Agency, on the other hand, was able to see through the revolutionaries' ideals and warned President Eisenhower of Castro's possible ties to Communism. Eisenhower wasted little time reacting, imposing an embargo on arms shipments from the United States and reducing the quota on Cuban sugar to pressure Castro on the economy. But most importantly, experiencing the CIA success in Guatemala during his first term, the President authorized the Central Intelligence Agency to increase surveillance on Castro and begin planning for the overthrow of Fidel Castro and his government. Eisenhower imposed a restriction of "plausible deniability" on the operation allowing the United States to disown such an operation for the international community.⁵ "Plausible deniability" would be a hindrance to the CIA throughout the operation as modern arms (machine guns rather than rifles, for example) could not be provided to the brigade out of fear that such materials could be linked to the United States.

The task of overthrowing Castro fell on the shoulders of Richard Bissell, the Deputy Director (Plans) for the CIA. In January of 1960, Jacob Esterline, who was involved in the 1954 operation in Guatemala, headed a special task force created by Bissell within the Western Hemisphere Division of the Central Intelligence Agency, simply known as WH/4, to coordinate Castro's removal.⁶ The CIA's original plan was to coordinate and support the various resistance groups inside of Cuba. The Agency had concrete evidence that such an internal uprising would be feasible. Although Castro enjoyed a honeymoon with the Cuban people after the fall of Batista, his popularity levels dropped quickly when his leftist policies came into effect. Even the leaders of the Roman Catholic Church, the predominant religion, deplored Castro's policies and his close ties to the Soviet Union.

⁴ Lynch, 11.

⁵ Peter H. Wyden, *Bay of Pigs: The Untold Story* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1979), 70.

⁶ Peter Kornbluh, *Bay of Pigs Declassified: The Secret CIA Report on the Invasion of Cuba* (New York: The New Press, 1998), 268.

Supporting internal uprisings was not the only option the Central Intelligence Agency entertained. The Agency also pursued assassination, albeit reluctantly, as a way to dispose of the Cuban leadership. Richard Bissell desired an easy way out and believed Castro could be assassinated, therefore allowing the Agency to avoid expending its efforts on a coup.⁷ Plots for which the CIA brass had little hope included paying a Cuban a sum of \$10,000 to eliminate Fidel Castro's brother Raúl and poisoning Fidel's cigars with botulism. Both half-hearted attempts failed, the former due to the Cuban agent getting cold feet and whether the cigars were even delivered in the latter case is unknown, although it would be safe to assume they were not.⁸

Despite these poor attempts on Castro's life, one final plan was developed to violently remove Fidel Castro from power. In collaboration with the American Mafia, whose casino interests in Havana were seized by Castro, the CIA contracted John Rosselli, Santos Trafficante, and Sam Giancana, members of the Mafia, for \$150,000 to neutralize Castro.⁹ The scheme involving the poisoning of Castro's food was ineffective and ended the efforts to neutralize Castro prior to the military invasion in April 1961.

In early November 1960, the Deputy Director (Plans) Richard Bissell informed Chief of the WH/4 Special Group Jacob Esterline of the decision to de-emphasize the creation of an internal uprising and instead focus on the training and landing of an invasion force consisting of Cuban guerrillas.¹⁰ Bissell stated in his post-operation report that the reason for the change in plans was because the CIA had believed Castro had solidified his power to the point where internal resistance would be quelled in a short period of time.¹¹

WH/4 already had a few hundred Cuban exiles training in Panama since March, but the training was moved to facilities in Guatemala in July 1960.¹² The new Guatemalan camp raised eyebrows among those inside the American intelligence community and those of the people in Guatemala, many of whom had loyalties to leftists like Fidel Castro. The source of this amazement was in the lack of security the facility maintained. The air base was situated on a primary road and could be seen from a passenger railroad line.¹³ In addition to the base being visible to the general public, the camp had no counter-intelligence division to screen the Cuban volunteers. Whether or not the Cuban regime was able to place a mole inside the training center is unknown, but there is no doubt that the base provided little security since Castro accused the United States several times of training guerillas in Guatemala in the months leading up to April 1961. This is hardly surprising since prominent newspapers in Guatemala and the United States were printing articles on the training of Cuban exiles as early as October 1960.¹⁴ What was supposed to be a covert operation was known to the world six months before a single bullet was fired at the Bay of Pigs.

As the training for the exiles was being expedited so they could be used as soon as possible, time had run out before the troops could reach a state of readiness to enable President

⁷ Jacob Esterline, "Bay of Pigs Revisited," interview by Peter Kornbluh, (October 1996), *Bay of Pigs Declassified: The Secret CIA Report on the Invasion of Cuba* (New York: The New Press, 1998), 265.

⁸ Wyden, 40.

⁹ Higgins, 56.

¹⁰ Victor Andres Triay, *Bay of Pigs: An Oral History of Brigade 2506* (Gainesville, Florida: University Press of Florida, 2001), 12.

¹¹ *An Analysis of the Cuban Operation*, Richard Bissell, ed. Peter Kornbluh, *Bay of Pigs Declassified: The Secret CIA Report on the Invasion of Cuba* (New York: The New Press, 1998), 151.

¹² Kornbluh, 273.

¹³ *Inspector General's Survey of the Cuban Operation October 1961*, Lyman Kirkpatrick, Jr., ed. Peter Kornbluh, *Bay of Pigs Declassified: The Secret CIA Report on the Invasion of Cuba* (New York: The New Press, 1998), 97.

¹⁴ Kornbluh, 277.

Eisenhower to give the green light on the operation. Vice President Richard Nixon, one of the first supporters of overthrowing Castro with military force, was defeated by John F. Kennedy in the presidential election in 1960.¹⁵ During the campaign, Kennedy lashed out against the Eisenhower Administration's apparent lack of concern about the growing threat in Cuba. Based on his campaign comments, those inside the intelligence community were confident Kennedy would permit the operation to continue.

Kennedy's comments caused concern among those in the State Department. Eisenhower's Secretary of State Dean Acheson warned the president-elect that his (Kennedy's) statements might be putting Kennedy into corners he could not escape.¹⁶ Before Kennedy took office, he spoke with outgoing President Eisenhower who encouraged Kennedy to do whatever it took to oust Castro, and recommended the new president to hasten the training of the exiles in Guatemala and to recognize a government-in-exile.¹⁷

Taking his predecessor's advice, President Kennedy ordered the CIA to establish and recognize a government-in-exile that could be installed soon after the invasion. The CIA chose the Frente Revolucionario Democrático (FRD—Democratic Revolutionary Front) led by Miró Cordona to be Cuba's provisional government once Castro was removed. With the government chosen, American domination on the project created resentment among the Frente's leaders. The American contact with the group was unable to speak Spanish, and the CIA controlled all the finances, giving the FRD little input in the operation.¹⁸

Unfortunately for the President, Cuba was getting itself militarily organized to the point where action had to be taken immediately in order to remove Castro. Cuba's alliance with the Soviet Union was evident as Cuba sent pilots to Czechoslovakia to be trained in Soviet MiG fighters. The National Security Agency was able to intercept radio traffic between a Spanish-speaking pilot and Czech air traffic control as early as January 17.¹⁹ Additionally, the Central Intelligence Agency was able to gain knowledge of Cuba making deals to import Soviet artillery and Czech anti-aircraft guns.²⁰ Such arms shipments were expected to arrive in a matter of months. President Kennedy now had to decide whether or not to give the mission the green light before Castro could rebuild his military's firepower.

Besides worrying about Cuba strengthening its dilapidated military, soldiers and civilians alike in the Kennedy administration were concerned about the Cuban brigade being trained in Guatemala since the previous March. Brigade morale sunk as the Cubans had to endure the tropical rain season and because they were prevented from meeting with the leaders of the Frente Revolucionario Democrático.²¹ The inability to see the FRD leaders angered the soldiers because they had every reason to want to know what kind of future they were fighting for in Cuba. Finally, the CIA arranged for three FRD representatives to go to Guatemala to meet the troops, and the volunteers' spirits rose markedly.²²

¹⁵ Higgins, 44.

¹⁶ Ibid., 59.

¹⁷ Ibid., 77.

¹⁸ Triay, 10.

¹⁹ National Security Agency, "Spanish-Speaking Pilot Noted in Czechoslovak at Trencin, 17 January," available from http://www.nsa.gov/docs/cuba/images/cuba_1.gif; Internet; accessed 5 April 2003.

²⁰ Wyden, 103.

²¹ Francisco Hernández, interview by Victor Andres Triay (1999), *Bay of Pigs: An Oral History of Brigade 2506* (Gainesville, Florida: University Press of Florida, 2001), 52.

²² Francisco Hernández, interview by Victor Andres Triay (1999), *Bay of Pigs: An Oral History of Brigade 2506* (Gainesville, Florida: University Press of Florida, 2001), 52.

Even if President Kennedy did want to cancel the invasion, he felt that he could not do so. The words spoken by Former Secretary of State Acheson were beginning to ring true for Kennedy. Kennedy believed he had to act on his campaign promises to show the American people that he was in fact confronting Castro, Khrushchev, and communism. If the Cuban fighters in Guatemala were ordered to disband, Kennedy worried that they would return to Florida and speak out against the administration in the press. Former Vice President Richard Nixon, who was forced to stay quiet on the issue and whose political ambitions were still alive, and many other political enemies would surely have pounced on the opportunity to label John F. Kennedy as a man with no backbone. Kennedy felt it was better for the Cubans to go and fight in Cuba than return to the United States and smear him politically.

In early March 1961, President Kennedy was finally informed of how the invasion to remove Castro's regime would take place. The Trinidad Plan, taking its name from the town where the invasion would take place, heavily borrowed from the Guatemalan operation of 1954. Since the May prior to Kennedy's election, the Cubans were being exposed to psychological operations from a radio station on Swan Island in the Caribbean Sea off the coast of Honduras, with broadcasts similar to those made in Guatemala urging desertion and providing false information.²³ As for the actual military involvement, the Trinidad Plan called for pre-invasion air strikes using old B-26 bombers to destroy the tiny Cuban Air Force and strikes on the day of the invasion to wipe out planes that may have survived. With enemy planes eliminated, the guerilla force could storm the beachhead near Trinidad under the cover of the bombers. If the beachhead could be secured and a government-in-exile be established there, the American government could then recognize that government and begin overtly aiding the counter-revolutionaries with soldiers stationed at the American base at Guantánamo Bay on stand-by.²⁴ In addition, the ports at Trinidad were excellent for supply ships to dock, the city was strongly anti-Castro, and the nearby Escambray Mountains could allow the invading force to escape in the event the invasion did not go as planned.²⁵

Those in the Central Intelligence Agency were confident that the Trinidad Plan would work. Those in the military had the gravest concerns. Colonel Edward Landsdale of the Defense Department believed an invasion would need at least 3,000 men and that the plan's "logistics were inadequate."²⁶ The generals comprising the Joint Chiefs of Staff were not so sure, either. A committee led by Brigadier General David Gray estimated a thirty percent chance of success and stated that the only way for the Cuban brigade to succeed was if total surprise and air superiority were achieved and "substantial popular uprisings or substantial" reinforcements were available to assist the invaders.²⁷ Regardless of Gray's assessment of the Trinidad Plan, the Joint Chiefs of Staff recommended that President Kennedy allow the operation to be continued.

Kennedy was perhaps even more skeptical than the Joint Chiefs. He never had high expectations for the mission. He doubted the revolt General Gray believed to be absolutely necessary for success was going to materialize after the force had landed on Cuban soil.²⁸ Even Director of the Central Intelligence Agency Allen Dulles said in his personal papers that President Kennedy was "only half sold on the necessity of what he was doing, and surrounded by

²³ Kombluh, 272.

²⁴ Lynch, 29-35.

²⁵ Wyden, 102.

²⁶ Higgins, 69.

²⁷ *Ibid.*, 84.

²⁸ Higgins, 103.

doubting Thomases." These doubters instilled skepticism in Kennedy, but not to the point of calling off the invasion.

Though the invasion was to proceed, the President nixed the Trinidad Plan. Kennedy labeled the plan as "too spectacular" and similar to a "World War II invasion."²⁹ In the hopes of maintaining "plausible deniability," Kennedy asked for the planners at the CIA to develop an alternative to a landing at Trinidad. With Cuba soon receiving arms and freshly trained pilots from the Soviet bloc, the planners at the Central Intelligence Agency were forced to develop a new plan—and soon.

Within four days of Trinidad's cancellation, the CIA submitted three new plans for review by the Joint Chiefs of Staff. The generals agreed the Bay of Pigs Plan was the best of the three, but all believed that its chances for success were not as good as those of the Trinidad Plan, a plan that was estimated as having a thirty percent chance for victory.³⁰ Even the creator of the plan, Colonel Jack Hawkins, warned that air strikes had to be carried out and Castro's air force eliminated for the Bay of Pigs Plan to succeed.³¹

Colonel Hawkins believed that the change from Trinidad to the Bay of Pigs was crippling since he felt that Trinidad provided all the elements for the invasion to succeed.³² The Bay of Pigs lacked several features which would hinder the invasion force: first, instead of landing on soft, sandy beaches found near Trinidad, the counter-revolutionaries would be stepping on sharp coral rock; second, the spot did not provide a port like the one at Trinidad for ships to easily dock and unload supplies; third, the Bay of Pigs was close to Cienfuegos, a town full of Castro loyalists, and the invaders could not expect assistance; fourth, and most importantly, there were no mountains to escape to in case the mission failed.³³ Despite all of this, Kennedy and Secretary of State Dean Rusk, especially the latter, stressed the need for "plausible deniability," and the supposedly quieter invasion from the Bay of Pigs was to proceed.

Around the middle of March 1961, the press began to publish major reports on the recruitment and military training of Cuban exiles from Miami. Though journalists had written on the subject before, none aroused serious interest from the public and their editors. Now, though, the Cuban community in Miami was informing reporters that action in Cuba was imminent. Reporters for both the *New Republic* and the *New York Times* had filed stories, but those in the White House, including John F. Kennedy himself, requested the stories not be published. Both the *Republic* and *Times* obliged in the request for the sake of national security.³⁴ Kennedy aide Arthur Schlesinger, Jr., believed that the invasion may have been cancelled had the President permitted the news articles to be printed due to the operation's loss of secrecy and public outcry against such an act.³⁵

If Kennedy had been under the belief that the Cuban brigade was still a secret, he was sorely mistaken. If journalists were able to extract information on the invasion from Cubans in Miami, it would have been foolhardy to think Castro's agents could not have gathered the same intelligence. As a result of receiving excellent intelligence about the imminent invasion and a

²⁹ Wyden, 100.

³⁰ Kornbluh, 294.

³¹ Lynch, 166.

³² Jack Hawkins, "Bay of Pigs Revisited," interview by Peter Kornbluh, (October 1996), *Bay of Pigs Declassified: The Secret CIA Report on the Invasion of Cuba* (New York: The New Press, 1998), 263.

³³ Lynch, 43.

³⁴ Arthur M. Schlesinger, Jr., *A Thousand Days: John F. Kennedy in the White House* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Company, 1965), 261.

³⁵ *Ibid.*

possible uprising, Castro arrested and imprisoned tens of thousands of suspected members in Cuba's counterrevolutionary underground in the weeks leading up to the invasion.³⁶ Castro's initiative thwarted any American hopes for a large-scale uprising after the invasion. Also, Castro positioned his regular army and militia in multiple areas where he believed an invasion might take place, including Trinidad, the Bay of Pigs, and the Isle of Pines outside of Havana.³⁷

With the beginning of April, it was apparent that the operation had to be carried out within a short period of time. Though President Kennedy was receiving cautious counsel from low-level advisors, the Central Intelligence Agency was clamoring for a green light from an increasingly reluctant commander-in-chief, even to the point of misleading President Kennedy. In a paper dated April 12, the CIA cited seven thousand insurgents in Cuba, but failed to differentiate whether the people would take up arms against Castro or if they were just opponents with no desire to fight.³⁸ This was critical because President Kennedy and the Joint Chiefs of Staff were depending on the insurrection of those already in Cuba for the operation's success. Despite what the CIA was saying, Joseph Newman, a reporter for the New York Herald Tribune, told Kennedy aide Schlesinger that Castro invoked patriotism in the young, and those who were anti-Castro would not rise up because they associated America with deposed Fulgencio Batista.³⁹ Furthermore, the CIA told Kennedy that the rebels could turn guerilla if the invasion were to fail, and Deputy Director of Plans Richard Bissell even estimated the chances of success at sixty-six percent.⁴⁰ It is no wonder that Kennedy made his decision based on the information he received from his military and intelligence advisors. After the invasion turned into a debacle, President Kennedy remarked to his aide Arthur Schlesinger, Jr., that he simply assumed "that the military and intelligence people have some secret skill not available to ordinary mortals."⁴¹

If the President had wanted to cancel the invasion, he did not lack opportunities. First and foremost, Kennedy only had to say the word for the invasion to cease. He had reserved the right to call it off until twenty-four hours before the invasion.⁴² On April 12, only two days before final approval was to be given, Georgi Kornienko, a counselor at the Soviet Embassy, contacted Arthur Schlesinger, Jr. and hinted at the possibility of last minute negotiations with Castro.⁴³ Such a meeting never materialized, but it was a golden opportunity for Kennedy to avoid going ahead with the invasion. Also on April 12, President Kennedy confirmed in a press conference that U.S. military forces would not be used in any scenario in Cuba.⁴⁴ By stating this Kennedy was unknowingly shooting himself in the foot by not leaving any maneuvering room if the impending invasion failed.

On April 14, 1961, President Kennedy authorized the invasion with the belief that the Cuban brigade could retreat to the Escambray Mountains and fight as guerillas.⁴⁵ Richard Bissell of the CIA or one of the generals on the Joint Chiefs of Staff should have shown Kennedy a map of Cuba to show that the guerilla option was not available since the Escambray Mountains were eighty miles from the Bay of Pigs.. The scheduled pre-invasion air strikes received a "go,"

³⁶ *Inspector General's Survey of the Cuban Operation October 1961*, Lyman Kirkpatrick, Jr., ed. Peter Kornbluh, *Bay of Pigs Declassified: The Secret CIA Report on the Invasion of Cuba* (New York: The New Press, 1998) 53.

³⁷ Wyden, 108.

³⁸ *Ibid.*, 52

³⁹ Schlesinger, Jr., 248.

⁴⁰ Higgins, 107.

⁴¹ Schlesinger, Jr., 258.

⁴² Wyden, 102.

⁴³ Schlesinger, Jr., 263.

⁴⁴ Lynch, 45.

⁴⁵ Schlesinger, Jr., 250.

but with a critical stipulation. Sixteen B-26 bombers were planned to carry out the mission to destroy Castro's air force, but Kennedy believed such a number was too large and ordered the number of planes to be halved.⁴⁶ In the attacks the next day, some of the Cuban planes survived, most importantly T-33 jet fighters.

The uproar the first air strikes caused in the international community was enough for Kennedy to make the costliest mistake of the invasion: he canceled the strikes scheduled for sunrise on the day of the invasion that were to eliminate the remainder of the Cuban air force.⁴⁷ Kennedy must not have realized the significance of these strikes in that he was sacrificing the success of the invasion for the sake of "plausible deniability." Deputy Director of Plans Richard Bissell was informed of this decision by Secretary of State Dean Rusk and was given the opportunity to speak with Kennedy to persuade him of the crucial importance of those strikes.⁴⁸ Bissell declined to do so and remnants of the Cuban air force survived.

The early air strikes that took place were a cause for concern among the generals on the Joint Chiefs of Staff. They believed that the invasion might unnecessarily alert Castro that the invasion his army had been preparing to defend against was beginning.⁴⁹ In response to the attacks, instead of ordering his surviving planes to be dispersed, Castro instructed his pilots to be ready to fly at all times; while one Cuban pilot stayed vigilant in the cockpit, the co-pilot slept under the wing of the plane.⁵⁰

When the Cuban brigade of exiles landed on the beaches of the Bay of Pigs, the invaders experienced immediate resistance as a result of Castro positioning his forces in strategic locations mentioned earlier.⁵¹ However, the first encounters went well as the brigade routed Castro's militia, and B-26s strafed the opposing forces with machine guns and bombs.⁵² The brigade was achieving its mission objectives.

However, the effects of canceling the second air strikes quickly became apparent. The ships carrying the supplies were exposed and highly vulnerable from an air assault, and Castro knew this. The ship *Houston* was sunk just after daybreak and the communications ship *Rio Escondido* suffered the same fate only three hours later, each at the hands of Cuban fighter planes.⁵³ This forced the remaining two supply ships to stay out to sea, and as a result, the invasion ran short on munitions. The B-26s were also affected. Rather than be able to support the invasion unmolested, the slow World War II aircraft were easily intercepted and destroyed by the faster Cuban T-33 fighters.⁵⁴ A total of nine B-26 bombers were downed in support of the invading brigade.⁵⁵ With ammunition running low and no air cover for protection, the exiles' fate was sealed.

The situation continued to deteriorate for the American-backed fighters on April 18. The Cuban militia used artillery and advanced in full force on the brigade on the beaches of the Bay of Pigs. Notified of the proceedings, Kennedy reneged on his April 12 promise of no United States military personnel involvement and allowed United States Air Force pilots to make flights

⁴⁶ Kornbluh, 303.

⁴⁷ Triay, 70.

⁴⁸ *Ibid.*

⁴⁹ Higgins, 128.

⁵⁰ Wyden, 185.

⁵¹ Wyden, 140.

⁵² Triay, 75.

⁵³ Wyden, 228-229.

⁵⁴ Triay, 76.

⁵⁵ Higgins, 148.

over Cuba from the Nicaraguan base.⁵⁶ On the final day of hostilities, two B-26 bombers were shot down and four Americans who flew missions in support of the invasion perished.⁵⁷ American involvement could no longer be denied.

Events on the island only went from bad to worse for the rebels, as the Cubans unleashed air campaigns and made their final push to overrun the brigade on the beaches of the Bay of Pigs. Exhausted and demoralized, at 2:00 P.M. on April 19, the invading brigade surrendered.⁵⁸ Of the 1,300 members of the brigade, nearly 1,180 were taken prisoner and the remainder of the troops were killed in action.⁵⁹ Castro flaunted his victory, and President Kennedy was subjected to humiliation not only in his own country but throughout the world, as well.

The Bay of Pigs invasion was an abysmal disaster in every aspect, although through no fault of the Cuban exiles. The finger pointing must begin with the Central Intelligence Agency. When Eisenhower asked the CIA to undertake this mission, they were to do so covertly. When it became obvious that the operation was no longer clandestine due to Castro's intelligence or published reports on the Guatemalan training camp, the Central Intelligence Agency should have recommended the Department of Defense assume control or ceased the operation altogether. At the very least, the CIA should have provided the President with unaltered information in order to receive a green light. Three costly examples of this misinformation should be noted. First, Deputy Director of Plans Richard Bissell's estimate of success being at sixty-six percent was grossly inaccurate. Second, the CIA allowed Kennedy to continue to believe that in the event of failure, the brigade could retreat to the Escambray Mountains and fight a guerilla war. Unfortunately, these mountains were eighty miles from the Bay of Pigs. Third, and most importantly, the planners did not stress the importance of the air strikes to the success of the mission. All damage inflicted on the brigade resulted from the T-33 jet fighters, and a post-invasion report believed that had the invaders received more air cover and ammunition, the Cuban exiles could have at least prevented an embarrassing rout.⁶⁰ Had the Cuban Air Force been destroyed and the brigade had been able to possess air superiority, the B-26 bombers could have easily supported the landing forces by strafing the Cuban positions at will.

For all the grave errors the Central Intelligence Agency made, President Kennedy, as commander-in-chief, should bear the brunt of the blame. He never intended to fully support this operation, and his adamant stance on "plausible deniability" cost the invasion its success by Kennedy refusing to meet the needs of the brigade so that his political backside would be covered. He ordered a new, quieter plan to be used rather than one that had better chances of success. He also wanted the Cuban brigade returned to their homeland so that they could not come to Miami and tell the American press of Kennedy's failure to stand up to Castro and Communism. The critical error was limiting the air strikes two days before the invasion and then canceling the air strikes altogether on the day of the invasion. Another key error made by President Kennedy that was crucial to his decision was that he believed that the brigade could escape into the mountains and fight a guerrilla war. Kennedy should have looked at a map of Cuba and seen with his own eyes that the guerrilla option was not available since the mountains were eighty miles away.

⁵⁶ Kornbluh, 317.

⁵⁷ Kornbluh, 318.

⁵⁸ *Ibid.*, 319.

⁵⁹ Triay, 115.

⁶⁰ *An Analysis of the Cuban Operation*, Richard Bissell, ed. Peter Kornbluh, *Bay of Pigs Declassified: The Secret CIA Report on the Invasion of Cuba* (New York: The New Press, 1998), 273.

The fiasco at the Bay of Pigs could have been avoided had the planning been better and had the President been better informed. President Kennedy's first major foray in foreign policy was a costly one, as Cuba's relationship with the Soviet Union blossomed to the point of allowing Soviet nuclear missiles to be based in Cuba a year and a half after the invasion. A deceptive intelligence agency and a doubtful commander-in-chief permitted the Bay of Pigs invasion to be a mistake that should never have been.