

Causes of the Bay of Pigs invasion's failure¹

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Abstract

While the failure of the 1961 Bay of Pigs Invasion is generally attributed to the errors of the Central Intelligence Agency, the analysis of the operation suggests that the decisions of President Kennedy and his Cabinet were also responsible for the defeat. The aim of the paper is to present a detailed picture of the causes of the mission's breakdown through the study of various reports and other documents, exploring the errors during both the preparatory phase and the invasion proper, and to argue that even though the Central Intelligence Agency was culpable for the substandard recruitment, selection, and training of the Cuban Expeditionary Force, the invasion was more severely hindered by the Cabinet's hesitant decision-making process and political restrictions, most notably the cancelation of the D-Day air strikes, which ultimately led to the defeat of the operation.

Keywords: Bay of Pigs, United States-Cuba Relations, Central Intelligence Agency, John F. Kennedy, Fidel Castro, Cold War

Introduction

The Bay of Pigs Invasion of April 1961 is one of the seminal moments of Cold War history. The United States' attack on the Cuban Castro regime was a complete failure and became synonymous with the incompetence of the Central Intelligence Agency in popular discourse. While the initial reports were positive regarding the outlook of the operation, the invasion of the Cuban Expeditionary Force only lasted two days from April 17 to April 19 and has been marred by difficulties from the outset. The errors of the Central

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Intelligence Agency, the political restrictions imposed by the Kennedy administration, and the less than admirable performance of the Cuban brigade collectively created a situation in which the action was doomed before the troops landed on the island. The failure of the Bay of Pigs Invasion was not only a spectacular defeat, it was also a diplomatic disaster that completely excluded the swift resolution of the situation in Cuba and strengthened the Soviet Union's foothold in the Western Hemisphere, serving as a precursor to the Cuban Missile Crisis in 1962.

The United States Government and the Central Intelligence Agency immediately ordered a review of the invasion, and several reports have been created with varying conclusions. While popular opinion on the Bay of Pigs invasion claims gross ineptitude on the part of the Central Intelligence Agency, the study of primary sources and other documents suggests a more intricate interpretation. Based predominantly on primary sources and reports, most importantly the memoranda of the Cuban Study Group, composed by General Maxwell Taylor's Presidential Commission, and Central Intelligence Agency historian Jack B. Pfeiffer's critique of the Cuban Study Group's assessment in *The Taylor Committee Investigation of the Bay of Pigs*, the article will compile and examine the findings of several documents, presenting a balanced evaluation of the reasons of the operation's failure.

Overview of the Events

In 1959, the Castro-led Cuban Revolution managed to overthrow the United States-friendly president and dictator, Fulgencio Batista, and established a socialist state in Cuba. Fearing the growing presence of the Soviet Union and Communism, on March 17, 1960, President Dwight D. Eisenhower authorized the Central Intelligence Agency to initiate a covert anti-Castro operation (Pfeiffer, 1979: 57). By the summer of 1960, a growing dissatisfaction emerged with regards to the original plan, which concentrated on small guerrilla groups consisting of two or three men infiltrating Cuba, and by the fall of the same year, a radical switch occurred in the concept, shifting focus onto paramilitary operations (Pfeiffer, 1979: 143). President Eisenhower approved the continuation of the plan's development, however, he decided to leave the final decision on the operation to his successor.

President-elect John F. Kennedy was first briefed on the anti-Castro project of the Central Intelligence Agency on November 18, 1960 (Pfeiffer, 1979: 148). After his inauguration, the Agency presented the developments to Kennedy and other high ranking

civilian officials on January 28, 1961, where the President voiced his approval for the project's further development (Bundy, 1961a: para. 1-3). Later in the process, on March 11, 1961, due to political considerations, alternatives to the original Trinidad Plan were ordered from the Central Intelligence Agency (Hawkins, 1961: 19). During the period of March 13 to 15, the Agency developed three preliminary concepts, including the Zapata Plan, which was ultimately approved (Hawkins, 1961: 20).

After two delays, the operation commenced on D-2, April 15, 1961. Three air strikes planned against Cuban air fields were carried out. However, the scheduled diversionary forces failed to land in Cuba (Hawkins, 1961: 32-33). On the night before D-Day, without prior warning, President Kennedy ordered the cancelation of additional D-Day air strikes against Cuban military air fields and other targets. Undeterred by the Central Intelligence Agency's request to reconsider his stance, the President's decision remained unchanged (Hawkins, 1961: 34). Soon after the landing started, as predicted by the Agency in their appeal to Kennedy, the *Rio Escondido* and the *Houston* freighters were lost to the Castro air force, resulting in the destruction of a significant amount of supplies (Hawkins, 1961: 35-36). Following the difficulties encountered due to the loss of the freighters and the failure to isolate the beachhead, the operation rapidly collapsed, concluding by D+2, April 19, leading to painful questions that the United States had to answer in regards to the defeat of the invasion.

Issues during the Preparatory Phase

A common assessment of both the Cuban Study Group and Pfeiffer's investigation was that the Executive branch of the United States Government was not organizationally prepared to conduct a paramilitary operation of such magnitude (Pfeiffer, 1984: 207). The bodies responsible for the paramilitary and military aspects of the plan were routinely restricted by the political considerations of the Cabinet (Pfeiffer, 1984: 247-248), and without a concrete framework to follow, the oftentimes fluctuating circumstances severely hindered the preparatory process. The reflections of the Central Intelligence Agency's Deputy Director responsible for Plans, Richard Bissell, reinforce this claim, asserting that President Kennedy's qualms were not based on the assessment of the chances of success but rather on political considerations (Bissell, 1996: 186-187). Kennedy and his staff should have created a clear policy outline or alternatively canceled the entire operation. Consequently, the project was poorly organized, especially considering the established command lines; no one ranking below the President had the

authority to coordinate all the participating agencies (Cuban Study Group, 1961b: para. 11).

The change from the original Trinidad Plan to the eventual Zapata Plan can also be considered a significant setback in view of the results. As the Cabinet refused to approve a concept as “spectacular” as the original (CSG, 1961a: para. 24), a new plan had to be developed, which evidently diverted efforts from the improvement of the already established strategy. Consequently, the new plan was less refined and could not be scrutinized appropriately, as the March 13 inception of the Zapata Plan only preceded the April 17 D-Day of the invasion by approximately a month. The new concept not only had to be rushed, but was also considered less likely to succeed than the original, and was simply chosen as the best of the three presented alternatives (Joint Chiefs of Staff, 1961b: para. 3d-3e). In their evaluation of the original Trinidad Plan, the Joint Chiefs of Staff stated that even if the operation does not fully succeed, it could contribute to the eventual overthrow of the Castro regime (JCS, 1961a: para. 1q), however, this was not true for the new concept. Due to the lack of time, several critical pieces of information were not considered in regards to the Zapata area. The region was a focus of the Castro regime and developed rapidly under the Communist government (Pfeiffer, 1984: 213-214). As a result of this, the population of the area was in favor of Fidel Castro, rendering local uprisings and guerrilla activities nearly impossible.

As the dismissal of the Trinidad Plan and the selection of the Zapata Plan was solely the preference of the Kennedy administration, the Central Intelligence Agency's culpability primarily lies in other areas. The Agency was criticized for not voicing their opinions with sufficient clarity or force (CSG, 1961c: para. 1g), and this issue is worthy of consideration. It is possible that the Agency should have dedicated more effort to pursuing the approval of the Trinidad Plan with the support of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, albeit, at that time, general consensus was that the scheduled air strikes would occur, and therefore the Zapata Plan was still considered to be viable. However, there were indeed some reported problems with the Central Intelligence Agency's communication in the preparatory phases of the operation, as rank had too many privileges; during the briefings and meetings, Director of Central Intelligence Allen Dulles did not defer to more knowledgeable individuals (Pfeiffer, 1975: 98). Still, the suggestion that the President and his Cabinet lacked ample knowledge is incorrect. Throughout the process, experts from both the Central Intelligence Agency and the Joint Chiefs of Staff responsible for the mission were involved, therefore the Kennedy administration was not misinformed in

regards to the details of the operation. Considering the aforementioned facts, it can be conceded that the Central Intelligence Agency's communication before D-Day was not impeccable, although it must be indicated that these shortcomings were largely inconsequential in regards to the operation's eventual failure.

A recurring theme during the operation was the substandard performance of several troops of the Cuban brigade, which raises questions regarding the selection and training of these individuals. The initial recruitment was carried out by Cuban exile organizations under the guidance of the Central Intelligence Agency, and there were various issues with the procedure. The recruitment was conducted in a quasi-overt manner, which was undoubtedly recognized by the Castro regime (Pfeiffer, 1984: 5). Furthermore, the report of Lyman B. Kirkpatrick claims that the exile leaders were misused, relegated to serving as puppets during the operation, while also citing language problems due to the lack of quality Spanish-speaking individuals in the Central Intelligence Agency (Kirkpatrick, 1961: 144). Initial reports were positive from the training facilities (CSG, 1961a: para. 11), implying an error in the assessment of the fighters, as their performance was substandard in the face of adversity. The selection and training was not discussed in detail by either major report, but the available information hints at a faulty process mainly attributable to the Central Intelligence Agency.

The Government's policy of non-attribution was a clear directive that was consistently non-negotiable, even as it is debatable if plausible deniability was attainable at all. The ongoing training in Guatemala and Nicaragua was well-known throughout Latin America, and the Cuban government was surely aware of the situation as well; initial reports warned that odds were against a surprise attack (CSG, 1961a: para. 18-19). This information was ultimately revealed to be true, as Castro and his forces were familiar with the date of the attack, only the location was unknown for them (Castro, 1961: para. 9). As the United States' involvement became abundantly clear, the Cabinet should have considered the option of overt military action. While risking the intervention of the Soviet Union and repercussions in the United Nations, the ability to use the United States Armed Forces would have essentially guaranteed the success of the operation and the removal of the Castro regime.

The Cuban Study Group shielded President Kennedy from receiving a significant amount of blame for the operation's failure, but it must be concluded that he was not prepared to assume such a huge task this early in his presidency. He inherited a project from the Eisenhower administration that was not his own concept, and was unable to

perfectly manage the situation as a young and inexperienced President in the political climate of the time. After his inauguration, Kennedy was immediately pressured by the Central Intelligence Agency and the governments of Guatemala and Nicaragua to reach a decision with regards to the Cuban Brigade (Pfeiffer, 1984: 6), while also having to consider the political ramifications that eventually forced him to continue a project that he seemingly did not want to pursue or did not attach such high importance to. While the situation was unwelcome, President Kennedy was at fault for not voicing his opinion explicitly. With the change of administration, the operation was in flux, and the situation required either the project's cancelation or the statement of a clear policy, yet neither option was chosen. As the pressure was mounting on Kennedy and his Cabinet to give a final approval, they decided that "dumping" the brigade in Cuba was better than losing face domestically and internationally (Schlesinger, 1965: 257-258). Their misunderstanding of the circumstances and refusal to fully commit to the already restricted plan ultimately manifested in the decision to cancel the D-Day air strikes.

The behavior of the Cabinet can be perfectly explained by the psychological concept of "groupthink." Coined by Irving Janis, the term refers to a phenomenon of group dynamics in which mental efficiency and reality testing is inhibited due to pressures to reach unanimity (Janis, 1972: 9). Groupthink is prevalent among members of high-prestige, tightly knit policy-making groups, and can reach excessive levels where group members value the group and the group's harmonious functioning higher than any other consideration (Hart, 1991: 247). There are several elements suggesting that this dynamic was present in the Cabinet with regards to the Bay of Pigs operation. According to Arthur Schlesinger, who was involved in the decision-making process, the "meetings were taking place in a curious atmosphere of assumed consensus, [and] not one spoke against it" (Hansen, 2013). The repeated preferences of the Central Intelligence Agency and the Joint Chiefs of Staff were ignored, including their insistence that none of the three alternatives to the Trinidad Plan were as likely to succeed as the original. Furthermore, the United States Government also failed to understand the consequences of the cancelation of the D-Day air strikes, refusing to concede to the personnel responsible for the operation despite numerous warnings about the capabilities of the Cuban air force. Apparently Secretary of Defense Robert McNamara also lost, misplaced, or ignored two Joint Chiefs of Staff documents containing crucial information regarding the operation (Pfeiffer, 1984: 216-217), which might have contributed to the President's alleged lack of knowledge and misconceptions. President Kennedy himself admitted that "[he] wasn't aware of any great

opposition” from within the Cabinet against the operation, indicating that the administration was not familiar with all the potential pitfalls of the mission (Sidey, 2001). Based on this information describing the dynamics within the Cabinet, it can be stated that President Kennedy’s awareness and understanding of the operation was hindered by the groupthink syndrome, enabling him and his administration to reach questionable decisions without critique from the inside.

Problems during the Invasion

The operation itself also suffered from numerous issues. With reference to the aircraft and landing boats of the Cuban brigade, substandard equipment was utilized during the invasion. While the use of the Douglas B-26 airplanes, which were outdated and inferior to the Lockheed T-33s and the Hawker Sea Fury flown by the Cuban *Fuerza Aérea Revolucionaria*, can be attributed to the requirements to attain plausible deniability (as these types of assets were widely distributed to Latin American countries [CSG, 1961a: para. 5]), but the selection of boats that could not be operated during the landing due to motor failure (CSG, 1961a: para. 52) was a major error. Furthermore, the plan included the capture of a landing strip in Cuba to allow continuous air support for the operation (Pfeiffer, 1984: 200), and as this attempt was ultimately unsuccessful following the cancelation of the majority of the air missions, the brigade struggled with establishing a foothold in Cuba. Moreover, the D-2 diversionary landing’s failure to draw the Castro forces away and the limited effectiveness of the air strikes against Cuban air fields only allowed Castro to rally his troops and prepare for the expected larger assault.

The most significant decision in regards to the operation was without a doubt the cancelation of the all-out D-Day air strikes. As the Joint Chiefs of Staff’s initial report stated that the mission had a “fair” chance to succeed (JCS, 1961a: para. 1q), it is difficult to understand the rationale behind the Cabinet’s decision, reinforcing the proposition concerning the presence of groupthink, as discussed above. Fidel Castro himself commented that the invasion had a “good plan, poorly executed,” and that if the invaders had good air cover, they could have plausibly succeeded (Castro, 1961: para. 7). The importance of neutralizing Castro’s aircraft on the ground, to isolate the battlefield and support the landing was disregarded due to a political decision. While the Central Intelligence Agency task force did not petition the President directly to reconsider following the decision to forgo the attack, the crucial importance of the air strikes was immediately communicated to Secretary of State Dean Rusk (CSG, 1961a: para. 43-44),

and the issue of the airborne assault was discussed previously with the Cabinet in various documents and on numerous occasions, including the Joints Chiefs of Staff's evaluation of the Central Intelligence Agency's original plan, JCSM-57-61 (JCS, 1961a), the Central Intelligence Agency's paper on the proposed operation against Cuba (CIA, 1961a: para. 7b), the Agency's revised plan (CIA, 1961b: para. 3b), National Security Advisor McGeorge Bundy's memorandum to President Kennedy (Bundy, 1961b), and during a meeting on April 6, less than two weeks prior to D-Day (Department of State, n.d.).

As predicted by the Joint Chiefs of Staff, with the added problem of the D-2 attacks' failure that alerted the Castro regime, the invasion failed to surprise the enemy – the date of the attacks was already known. While the location was unknown, the alarm was immediately raised, and Cuban forces promptly arrived in the Zapata area. Due to the setbacks, the troops earmarked for Green Beach never reached their destination, and had to be unloaded at Blue Beach (CSG, 1961a: para. 46). The invaders also encountered problems with their radio equipment, as it got wet during the landing, and communication had to be conducted via messengers, slowing down the flow of information between the battalions and the Brigade Commander stationed at the beachhead (CSG, 1961a: para. 51, 62). The final attempt to salvage the situation with regards to the control of the airspace was initiated on the night after D-Day with the bombing of the San Antonio de los Baños air field. Due to unfavorable weather conditions, the operation was unsuccessful (CSG, 1961a: para. 57). After this effort, there was not even a remote possibility for the Cuban brigade to effectively isolate the battlefield from the Castro air force.

Apart from the cancelation of the D-Day air sorties, the operation endured its second most severe impediment with the loss of the *Rio Escondido* and *Houston* freighters. The invaders not only lost a significant amount of supplies, but also the Fifth Battalion refused to join the fight after the *Houston* ran aground (CSG, 1961a: para. 52). In addition to these casualties, the *Atlantico* and *Caribe* freighters also deserted the operation. Only the *Atlantico* was able to rejoin the mission, with an enormous delay, effectively after all relevant action had already ended (CSG, 1961a: para. 59). Although the loss of the aforementioned lines of supply hurt the effort of the invaders, evidence suggests that the claims of ammunition shortages by the Cuban Study Group were not legitimate. Cuban publications presented photographs of captured arms and ammunition (Otero, Desnoes, & Fornet, 1961-1962: 25-30), and Castro forces testified that the assault force abandoned numerous loaded weapons (Pfeiffer, 1984: 202). Out of approximately 1,400 members of the Cuban brigade, 1,200 members were captured (Pfeiffer, 1984: 203),

indicating a less than admirable performance. The substandard conduct of the Cuban Expeditionary Force was an overarching element, referring back to the question of the selection and training process discussed earlier. Due to the policy of non-attribution, United States personnel were prohibited from entering the combat area barring a few exceptions, most notably American contract pilots who took part in the operations after Cuban aviators quit (CSG, 1961a: para. 66). Even though the overt involvement of United States was never likely to happen, the mission would have undoubtedly enjoyed a higher level of performance with well-trained and more disciplined American troops.

Conclusion

The Bay of Pigs invasion suffered from both political restrictions and operational errors, however, the landing's failure was not a foregone conclusion before the cancelation of the D-Day air strikes. The latter eliminated one of the most important elements of the plan. While the 1,400 troops were unlikely to march into Havana and remove Castro, the effective control of the beachhead would have allowed them to either establish a provisional government, spark uprisings, or weaken the Castro regime's hold on the island in general. The original Trinidad Plan offered more opportunities to accomplish this – however, the Zapata Plan could have also contributed to the fall of the Cuban Communist regime. The operation suffered from the lack of a clear policy statement from the Cabinet after the change of administration from President Eisenhower, and no one short of President Kennedy had the authority to coordinate the various participating agencies. The Central Intelligence Agency committed several errors during the preparatory phase, most notably in regards to the selection, recruitment, and training of the Cuban brigade. While it remains unknown how the assault forces would have performed if the plan was fully executed, the discipline of the Cuban Expeditionary Force left much to be desired. President Kennedy and his Cabinet was presented with an urgent situation that the inexperienced administration mismanaged, and ostensibly allowed their decisions to be influenced by the groupthink phenomenon. Even so, the plan had a chance to succeed until the D-Day air strikes were canceled by the President, exposing the landing to the full power of the Castro air force, triggering a chain of events that led to the quick collapse of the beachhead.

Although in the public eye and the popular interpretation of the invasion, the Central Intelligence Agency has borne the brunt of the criticism for the debacle, the study of the situation suggests that more careful analysis is warranted. In conclusion: the

Cabinet's political decisions and hesitancy were just as responsible for the ultimate defeat. The Central Intelligence Agency's most crucial shortcomings were demonstrated in the selection and training process. Yet, barring their failure to provide a detailed description of the consequences of potential defeat, their other errors were either relatively minor or, in the case of the performance of the troops, they cannot be properly evaluated, due to the Zapata Plan not being executed to its fullest extent.

As for the Cabinet's missteps, the cancelation of the D-Day air missions can be undoubtedly identified as the critical juncture that all but guaranteed the plan's failure. In general, it can be stated that the most crucial mistake was that the Kennedy administration was not committed to the fullest extent to the operation, and only approved a half-measure, whereas a different approach may have led to the overthrowing Castro in 1961, placing United States–Cuba relations on a very different trajectory in the following decades.

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