

“Defeat Is an Orphan” The Kennedy Administration and the Bureaucratic Tug-of-War over the Bay of Pigs

Eric R. Martell



President John F. Kennedy meets with the Joint Chiefs of Staff, January 25, 1961

Foreign policy creation is a dialectical discourse. In an uncertain post-9/11 world replete with threats of transnational terrorism, international narcotics trafficking, and persistent border crises, the domestic debate over foreign policy is perhaps more acute than ever. Within the councils of government, the nature of the nation’s relationship to the rest of the world is inherently a dialogue between competing ideas. Whether warning of “entangling alliances” as in George Washington’s famous farewell address or in promoting notions of interventionism, empire, and globalization, the development of foreign policy requires the critical exchange of

Eric R. Martell is a Ph.D. student in the Department of History at the University at Albany, SUNY where his work engages with the interplay between private business and public policy in foreign relations with Latin America. “Defeat is an Orphan” began as his bachelor’s thesis at SUNY Potsdam. He especially would like to thank the Presidential Scholars program and Professors Kevin Smith and Thomas Baker for their knowledge, guidance, and support in producing this piece. He is also grateful for the insightful comments and suggestions from his graduate community, his Albany instructors, and Ellen.

ideas. Exploring the process of policy creation can be quite useful for studying the American federal government and how it responds to exogenous and endogenous pressures around the world and at home.

One particularly illuminating episode of foreign policy creation as a dialectical discourse is the failed invasion of Cuba in 1961 to unseat Fidel Castro. Well understood by students and scholars alike, the invasion at the “Bay of Pigs” famously floundered upon arrival. What is less understood, however, and is hotly debated amongst scholars, is *why* it unfolded in the manner it did. As Rebecca Friedman points out, scholars have identified four proximate explanations: the unfamiliarity among President John F. Kennedy’s advisers, the secrecy involved, the decision-making structure, and “perverse” bureaucratic dynamics.¹ Whereas Friedman posits the importance of the transition period between Dwight Eisenhower and John Kennedy, this essay, concedes the significance of the transition months but argues that the primary reason for the invasion’s failure was the perverse bureaucratic dynamics.

In carrying forward a plan inherited from the Eisenhower administration, Kennedy approved what he thought to be a guaranteed victory. Both administrations, however, wrestled bureaucratically over the clandestine operation’s planning and execution. To understand the operation and the debates within the Kennedy administration this essay examines the planning and approval processes through two lenses: the bureaucratic politics model hypothesized by Graham T. Allison in 1971 and Groupthink Syndrome as articulated by the noted Yale psychologist Irving Janis.² Separately, these models do not adequately explain the outcome of the invasion, but together, they supplement and compensate for the other’s deficiencies. Groupthink, for example, explains what Allison’s model cannot: the psychological pressures placed on policymakers at the critical moment of decision. Allison’s model, on the other side, complements Janis’s paradigm by providing a theoretical framework for explaining the process of bureaucratic planning. By fusing these models, scholars can better understand not only why the invasion failed, but also why

¹ Rebecca R. Friedman, “Crisis Management at the Dead Center: The 1960–1961 Presidential Transition and the Bay of Pigs Fiasco,” *Presidential Studies Quarterly* 41 (June 2011): 307–33. She argues that a fifth category ought to exist, one that focuses on the transition period from Eisenhower to Kennedy, and that this lame duck period was the primary determining factor in the invasion’s defeat.

² Graham T. Allison, *Essence of Decision: Explaining the Cuban Missile Crisis* (Boston: Little Brown, 1971); Irving L. Janis, *Victims of Groupthink: A Psychological Study of Foreign-policy Decisions and Fiascos* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1972).

it went forward with far too little critical analysis of its shortcomings that were obvious to many of the planners. More broadly, such investigations demonstrate that historians can find utility in applying theories from the other social sciences and humanities in their analyses. Understanding the winding process of Operation Bumpy Road, as the invasion was known, can permit scholars to better appreciate our contemporary presidential methods of foreign policy decision-making and public policy creation more broadly.

The Bureaucratic Politics and Groupthink Approaches

Graham T. Allison theorized bureaucratic politics analysis in 1972 as a way to understand Kennedy’s famous success in the Cuban Missile Crisis of 1962. In 1984, however, scholar Lucien Vandenbroucke applied the same bureaucratic lens to the Bay of Pigs—a famous Kennedy failure. Vandenbroucke held deep reservations about the total usefulness of the model due to the paucity of primary evidence in the mid-1980s but did accept its three key assumptions.³ First, there are many competing rational actors representing different parts of the bureaucracy with policy preferences that are driven by Miles’s Law.⁴ Additionally, theorists argue that bureaucrats attempt to defend their organizations’ budgets, responsibilities, and discipline in a phenomenon called “organizational parochialism.” Second, these competing rational actors engage in “bargaining” in which each actor negotiates and compromises in a game of “push-and-pull” politics. Third and finally, the model assumes that all government decisions are a “resultant” of this bargaining game and that decisions are simply a series of compromises.

In Allison’s model, the power of the decision-maker is checked by the power of the decision-implementers. Accordingly, the president is the only superpower among lesser players representing different departments or agencies. “The moves, sequence of moves, and ‘games of chess’ are thus to be explained in terms of the bargaining among players with separate and unequal power over particular pieces, and with separable objectives in distinguishable sub games,” wrote Allison.⁵ One of the defining qualities of Allison’s theory is that in terms of quantity and quality of power, players can be colloquially divided into two categories: “heavy-weights”

³ Lucien S. Vandenbroucke, “Anatomy of a Failure: The Decision to Land at the Bay of Pigs,” *Political Science Quarterly* 99 (Autumn 1984): 471–91.

⁴ Miles Law, “Where you sit (your position) in the bureaucracy will determine your stand (your policy preferences).” See: Rufus E. Miles, Jr., “The Origin and Meaning of Miles’ Law,” *Public Administration Review* 38 (1978): 399–403.

⁵ Allison, *Essence of Decision*, 163.

and “light-weights.”⁶ Thus, decision-making is a game in which players of unequal strength barter and negotiate with other players, all the while contending with the executive whose power trumps all, but is concomitantly held in check via the negotiated relationship.⁷

The most serious shortcoming of Allison’s model, however, is that it only describes the decision-making process and does not adequately account for the actual decision itself. Groupthink Syndrome, on the other hand, is an efficacious way to solve this deficiency as it addresses the rationality and psychological dynamics of group-based decision-making. The founding theorist, Irving Janis, defines groupthink as “a quick and easy way to refer to a mode of thinking that people engage in when they are deeply involved in a cohesive in-group, when the members’ strivings for unanimity override their motivations to realistically appraise the alternative courses of action.”⁸ The theoretical premise is rather simple: when grouped together, people naturally try to agree and find commonality, and when too many people in the group attempt to find concurrence, any healthy criticism, dissension, and debate is lost because of an atmosphere of “relaxed conviviality.”⁹

Groupthink Syndrome can explain the decision itself while the Bureaucratic Politics model explains the preceding discursive process. The resulting fusion of the two models enhances explanatory power. This combined Bureaucratic-Groupthink model can demonstrate that those policymakers involved in the creation and approval of the 1961 invasion failed to be critical of the plan’s evident shortcomings and can further illuminate the process of dialectical discourse by showing how it broke down within the Kennedy administration.

The Planning Stages

Organizations like the Central Intelligence Agency (CIA) tend to follow past templates to deal with present and future problems. The Bay of Pigs invasion was mod-

⁶ For excellent criticism of Allison on this point, with which I concur, see David Welch’s work “The Organizational Process and Bureaucratic Politics Paradigms: Retrospect and Prospect,” *International Security* 17 (Fall 1992): 112–46; Vandenbroucke, “Anatomy of a Failure: The Decision to Land at the Bay of Pigs,” 471–91; and the inquisitive 1992 work of Jonathan Bendor and Thomas Hammond, “Rethinking Allison’s Models,” *American Political Science Review* 86, no. 2 (1992): 301–22.

⁷ This is similar, on a much smaller and intragovernmental level, to the construction of hemispheric hegemony by the United States as articulated by William Roseberry’s chapter, “Hegemony and the Language of Contention,” in *Everyday Forms of State Formation: Revolution and the Negotiation of Rule in Modern Mexico*, 355–66, eds., Gilbert M. Joseph and Daniel Nugent (Durham: Duke University Press, 1994). In it he argues that hegemony is contested, negotiated, and fluid.

⁸ Janis, *Victims of Groupthink*, 9.

⁹ *Ibid.*, 3.

eled after Operation PBSUCCESS in which the CIA worked to oust Guatemala’s leftist president Jacobo Arbenz in 1954. The Guatemalan overthrow was poorly planned and was only adequately executed, but conditions within Guatemala allowed it to succeed.¹⁰ Seven years later, when trying to convince Kennedy that the invasion of Cuba should proceed, CIA Director Allen Dulles said he felt *more* confident than he had with Guatemala.¹¹ Dulles’s words weighed heavily on Kennedy, who evidently was unaware that reality did not match his presidential briefings—that the exiles were poorly trained, supplies were limited, and Castro was on alert.¹² Piero Gleijeses notes that CIA officials were so “elated” in the wake of 1954 that “they forgot the many ways that they knew it could have gone wrong.”¹³ The brimming overconfidence within the CIA prevented any objective internal review, and its officials were, by 1961, unaware of the inferior nature of their template.¹⁴

The plan Kennedy approved in March 1961 was drastically different from the plan that Eisenhower sanctioned a year earlier. In March 1960, Eisenhower authorized a small guerilla infiltration with the goal of training disloyal Cubans to openly rebel and march on Havana.¹⁵ Kennedy was subsequently asked to approve a World War II–style maritime invasion. Coinciding with the presidential transition as hypothesized by Friedman, the decision-making process by which the invasion morphed from guerrilla-infiltration to a covert amphibious landing doomed the entire project. Therefore, until the final moment of failure, Kennedy continued to believe that popular uprisings would indeed occur and that guerilla operations were still being conducted on the island.

¹⁰ Vandenbroucke, “Anatomy of a Failure,” 474; see also Piero Gleijeses’s *Shattered Hope: The Guatemalan Revolution and the United States, 1944–1954* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1992).

¹¹ Theodore C. Sorensen, *Kennedy* (New York: Harper & Row, 1965), 296.

¹² Castro had imprisoned or exiled most of the opposition groups, thereby destroying the underground networks that would have otherwise aided the invasion. Kennedy remained uninformed on the matter until February; see: “Proposed Operation Against Cuba,” *Foreign Relations of the United States* (hereinafter abbreviated *FRUS*), 1961–1962, Vol. X, Cuba: January 1961–September 1962, eds., Louis J. Smith and David S. Patterson (Wash., DC: Government Printing Office (GPO), 1997), Doc. 58; see also “Revised Cuban Operation,” *FRUS*, Vol. X, Doc. 61; “Cuban Operation,” *FRUS*, Vol. X, Doc. 93; “Cuba,” *FRUS*, Vol. X, Doc. 27; and “Joint Chiefs Security Memoranda 57–61: Military Evaluation of the Cuban Plan,” *FRUS*, Vol. X, Doc. 35; all make an unequivocal case to the president that the invading forces would be welcomed and joined by the Cuban populace.

¹³ James G. Blight and Peter Kornbluh, eds., *Politics of Illusion: The Bay of Pigs Invasion Reexamined* (London: Lynne Rienner Publishers, 1988), 41; see also Piero Gleijeses, *Shattered Hope* for a more in-depth analysis of the coup and his 1995 article “Ships in the Night: The CIA, the White House and the Bay of Pigs,” *Journal of Latin American Studies* 27 (Feb. 1995): 1–42.

¹⁴ Gleijeses, *Shattered Hope*, 376.

¹⁵ Gleijeses, “Ships in the Night,” 3.

Why, in light of the operation's metamorphosis, did Kennedy continue to believe this to be true? Allison's bureaucratic politics model provides the answer: organizational parochialism. The term is defined as the desire to promote, defend, and enhance the agency's turf and reputation, and explains the CIA's ability to possess a monopoly over intelligence and then control the flow of information to the White House.

In a memo sent by Col. Jack Hawkins to Jake Esterline in the CIA's Western Hemisphere Directorate for Plans in the first week of 1961, the agency noted that popular uprisings in Cuba were requisite for success. This came after the invasion's conception had turned away from a guerilla-based program and toward an amphibious Normandy-styled landing. The memo read: "There will be no early attempt to break out of the lodgment for further offensive operations [meaning proceeding to Havana] unless and until there is a general uprising against the Castro regime or overt military intervention by United States forces has taken place."¹⁶ This crucially important statement from the CIA was the basis of JFK's eventual, albeit apprehensive, approval. The CIA promised a Cuban uprising and defections from Castro's own military. The CIA argued that in case revolts did not materialize the United States could recognize a provisional government in Cuba after the brigade took enough physical territory. After recognition, the president could authorize overt American intervention on behalf of an ally.¹⁷

In addition to the CIA's monopoly of information, Director Allen Dulles and Richard Bissell, the invasion's mastermind and the agency's deputy director of plans, advocated for their own plan and tried to sell it to the incoming president and his new advisers. In doing so, they prevented an objective review of their blueprint. As part of their monopoly that relegated Pentagon officials to the role of outside evaluators, Dulles and Bissell also blocked contradictory intelligence originating in other parts of the CIA from making its way outside the confines of agency headquarters.¹⁸ Equally nefarious, Bissell prevented information from

¹⁶ "Policy Decisions for Conduct of Strike Operations Against Government of Cuba," *FRUS*, Vol. X, Doc. 9.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*

¹⁸ Intelligence briefings that argued the Cuban underground was in shambles and that revolts would not occur were never sent to the White House. In addition, officers in charge of implementing the plan and training the guerilla fighters expressed doubts that were never relayed outside of the CIA. In fact, the planners Jake Esterline and Jack Hawkins traveled to the home of Richard Bissell to express their reservations and their desire to resign from their posts over the latter's stifling of their objections. See: Don Bohning, *The Castro Obsession: US Covert Operations Against Cuba, 1959–1965* (Wash., DC: Potomac Books, 2006), 32–36.

being passed between policymakers and policy implementers. One CIA official noted that Bissell “deliberately kept us in the dark until the last minute” after that particular officer expressed severe doubts about the operation.¹⁹ Instead, Bissell relied upon hand-chosen evidence that supported his view of Castro’s power, the readiness of the expatriate army, and his own worldview. This evidence, however, was based on intelligence that greatly underestimated Castro’s military strength and overestimated the likelihood of average Cubans rising up and marching to Havana to oust the bearded leader.²⁰

When questioned about the conceptual change years later, Bissell stated that the original plan would not have “produce[d] a psychological effect sufficient to precipitate general uprisings or wide-spread revolt among disaffected elements of Castro’s armed forces.”²¹ With a new chief executive in John F. Kennedy, Bissell promoted a Normandy-style amphibious landing that he believed would indeed precipitate uprisings across the island against Castro. In reality, however, the invasion plans had evolved because of declining support for rebels throughout Cuba as articulated by interagency intelligence estimates. The agency’s stranglehold over the intelligence reports that made it to the president’s desk made it seem as if the White House and the CIA were, as Piero Gleijeses nicely described it, “ships in the night.”

The Joint Chiefs, the CIA, and the White House wrestled over whether or not the program should be enlarged. In their evaluator role, the chiefs suggested utilizing more resources, including the possible use of American troops, while the CIA insisted on quick approval. Kennedy, however, opposed both requests and contended that he had the right to cancel the entire operation within 24 hours of the scheduled landings.²² The Pentagon meanwhile endorsed the CIA’s plan for an amphibious invasion and noted that peasant uprisings would indeed be necessary. They also reported that if the invasion was to fully succeed and Castro to be eliminated, American troops would be required—something Kennedy was unwilling to commit to.²³ Between Kennedy’s inauguration in January and the invasion’s launch in April, the three entities continued to be entangled in messy bureaucratic interplay, and the program’s design reflected that convoluted interaction.

¹⁹ Howard Jones, *The Bay of Pigs* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2008), 93.

²⁰ *Ibid.*, 126.

²¹ “Cuba,” *FRUS*, Vol. X, Doc. 46.

²² Peter Wyden, *Bay of Pigs: The Untold Story* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1980), 152.

²³ “JCS Memo of Conference with JFK, 25 January, 1961,” *FRUS*, Vol. X, Doc. 26; See also “Policy Decision for Conduct of Strike Operations Against Government of Cuba,” *FRUS*, Vol. X, Doc. 9; and also, “Memo from Barnes to Esterline,” *FRUS*, Vol. X, Doc. 21.

Demonstrating their intent to enlarge the project and incorporate the use of American troops, the CIA issued a critical memorandum on January 26, 1961. Ambiguously, the agency claimed that there was “a reasonable chance” that the invasion would “set in motion force which would cause the downfall of the regime.” It further noted that the invasion, if left by itself, would likely not cause Castro’s final fall from power.²⁴ The CIA claimed that a larger, more comprehensive program, beyond the resources already allocated, was necessary. In the face of changing circumstances, Kennedy again rejected the use of American soldiers for the sake of plausibly denying American involvement. The CIA, however, chose to believe that the young and inexperienced president would yield at the most perilous moment. The fatal flaw in the Bay of Pigs invasion was therefore the underestimating and misunderstanding of President Kennedy.

Precisely at that moment of misunderstanding between the White House and the CIA the Pentagon began pressuring President Kennedy to resolve the situation in Cuba, believing that the window of opportunity was closing. In a new memorandum, the Joint Chiefs argued that “unless the United States takes immediate and forceful action, there is a great and present danger that Cuba will become permanently established as part of the Communist Bloc, with disastrous consequences to the security of the Western Hemisphere.”²⁵ Trapped by his own fiery campaign rhetoric and wanting to avoid Truman’s fate for “losing China,” Kennedy was in no position to cancel the operation when nearly all his advisers and the venerable Eisenhower were pushing for its approval.

The Joint Chiefs’ evaluation of the invasion concluded, much as the CIA had, that success was to be contingent on the uprisings of the Cuban people. Without it, Castro’s resistance would be far too great for the objective to be achieved. The chiefs reviewed the CIA plan favorably and told Kennedy that it would likely “achieve initial success” but that ultimate success would depend on popular uprisings and a substantial follow-up force. Despite the shortcomings pointed out in the assessment, the Joint Chiefs of Staff believed that timely execution of this plan had a “fair chance” of ultimate success.²⁶ In addition, the Joint Chiefs informed the White House that if the initial invasion somehow failed, a protracted war could be waged in the Escambray Mountains. In an ironic twist, the planners believed that American-trained Cuban expatriates could defeat

²⁴ “Cuba,” *FRUS*, Vol. X, Doc. 27.

²⁵ “JCSM-44-61: US Plan of Action in Cuba,” *FRUS*, Vol. X, Doc. 28.

²⁶ “JCSM-57-61: Evaluation of the Cuban Plan,” *FRUS*, Vol. X, Doc. 35.

Castro’s military by using the very mountainous guerilla tactics that Castro’s own revolution had used to gain power.

In an early February memorandum, the chiefs reiterated their vague and imprecise notion of a fair chance for ultimate success. One Pentagon official revealed later that a fair chance was equivalent to a 30-percent success rate. The chiefs believed that civilian leaders and even those with military backgrounds would understand that a “fair chance” meant “not too good.” Jim Rasenberger has shown that no one made this distinction to the White House and that the chiefs’ assessment “came off as an endorsement of the CIA’s plan with decision-makers fully believing the Pentagon believed success was probable.”²⁷ Ambiguity by the Joint Chiefs, whether intentional or not, resulted in a grave misunderstanding between evaluator and decision-maker.

Through January and February 1961, President Kennedy continued to believe that the landing forces could simply hide away in the mountains in case of failure. In early February, the CIA convinced State Department officials, with the notable exception of Thomas Mann, that the guerilla option was still open. Mann, in his skepticism, concluded that it was unlikely that popular uprisings would occur and that the plan was inherently flawed. This, he argued, would force Kennedy to make a tough decision to either wholly abandon the brigade or openly intervene with American troops, which would then destroy the plausible deniability to which Kennedy so desperately clung.²⁸



President John F. Kennedy speaks at a press conference, January 25, 1961

Weeks later, on March 10, Kennedy received the finalized invasion plan from the CIA and an evaluation from the Joint Chiefs. He rejected both. For Kennedy, the

²⁷ Jim Rasenberger, *The Brilliant Disaster: JFK, Castro, and America’s Doomed Invasion of Cuba’s Bay of Pigs* (New York: Scribner, 2011), 119.

²⁸ “Memo from Mann to Rusk,” *FRUS*, Vol. X, Doc. 45.

invasion had to achieve surprise, attain air superiority, and encounter minimal initial resistance, and intelligence estimates on Castro's strength had to be correct. The Joint Chiefs concluded, once again, that "ultimate success will depend on the extent to which the initial assault serves as a catalyst for further action on the part of anti-Castro elements throughout Cuba."²⁹ The evaluation this time around, however, stated that the odds were about 85 to 15 *against* the achievement of surprise.³⁰

The next day, Kennedy reaffirmed his support for sending guerilla fighters to Cuba but asked for new alternatives to meet new criteria he was imposing. In yet another instance of a bureaucratic tug-of-war, the president, planners, and evaluators sparred over the fate of the project. He requested that the actual landings take place at night under the cover of darkness and that the CIA find a new landing site with suitable terrain for guerilla warfare in case of failure. Lastly, Kennedy demanded that air operations be conducted only after a Cuban airstrip was captured, instead of launching from American ships.³¹ He made all three requests to ensure that plausible deniability was maintained.

Four days later, the CIA returned with a new plan that met the president's criteria and, most importantly, guaranteed that the backup option for guerilla warfare was still available. As predicted by the bureaucratic politics model, a significant interplay occurred between the president and the planners during these meetings that produced a compromise. Opening the March 15 meeting, National Security Advisor McGeorge Bundy praised the CIA and for the first time affirmed his support for the plan.³² Exemplifying bureaucratic pushing and pulling, the CIA made major concessions. They agreed to stage an amphibious landing before sunrise and without immediate air support. Kennedy was pleased that air support would come only after the brigade had successfully taken control of a local airstrip in order to make the operation "look as Cuban as possible." This excluded the pre-D-day strikes that were allowed to be conducted without interference to be launched two days prior to the amphibious landing. Critically important, Bissell also stated that the guerilla option was still available to the brigade in the new location Kennedy asked for: la bahía de Cochinos.³³

²⁹ "JCSM-146-61: Evaluation of the CIA Cuban Volunteer Task Force," *FRUS*, Vol. X, Doc. 56.

³⁰ *Ibid.*

³¹ Lyman Kirkpatrick, "Inspector General's Survey of the Cuban Operation October 1961," in Peter Kornbluh, *Bay of Pigs Declassified: The Secret CIA Report on the Invasion of Cuba* (New York: The New Press, 1998).

³² "Meeting on Cuba: 15 March, 1961," *FRUS*, Vol. X, Doc. 64.

³³ "Revised Cuban Operation," *FRUS*, Vol. X, Doc. 61.

The Joint Chiefs evaluated and endorsed the newly named “Zapata plan” with only one, barely noticeable reservation. This reservation, however, proved to be essential and was not made forcefully enough to the president. Buried deeply at the end of the document read the sentence: “None of the alternatives are considered as feasible and likely to accomplish the objective as the basic Para-military plan [original Trinidad plan].”³⁴ That document, apart from that barely salient sentence, appeared to be a wholehearted endorsement of the CIA’s new plan. Due to their monopoly of information and organizational parochialism, the CIA effectively relegated the nation’s military advisers to only an evaluator role on a major military operation.³⁵ It is not surprising then that the Joint Chiefs, and ultimately Kennedy’s response, reflected this bottleneck of information. On this point in his 1984 assessment, Vandenbroucke wrote: “An organization [like the CIA] that controls information on a given issue can shape the appearance the issue takes, and thus largely predetermine the executive’s response.”³⁶

In their limited role as evaluators, the Joint Chiefs did not assess the plan as thoroughly and critically as they might have if it were their own operation.³⁷ They agreed with the CIA that the Zapata environment was indeed an area suitable for guerilla warfare and that the surrounding swamps could provide a sanctuary for the exiles to escape to if the invasion went poorly.³⁸ The CIA, in turn, wrote Kennedy of its optimism: “It is believed that the plan here outlined goes as far as possible in the direction of minimizing the political costs without impairing its soundness and chance of success as a military operation.”³⁹ In the end, the two fundamental conditions that beleaguered the planning process more than Kennedy’s executive inexperience, his management style, or the presidential transition from Eisenhower to Kennedy, were the organizational parochialism and the monopoly of information that ultimately prevented sufficient critical scrutiny.

³⁴ “JCSM-166-61: Evaluation of the Military Aspects of Alternative Concepts, CIA Para-military Plan, Cuba,” *FRUS*, Vol. X, Doc. 62.

³⁵ As mentioned earlier (see footnotes 18–20) intelligence reports and estimates were created by the CIA and controlled by Bissell and Dulles at the top before being passed on to the White House. Neither the Defense Department nor the president’s national security advisers were asked to produce intelligence reports. They were simply tasked and relegated to being evaluators. See: Jones, *The Bay of Pigs*, 61. Peter Kornbluh also substantiates the bottleneck of information and monopoly of intelligence held by Bissell in particular. See: Kornbluh, *Bay of Pigs Declassified*, 43.

³⁶ Vandenbroucke, “Anatomy of a Failure,” 474.

³⁷ *Ibid.*, 477. Vandenbroucke does an excellent analysis of how the military was relegated to only an advisory role.

³⁸ *Ibid.*

³⁹ “Revised Cuban Operation,” *FRUS*, Vol. X, Doc. 61.

The CIA continued to make it extraordinarily clear through the final month before D-day that the guerilla option was available. The CIA informed the president on March 15 that the Zapata site was “suitable for guerilla warfare in the event that an organized perimeter could not be held.”⁴⁰ Lost in translation was the cartographic fact that, because of the location change, the Escambray Mountains were now 80 miles away. By not knowing the entire truth about the guerilla option, the president was more optimistic than he should have been. Kennedy’s fault in the planning process resulted from his executive inexperience, which predisposed him to accept what the CIA presented based on the agency’s reputation as an organization of trained experts. The Joint Chiefs, as well, reiterated ambiguously that a “mountainous” guerilla option was still available.⁴¹ The importance of the contingency guerilla plan cannot be overstated. Attorney General Robert Kennedy revealed later that the backup plan was the factor above all else that convinced his brother to approve continued planning.⁴²

The Decision

The weakness of the bureaucratic politics model, as noted earlier, is its inability to sufficiently explain the decision itself due to its focus on the decision-making process. To address this issue, scholars should consider the Groupthink model previously mentioned, with its emphasis on group dynamics in the decision-making group. To understand why a specific decision was made, scholars need to consider several factors concerning the group’s individuals: their relative influence, the respect that their reputations and positions command, relative political power, connection to higher authority, personality traits, and others. In public policy decision-making, for example, cabinet members have *constituted power*, meaning that they have input and influence because of their position. Members who may not “sit” anywhere in the bureaucracy have *perceived power*, meaning that they have influence derived from their reputation and connection to the executive or chairperson. Within this simple dichotomy, there exists another criterion: the relative influence of each actor. Heavy-weights are those public officers who generally hold the greatest levels of public recognition, expertise, experience, and constituted power. By contrast, light-weights are under secretaries, secondary officers, career bureaucrats, or those who are new to government.

⁴⁰ Ibid.

⁴¹ “JCSM-166-61: Evaluation of the Military Aspects of Alternative Concepts, CIA Para-Military Plan, Cuba,” *FRUS*, Vol. X, Doc. 62.

⁴² Jeffrey Schulman and Edwin O. Guthman, eds., *Robert Kennedy in His Own Words: The Unpublished Recollections of the Kennedy Years* (Toronto, ON: Bantam Books, 1988), 240.

Cognizant of his own relative influence (or lack thereof), Kennedy’s special assistant Arthur Schlesinger wrote:

It is one thing for a Special Assistant to talk frankly in private to a President at his request and another for a college professor fresh to the government, to interpose his unassisted judgment in open meetings against that of such august figures as the Secretaries of State and Defense and the Joint Chiefs of Staff, each speaking with the full weight of his institution behind him.⁴³

On the topic of the Bay of Pigs, the heavy-weights were either *fully* in support of the invasion or were dissenting so quietly that their silence was taken as compliance. On the other side, the light-weights were generally opposed to the plan. The heavy-weights were men like Allen Dulles, Gen. Lyman Lemnitzer and the other Joint Chiefs, and Richard Bissell, as the architect of the invasion.⁴⁴ The second group, also heavy-weights who quietly dissented, were people like Secretaries of State and Defense Dean Rusk and Robert McNamara, respectively, and Thomas Mann, all of whom had reservations about the plan but voted in the affirmative to support what they thought the president wanted. Their complicity was dangerous because it left Kennedy with no heavy-weights opposed to the plan. Finally, the light-weights included men like Arthur Schlesinger, Senator William Fulbright (well-respected as the powerful Senate Foreign Relations Committee chair but without formal power in cabinet meetings), and Chester Bowles,⁴⁵ who attempted to persuade Kennedy against the invasion. These men constituted weaker forces within the administration, and their opinions carried little persuasive power.

The light-weights were the ones who spoke directly with Kennedy and with few others outside the White House. Immediately before the final decision, Chester Bowles wrote a memorandum to Rusk and Kennedy that went unread by others:

⁴³ Arthur M. Schlesinger, *A Thousand Days: John F. Kennedy in the White House* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1965), 255.

⁴⁴ Normally Richard Bissell would be labeled a light-weight because he held little sway outside of CIA matters, but in the case of the Bay of Pigs (a CIA operation), and with Bissell as the creator, he carried tremendous influence and power in planning sessions and should be considered a heavy-weight for this particular affair.

⁴⁵ Chester Bowles was the under secretary of state in Kennedy’s first year and was asked by Kennedy to resign in the wake of the Bay of Pigs.

I do not overlook the ruthless nature of the struggle in which we are involved, nor do I ignore the need on occasion for action which is expedient and distasteful. Yet I cannot persuade myself that means can be wholly divorced from ends—even within the context of the Cold War . . . I realize that this operation has been put together over a period of months. A great deal of time and money has been put into it, and many able and dedicated people have become emotionally involved in its success. We should not, however, proceed with this adventure simply because we are wound up and cannot stop.⁴⁶

In explaining his own opposition, Arthur Schlesinger sent President Kennedy three memorandums detailing potential risks and dangers with the invasion. In the first memo he wrote that “there seems to me a slight danger of our being rushed into something because CIA has its hands [on] a band of people it doesn’t quite know what to do with.” Later, he expressed his moral opposition by writing that “no matter how ‘Cuban’ the equipment and personnel the US will be held accountable for the operation, and our prestige will be committed to its success.” Schlesinger warned: “If the landing fails to trigger uprisings behind the lines and defections in the Militia (and the evidence that it would do so is inconclusive), the logic of the situation could well lead us, step by step, to the point where the last step would be to dispatch the Marines.” After questioning the CIA’s intelligence on Cuba, Schlesinger argued: “Whatever we do, the effect will be to spoil the new US image—the image of intelligence, reasonableness and honest firmness which has already had such an extraordinary effect in changing world opinion about the US.”⁴⁷

While the light-weights were providing quiet, insulated dissent, the president sat down on April 4 with his cabinet, the planners, the evaluators, and other selected guests to make a formal decision. In an inflexible situation that precluded elaboration, opposition, or critique, Kennedy went around the table and asked for a simple “yes-no” answer. The meeting was frustrating to many of the participants, most notably Thomas Mann, Dean Rusk, Paul Nitze, and the Joint Chiefs.⁴⁸ The president’s collegial management style and executive inexperience made the meeting

⁴⁶ “Memo from Bowles to Rusk,” *FRUS*, Vol. X, Doc. 75.

⁴⁷ “Memo from Schlesinger to JFK,” *FRUS*, Vol. X, Doc. 63; “Memo from Schlesinger to JFK,” *FRUS*, Vol. X, Doc. 81; “Memo from Schlesinger to JFK,” *FRUS*, Vol. X, Doc. 86.

⁴⁸ Adolf Berle, one of FDR’s Good Neighbor advisers brought in by Kennedy for the Alliance for Progress and his transition team had his explanation cut off by Kennedy who simply asked for a yes or no answer. Following JFK’s request, he simply said: “I say, let ‘er rip!” Thomas Mann, of the Department of State, felt that the entire meeting was “very indecisive” and “very unsatisfactory.” See: Wyden, *Bay of Pigs*, 147–49.

unproductive and allowed groupthink to persist once again. Kennedy had created a difficult situation that stifled creativity and led most of the advisers to simply agree.⁴⁹

Why did seemingly rational and intelligent men like Rusk, Bundy, McNamara, and Robert Kennedy, all of whom had reservations about the plan, gloss over obvious flaws, not ask the right questions, and assent to a seemingly irrational course of action? Part of this explanation comes from patterns in simple interpersonal interactions. Men like Rusk, McNamara, Bundy, and Schlesinger were new to government and felt they had no business in questioning the judgment of professional military and CIA personnel who had been doing their jobs for decades.

Even more important, as Irving Janis has argued, are “illusions” of “invulnerability” and “unanimity.”⁵⁰ The most damning issue was the illusion of unanimity. Many of the advisers who had reservations about the project likely felt alone in their quiet dissent and offered little or no criticism of the CIA’s project. Ted Sorensen, a White House speechwriter and confidant, later recalled that “no strong voice of opposition was raised in any of the key meetings, and no realistic alternatives were presented.” Sorensen wrote that the advice given to the president was not only unanimous, it was in fact wrong.⁵¹ With those who were wavering or undecided now silenced and voting in the affirmative, the only vocal dissenter was Fulbright (and in private Schlesinger and Bowles). Those who were “on the fence” firmly believed they were serving the president well by supporting him through an affirmative vote and thus fell victim to dangerous consensus-seeking.

The destructive power of Groupthink Syndrome with respect to the Bay of Pigs is clearly revealed in Schlesinger’s 1965 hagiography about President Kennedy. He argued that the president did not want “to go it alone” in dissenting against the entire group and was looking for a dissention partner. Schlesinger suggested that if a single “heavy-weight” had spoken forcefully against the invasion, Kennedy would have cancelled the project outright.⁵² History will remember, however, that one

⁴⁹ Psychologists, sociologists, and political scientists have identified three patterns of “deliberative organization”: competitive, formalistic, and collegial. Kennedy used a collegial management style, meaning that the executive uses a small group of policymakers with the executive at the middle giving equal access to each policy adviser, thereby reducing bureaucratic hierarchy. The methodological debates about the different styles and the development of these theories are quite rich. See Richard Tanner Johnson, *Managing the White House: An Intimate Study of the Presidency* (New York: Harper & Row, 1974) as a foundational text.

⁵⁰ Janis, *Victims of Groupthink*, 36–38.

⁵¹ Sorensen, *Kennedy*, 304–5.

⁵² *Ibid.*, 259.

man did indeed speak up. Kennedy personally asked Senator William Fulbright to attend the meeting. Kennedy was equivocal and likely wanted Fulbright to speak energetically against the operation, hoping to convince others to join openly in dissent. In the end, however, Fulbright convinced no one, and when no one of else of consequence spoke up, Kennedy had his answer. Part of Fulbright's futility lies in the fact he had no bureaucratic authority and little influence in those planning meetings despite having a respected policy-making pedigree.

Moving Toward D-day

On April 13, the CIA sent one final memorandum that clinched Kennedy's approval. Col. Jack Hawkins, on the ground at the Guatemalan training sites, outlined the enthusiasm and readiness of the exiles to retake their homeland and claimed that the trainers had "supreme confidence" in the expatriate army. One again, the cable told the president to expect the successful overthrow of Castro's government with popular uprisings.⁵³ Attorney General Robert Kennedy later claimed that Hawkins's note was "the most instrumental paper in convincing the President to go ahead."⁵⁴

President Kennedy's optimism increased after Hawkins's report, but he was still apprehensive about the airstrikes. Secretary Rusk had opposed the airstrikes and argued that the first wave on April 15 (day 2) ought to be reduced from 16 planes to 6. In a scathing 1998 book about the entire affair, Grayston Lynch, one of four Americans to participate in the landings (against Kennedy's orders), wrote that the sortie had already been reduced from 22 to 16 and that further reduction harmed the effectiveness of the air campaign.⁵⁵ Acting on Rusk's advice and without consultation with the Pentagon, Kennedy telephoned Bissell at the CIA with ambiguous instructions to downplay the preinvasion strikes. Exemplifying the bureaucratic tug-of-war, the State Department and the White House tussled with the CIA and the Pentagon to reduce the "noise" of the air assault.⁵⁶ Bissell knew that any further reduction or elimination of the airstrikes would handicap the program but agreed to carry out his orders without rebuttal. Alluding to groupthink syndrome plaguing the planning process, he noted that his compliance reflected "the degree of pressure felt" by those involved in "resolving the Cuban problem."⁵⁷

⁵³ "Memo from CIA to Taylor," *FRUS*, Vol. X, Doc. 98.

⁵⁴ Schulman and Guthman, *Robert Kennedy in His Own Words*, 241.

⁵⁵ Grayston L. Lynch, *Decision for Disaster: Betrayal at the Bay of Pigs* (Dulles, VA: Brassey's Publishing, 1998), 44; the exchange between Bissell and Kennedy is described in Wyden, *Bay of Pigs*, 170.

⁵⁶ Wyden, *The Bay of Pigs*, 135, 163.

⁵⁷ Richard Bissell, *Reflections of a Cold Warrior: From Yalta to the Bay of Pigs* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1996), 169.

Planners knew that a failure to neutralize Cuba’s air force on the first wave would allow Castro’s pilots to harass the unloading ships. This would, in turn, likely allow the Cuban army to successfully repel the amphibious landings and thereby prevent the capture of an airstrip from which to launch the second wave of airstrikes.⁵⁸ On April 16, however, Rusk pleaded with Kennedy to cancel the second preinvasion airstrikes altogether. After speaking with Adlai Stevenson at UN headquarters in New York, Rusk and Kennedy realized the impossible position they had placed Stevenson in—having to hide the invasion by fabricating a story of a defecting Cuban pilot. Beyond feeling sympathy for Stevenson, Rusk viewed the D-day airstrikes as detrimental to plausible deniability. Rusk understood that the planes would be traced to the United States if not launched from Cuban soil, putting the administration in an even more untenable position.⁵⁹

Why did Bissell agree to the reduction knowing full well that it would further diminish the invasion’s odds of success? Consistent with the monopoly over information and organizational parochialism, the CIA prevented the dissemination of critical information about the importance of the airstrikes to the president and the other decision-makers. Unfortunately for all involved, the intelligence briefings that did make their way to the White House did not adequately explain the precise details of the airstrikes. After berating Secretary Rusk about the entire affair, and after he informed them that the president thought the airstrikes set for the next morning were “important but not critical,” Gen. Charles Cabell and Richard Bissell convinced the secretary to telephone the president and ask him to reconsider.⁶⁰ In another questionable decision, Bissell and Cabell chose not to plead their case with Kennedy. In his memoirs, Bissell admitted that he should have seized the opportunity to challenge Kennedy to rescind his order, writing:

I believe the president did not realize that the airstrike was an integral part of the operational plan he had approved. I don’t think we, the planners, made it clear enough to him that, as with most military plans, all aspects of it had to be dealt with. In other words, we should have told him more clearly ahead of time that if he wanted to exclude that part of the plan the whole plan had to be reconsidered.⁶¹

⁵⁸ Jones, *The Bay of Pigs*, 86; the capture of an airstrip on Cuban soil was important because the United States could then plausibly deny involvement and claim that the pilots were Cuban defectors joining the invading forces. See Wyden, *The Bay of Pigs*, 198.

⁵⁹ For the scene at the United Nations and Stevenson’s reaction, see: Wyden, *Bay of Pigs*, 185–89.

⁶⁰ Wyden, *Bay of Pigs*, 199.

⁶¹ Bissell, *Reflections of a Cold Warrior*, 183.

This episode further demonstrates that the planners desired so deeply and personally that their plan be launched they reluctantly followed any directive from the White House without discussion or rebuttal. Years later, Bissell admitted to becoming an advocate for the plan instead of remaining a strict analyst.⁶² They knew Kennedy was downsizing the operation with his increasing restrictions and interference but chose not to speak up until it was too late. Nevertheless, at 1:45 p.m. on April 16, 1961, President Kennedy formally approved the American-sponsored invasion of Cuba.

In the end, however, Castro's forces were on alert, and the situation was already falling apart well before the first soldiers ever went ashore in the early hours of the 17th. While unloading men and equipment, the local Cuban militia who were scouting the area spotted the landing and opened fire. The brigade moved onto the beaches and was under constant fire by Castro's still functioning air force. With only six planes to supply cover, and no airstrikes against Castro's planes, the invading force was doomed. Under pressure from agency officials, Bundy advised Kennedy that he needed to escalate the crisis by sending in "neutrally painted US planes," presumably flown by American pilots, which Kennedy steadfastly refused.⁶³

Bundy's request forced Kennedy into the precise situation the CIA had planned for. The president had to choose between overt U.S. intervention, with global condemnation, on the one hand, or disgraced failure on the other, which would leave Castro in power and demonstrate that the president was "weak on communism." It was at this final juncture that Kennedy realized that the guerilla option was no longer available. In a moment of anger and toughness, he again rebuffed requests to intervene directly with American soldiers and chose to accept the failure, much to the surprise of CIA officials. Finally, after two more agonizing days on the beaches, the exile brigade surrendered, leaving almost 1,200 men imprisoned and over 100 dead.

Ultimately, the cause of failure was not the decision to cancel the second airstrikes on April 16. Rather, it was preexisting bureaucratic organizational parochialism, the CIA's monopoly of information, and the agency's inadequacies in training and intelligence-gathering that exacerbated Kennedy's own executive inexperience and managerial weaknesses. The failure at the Bay of Pigs was twofold: the inability to

⁶² *Ibid.*, 172.

⁶³ "Memo from Bundy to JFK," *FRUS*, Vol. X, Doc. 119.

build an invasion program that could stand alone without U.S. intervention, and the fatal assumption that Kennedy would rescind his previous statements and order military assistance to rescue the floundering brigade.

Conclusion

Following the biggest failure of his presidency, John F. Kennedy developed an acute awareness of his own authority and how to deal with the defense and intelligence communities. Reviewing post-failure reports, Kennedy learned a great deal about the gulf that existed between what he was being told and the reality of the situation. The experience taught him that the chief executive was one of several players in the competitive game of bureaucratic interaction and decision-making.

Using a bureaucratic politics lens, then, it becomes apparent that the CIA’s monopoly of intelligence and its organizational parochialism were the primary sources of the communication failure and the inability to get an objective, in-depth evaluation of the plan. According to Ted Sorensen:

The pressures of time and secrecy permitted too little consideration of the plan and its merits by anyone other than its authors or advocates. Only the CIA and the Joint Chiefs had an opportunity to study and ponder the details of the plan. . . . The whole project seemed to move mysteriously and inexorably toward execution without the President being able either to obtain a firm grip on it or reverse it.⁶⁴

The monopoly of intelligence created a bottleneck controlled primarily by those who acted as salespeople. The Bay of Pigs case demonstrates how organizations like the CIA can easily become advocates of their own plan by attempting to monopolize information regarding their operations and by being willing to distort reality to make decision-makers support their proposals.



President Kennedy receives the 2506 Cuban Invasion Brigade flag, December 29, 1962

⁶⁴ Quoted in Rasenberger, *The Brilliant Disaster*, 304.

That bottleneck of information also led to misunderstandings between the White House and the planners over the true nature of the invasion. Sorensen wrote that Kennedy believed, up until the final climactic moments, that he had approved a “quiet, even though large-scale, re-infiltration of 1,400 Cuban exiles back to their homeland.”⁶⁵ Despite Sorensen’s overly hagiographic approach and his own biases, his words still point to a communication impasse between the White House and the operation’s planners and evaluators. Naturally then, this impasse negatively affected the decision-making ability of the president and his staff. Perhaps, then, Ted Sorensen had it right when he wrote that “the President, having approved the plan with assurances that it would be both clandestine and successful, thus found in fact that it was too large to be clandestine and too small to be successful.”⁶⁶

Due to the CIA’s organizational parochialism, the military invasion was planned and carried out without Pentagon supervision or consultation because the Defense Department had been relegated to being a secondary evaluator. In truth, the program was simply too large for the CIA to handle. The agency was a clandestine paramilitary tool for limited interventions, infiltration, political coups, intelligence gathering, and assassinations—not for a WWII-style amphibious invasion. The Lyman Kirkpatrick report, one of the two after-action inquiries, placed most of the blame on the CIA’s planning process, which had remained largely uncritically examined and unchanged after 1954.⁶⁷

In the intense game of intragovernmental politics, organizations and agencies have a vested interest in protecting their image, current resources, and future authority. Seeking presidential approval, the CIA discounted Kennedy’s warnings that he would not send American troops ashore in Cuba.⁶⁸ Further, they assumed Kennedy would prefer victory to having the ability to plausibly deny U.S. involvement. This led agency officials to permit the president to handicap the operation as he tried to “make it quieter,” believing that if the situation deteriorated to the

⁶⁵ Sorensen, *Kennedy*, 304.

⁶⁶ *Ibid.*, 303.

⁶⁷ The results of the CIA running an operation beyond its capacity were first and foremost poor planning and communication, but second the fact that the invading forces were poorly equipped and trained. This second reason was identified by the CIA Inspector General Lyman Kirkpatrick detailed in “Inspector General’s Survey of the Cuban Operation October 1961,” which can be found in *Bay of Pigs Declassified*, edited by Peter Kornbluh; See also Wyden, *Bay of Pigs*, 162.

⁶⁸ Kennedy said repeatedly that he would not commit U.S. forces into combat. Wyden, *Bay of Pigs*, 270. Interestingly, under the orders of Richard Bissell, four American pilots participated in the air-strikes. Kennedy remained unaware of that until 1963. See: Wyden, *Bay of Pigs*, 278. Also see Bohning, *The Castro Obsession*, 38.

point of failure, JFK would renege on his promises and send U.S. marines to save the brigade, as they had come to expect with Eisenhower.

Groupthink Syndrome, as purported by Irving Janis, supplements Graham T. Allison’s bureaucratic politics model by showing how members of the Kennedy administration fell victim to consensus-seeking. “The participants in the White House meetings, like members of any other discussion groups, evidently felt reluctant to raise questions that might cast doubt on a plan that they thought was accepted by the consensus of the group, for fear of evoking disapproval from their associations,” wrote Irving Janis.⁶⁹ While Kennedy harbored, perhaps, the gravest reservations, and while he asked the toughest questions and delayed giving definitive approval, he nevertheless contributed to the “group’s docility and uncritical acceptance of the defective arguments in favor of the CIA’s plan.”⁷⁰ Indeed, Kennedy’s advisers became “victims of groupthink” because they censored their reservations and stifled their healthy skepticism to join the group’s unanimity. Consensus-seeking, as the president discovered, is detrimental to good governmental decision-making because the heavy-weight players can easily overpower the light-weight players and force those who oppose or are indifferent to a course of action to remain silent, thereby stifling creativity and dissent.

The Bay of Pigs episode also taught the president to question the advice of the experts, more forcefully seek the opinions of light-weights, and trust his and his brother Robert’s judgments. It also demonstrated to men like Bundy, McNamara, and Rusk that they needed to speak up forcefully regarding any reservation or question they might have. Kennedy’s advisers served him poorly by being overly supportive and uncritical, by being victims of the Kennedy circle’s groupthink. Nearly all of Kennedy’s non-CIA and non-Pentagon heavy-weight advisors had reservations but chose to remain silent because they thought their dissent was inappropriate in a time when they needed to support the president.⁷¹ Lastly, the president himself served his advisers poorly by not doing enough to create an environment antithetical to groupthink, in which open dissention and disagreement were encouraged.

The core reasons for failure at the Bay of Pigs come down to two: the inability to build an invasion program that could stand alone without U.S. intervention and the CIA’s fatal assumption that Kennedy would rescind his previous statements and

⁶⁹ Janis, *Victims of Groupthink*, 41.

⁷⁰ *Ibid.*, 43.

⁷¹ Rasenberger, *The Brilliant Disaster*, 160.



President John F. Kennedy (right) shakes hands with Allen W. Dulles (left), November 29, 1961, at the swearing-in ceremony of new CIA Director John McCone (center)

order military assistance to the floundering brigade. Using a combined Bureaucratic–Groupthink lens, we can more clearly understand the missteps in the decision-making and planning processes in the Kennedy administration that led to this blatant disaster on the beaches of Cuba in April 1961. Approaching the study of the federal government in such a manner also provides interesting avenues for understanding the nuances and complexities of decision-making for domestic as well as international issues. Using this combined method can illuminate why some decisions yield successful consequences while others lead to disastrous results. The Bay of Pigs invasion, in particular, reveals that foreign policy creation is a dialectical process between competing ideas through which compromised resultants emerge. In the case of the Kennedy administration and Operation Bumpy Road, the resultant led to an unmitigated disaster due to bureaucratic and organizational failure. At the press conference following the now-famous debacle, the president stated extemporaneously: “Victory has a hundred fathers, but defeat is an orphan.” President Kennedy may be the one whom history has labeled the father of that orphan, but in the final analysis, there were many more, as is often the case, who bore similar responsibility.

Five Decades Later: Does It Still Matter?

The experience at the Bay of Pigs can contextualize many of the same types of foreign policy decisions of the contemporary age.⁷² Unfortunately, scholars have had a difficult time understanding the invasion’s long-term legacy due to the intransigency of the American state in preventing the disclosure of its records. There has been progress despite stiff opposition from the CIA, successive administrations, and the courts. Recently, the debate between academic scholars and government officials came to a head over the CIA’s internal history of the invasion. Authored by agency historian Jack B. Pfeiffer during the 1970s and 1980s, the first four volumes have been slowly released over the last 20 years. Citing national security concerns, the CIA has kept Volume V from the public’s eye. The CIA claimed that Volume V ought to be protected against public release under Exemption 5 of the Freedom of Information Act, reasoning that public disclosure of the agency’s decision-making processes would violate their “deliberative process privilege.”⁷³

In 2014, the DC Court of Appeals upheld the CIA’s exemption request. Joined by Stephen F. Williams, Judge Brett Kavanaugh delivered the opinion with Judith Rogers dissenting. Kavanaugh, a George W. Bush appointee, argued that the fifth volume, written in 1984, belonged in the same intellectual category as the agency’s pre-invasion decisions. Therefore, all intraagency deliberations between 1960 and 1984 were protected under FOIA’s “deliberate process privilege” exemption clause. The opinion went on to counterfactually argue that “penalizing” agencies through FOIA requests would “discourage them from voluntarily releasing information” and, according to their logic, “thwart the broader objective of transparent and open government.”⁷⁴

⁷² One example is President Obama’s 2011 intervention in Libya that he later claimed was his worst foreign policy mistake. See: Alan J. Kuperman, “Obama’s Libya Debacle: How a Well-meaning Intervention Ended in Failure,” *Foreign Affairs* 94, vol. 2 (2015); See also Dominic Tierney, “The Legacy of Obama’s ‘Worst Mistake’: There’s a Problem with America’s Way of War,” *The Atlantic*, Apr. 15, 2016, <http://www.theatlantic.com/international/archive/2016/04/obamas-worst-mistake-libya/478461/> (accessed Nov. 4, 2016,).

⁷³ *National Security Archives vs. Central Intelligence Agency*, District of Columbia Court of Appeals, (2014). The language specifically protects “deliberate, pre-decisional communications within the Executive Branch.”

⁷⁴ *Ibid.*

Kavanaugh and Williams continued to make ahistorical claims by writing that the “premature release” of protected material would have the “effect of chilling current and future agency decision-making.”⁷⁵ The implication here is dangerous: without compulsory disclosure of documents that show extreme incompetence and incorrigibility, the American government and its affiliated agencies can indefinitely withhold evidence and hide behind this wall of deliberative privilege.

After subjection to constant public, academic, and congressional pressure, the CIA finally released Volume V of Pfeiffer’s work on Halloween Day 2016. Scholars will most assuredly carefully examine the volume as we continue to piece together what really happened in the decision-making processes before, during, and after the invasion.

We return to our question: Does it matter anymore? If we care about transparent government and want to guard against dangerous future breakdowns in communication and decision-making, there is no question the Bay of Pigs still looms large. We must take seriously the lengths to which the American government has gone to prevent the disclosure of its material. This is a clear example of dark, shadowy operators frustrating the promethean light of truth. The contemporary political concerns aside, at this juncture all we know is this: the orphan of defeat *did* have more than one father.

Photo credits: John F. Kennedy Presidential Library and Museum

© Society for History in the Federal Government. Readers can download *Federal History* articles and share them but must credit the journal and author. They cannot change the articles in any way or use them commercially. This work is licensed under a Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial-NoDerivatives 4.0 International License (CC BY-NC-ND).

⁷⁵ Ibid.