

THE UNLEARNED LESSONS LEST WE FORGET THE BAY OF PIGS

On the occasion of the twenty-fifth anniversary of the Bay of Pigs invasion we asked an unreconstructed supporter of the operation, Harold Feeney, a retired U.S. Navy commander who worked with the veterans while serving in the Cuba Branch of the Defense Intelligence Agency in 1962, to find out what his former associates think about it today. For the historical lessons of the invasion, we turned to Walter LaFeber, a Nation contributor and a longtime student of U.S. intervention in Central America.

—The Editors

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President Kennedy's attempt to destroy Fidel Castro's regime at the Bay of Pigs has rightly been called the perfect failure. But the debacle of April 17, 1961, went far beyond Cuba. It helped lure the United States down a violent dead-end street in pursuit of revolutionaries throughout Latin America. It resulted in the first Soviet presence in the hemisphere. It rapidly accelerated Washington's disastrous policies in Vietnam. It caused nations throughout the world to question U.S. judgment and dependability. Twenty-five years later Washington officials still do not understand the reasons for this failure and seem bent on repeating it.

Certainly no place appeared more vulnerable to U.S. power than Cuba. The United States had controlled the island since 1898. Its ambassador was Cuba's second-most-powerful official, after the president, and at times the most powerful. Fidel Castro changed all that with his victory over dictator Fulgencio Batista on New Year's Day, 1959. During the rest of that year, his

determination to transform Cuba led to radical land reforms and other economic changes that brought him closer to the Cuban Communist Party—which, as late as 1958, had refused to work with him—and put him on a collision course with the Eisenhower Administration. As historian Richard Welch has put it, North Americans discovered, to their amazement, "that the Cuban Revolution was un-American."

When in early 1960 the United States tried to strangle Castro with tough economic sanctions, he turned to the Soviet bloc for help. Eisenhower tightened the choke hold and, in March of that year, secretly ordered the Central Intelligence Agency to plan an invasion of Cuba. U.S. appeals for help in isolating Cuba drew little response from Latin American countries, who feared the Cubans less than Washington's century-old policy of intervention in their affairs. But two dependable friends did volunteer: Guatemalan dictator Gen. Miguel Ydigoras, one in a succession of military leaders who ruled that country after the C.I.A. overthrew the elected reformist government in 1954, and Anastasio Somoza in Nicaragua. Those two men provided training bases in their countries for the Cuban exiles involved in the Bay of Pigs operation. This collaboration is indelibly etched in Central American and Cuban memories.

Campaigning for the presidency in 1960, Kennedy blamed Eisenhower for losing Cuba to the Communists. The accusation trapped the new President. He discovered that the former general, an old hand at plotting covert counter-revolutions, had invasion plans well under way. Kennedy's State Department, however, warned that such an incursion would set back U.S. relations with Latin America and, moreover, probably fail. It quickly became obvious that the C.I.A.'s plans were lacking in intelligence, in both senses of the word. The agency and the Administration said openly that Cuban exiles were going to restore freedom to their homeland, but clearly the C.I.A. was recruiting, training and controlling them. Mutual trust was conspicuously absent. One agent admitted that he refused to tell the exiles when they were to invade because "I don't trust any god-damn Cubans." Propaganda about the exiles made U.S. officials believe that the invasion, carried out by an independently formed anti-Castro force, would cost this country almost nothing. The ultimate responsibility lay with the C.I.A. and Kennedy. Both desperately tried to ignore the operation's central problem—North Americans telling the Cubans how to run their country—by assuming that once the exile force landed, the Cuban people would spontaneously assist in overthrowing Castro.

Harboring serious reservations about the operation, Kennedy decided to cut direct U.S. military support to an ab-

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solute minimum. Nevertheless, he despised Castro and saw himself going head-to-head with Nikita Khrushchev over which superpower would control the Third World. He was also passionately committed to a romantic view of counter-revolutionary operations and feared being labeled as less of an anti-Communist than Eisenhower, whose policies he had blasted only months earlier. So the attack went ahead on the night of April 17.

It was doomed from the start. In the first place, the C.I.A. mistook the coral reefs in the Bay of Pigs for seaweed. The exile crafts ran aground and were easy targets for Castro's small but effective air force. When U.S. naval officers on an aircraft carrier just offshore urgently requested permission to launch their planes to support the exiles, the White House rejected the request. Robert Kennedy recalled: "We kept asking when the uprisings were going to take place. Dick Bissell [the C.I.A. official in charge of the operation] said it was going to take place during the night. Of course no uprising did take place." Castro killed or captured nearly all the invaders. At a televised press conference Kennedy took full responsibility for the disaster.

Kennedyites have since gone to great lengths to blame the fiasco on the C.I.A. But deeper causes than agency bungling were involved. In the aftermath, U.S. officials tried to fool the public into believing that the exile force was acting on its own and that it was so strongly identified with the cause of freedom that the Cuban people would rally to its banner. Those officials were, and remain, vastly ignorant of both the damage North American control has inflicted on Caribbean and Central American societies and the promise of escape from that past that revolutionaries like Castro seemed to offer.

Moreover, the exiles could never have conquered Castro's army without massive U.S. involvement. That realization led Senator J. William Fulbright, in a last-ditch attempt to stop the invasion, to pose the classic question: What if we win? "Winning" would have meant a U.S. occupation of Cuba and, no doubt, a bloody guerrilla war. U.S. troops in Cuba would have been as unpopular as the Russians are in Afghanistan. In addition, most Americans took seriously the U.S. commitment to the Organization of American States Charter of 1948 not to use force to overthrow Latin American governments. As it was, the invasion violated that pledge. The respect for the rule of law that supposedly distinguishes U.S. foreign policy from that of the Soviet Union was cast aside.

Kennedy's successors have continued to regard the Bay of Pigs tragedy as a failure by the "experts" to run a military operation properly, instead of what it was: a failure to understand the political and economic causes of revolution. By relying on the C.I.A. and the exiles, U.S. officials unwittingly tried to revive the imperialist past. Over the next several years Kennedy's Administration authorized sabotage, dirty tricks and even assassination attempts to eliminate Castro. Those attacks only made the Cuban leader more popular at home and drove him closer to the Russians. Finally, in the aftermath of the debacle, Kennedy resolved to redeem himself by sending more troops to Vietnam. The

significant escalation of involvement in Southeast Asia by the end of 1961 was a direct result of Kennedy's misreading of the lessons to be drawn from the Cuban revolution. With the Bay of Pigs invasion Kennedy dealt militarily with the effects, not the causes, of revolution.

Although sympathetic to the Cuban exiles' cause, Harold Feeney demonstrates in the following article that the United States is better at enlisting and exploiting exile forces than in protecting them or dealing with the long-term social and political consequences of their actions. There are troubling parallels between the C.I.A.-created Brigade 2506 in 1961 and the C.I.A.-created *contras* in 1986. As did Kennedy with the Cuban invasion force, Reagan pretends that his Nicaraguan "freedom fighters" are an independent band of dedicated patriots who will stem the tide of communism in the hemisphere at little cost in U.S. lives and treasure. Just as Kennedy raised the specter of "losing" Cuba to Communism, so Reagan depicts the Nicaraguan revolution in stark cold war terms and threatens that legislators who oppose his aid program for the *contras* will be blamed for losing Central America to Moscow. Washington's ignorance of the causes of the "perfect failure" twenty-five years ago, which led to disaster in Vietnam, is now drawing this country into another calamity in Central America. □