

# "One Hell of a Gamble"

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**KHRUSHCHEV,  
CASTRO,  
AND  
KENNEDY,  
1958-1964**

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## Bay of Pigs

At forty-three years of age, John Fitzgerald Kennedy was the youngest man ever elected to the presidency. On November 6, 1960, Kennedy had beaten Richard Nixon in a very close election. Now it was January 20, and Kennedy cut a sharp figure next to the septuagenarian Dwight Eisenhower, who bunched up against the cold wind as Kennedy removed his top hat and overcoat to deliver his first and best-known address as president.

"Let the word go forth from this time and place, to friend and foe alike, that the torch has been passed to a new generation of Americans. . . ." On the limousine ride to the Capitol, Kennedy had awkwardly tried to engage General Eisenhower in a discussion of *The Longest Day*, a recently published popular history of the 1944 Normandy landings. Had the former supreme commander of the Allied Expeditionary Force read the book? No. Eisenhower was the man who had taken a gamble on the weather and ordered the troops onto the beaches on June 6.<sup>1</sup> He did not need to read the book.

Having witnessed the war at a much lower level, Kennedy was respectful of the old general's wisdom. In the Pacific campaign Kennedy had demonstrated heroism in saving the crew of his PT boat after a collision with a Japanese destroyer. He and Eisenhower actually met in occupied Germany at the end of the war, but Eisenhower was there to advise Joseph Stalin, Winston Churchill, and Harry Truman at the Potsdam Conference, while John Kennedy was attending as a cub reporter for the Hearst newspapers.

The day before the inauguration Kennedy had gone to the old man for advice, which Eisenhower gave freely. The outgoing president had words of warning for his successor. He believed that Nikita Khrushchev and the communist world were on the offensive. The U.S. economy was growing at a rate of 2 to 3 percent per year, while the CIA and other government agencies estimated that the Soviet economy was growing roughly three times as fast.<sup>2</sup> Moreover, the Soviets seemed to be more effective at getting their message

across to the developing world. Eisenhower emphasized the problem of Southeast Asia. "If Laos should fall to the Communists," he said, "then it would be a question of time until South Vietnam, Cambodia, Thailand and Burma would collapse." In a nutshell, this was the domino theory. Cuba was also on Eisenhower's agenda. "We cannot let the present government there go on," he said. Then Kennedy asked, "Should we support guerrilla operations in Cuba?" Eisenhower's response was unequivocal: "To the utmost."<sup>3</sup>

The exigencies of the Cold War dominated the themes of Kennedy's inaugural address. The new generation, despite its energy and optimism, shared the anxieties of the retiring Eisenhower. In the late 1950s the Soviets had scored a series of symbolic triumphs. In 1956 the French and British had embarrassed themselves in colluding with Israel against Egypt, Khrushchev's ally in the Middle East. Hoping to drive Gamal Abdel Nasser from power, the European powers had attacked Egypt on the pretext of protecting international access to the Suez Canal. Although Washington had not been informed of the final plans for the attack, and moved quickly to threaten sanctions against the British if they did not desist, the episode tarnished America's reputation for anticolonialism in the Third World. In 1957 the Soviets startled the West by announcing the successful launch of Sputnik, the first man-made satellite to orbit the earth. And in May 1960, a month before Eisenhower and the French and British leaders were to meet with Khrushchev at Paris, a Soviet SA-2 surface-to-air missile shot down an American U-2 piloted by Francis Gary Powers. The U-2 was a high-altitude reconnaissance plane designed to elude air defenses; but once again Soviet technology proved to be better than the experts had assumed. The downing doomed the Paris summit and complicated U.S. efforts to assess Khrushchev's boast that the Soviet Strategic Rocket Forces had more intercontinental ballistic missiles than the United States.

"Let every nation know, whether it wishes us well or ill, that we shall pay any price, bear any burden, meet any hardship, support any friend, oppose any foe to assure the survival and success of liberty."<sup>4</sup> Kennedy's clarion call to action on this January afternoon was not a mere recitation of the liturgy. Kennedy and the former-junior grade officers around him in the new administration believed that, to ensure its very survival, the United States needed to reinvent its leadership of the West. Circulating among them was a copy of Khrushchev's January 6 speech on "sacred wars," which had been broadcast over Moscow radio the previous day. The Soviet leader and his ally in the Caribbean, Fidel Castro, seemed equally prepared to energize their own kind of leadership. "Read, mark, learn and inwardly digest," President Kennedy noted on the Khrushchev speech as he ordered its distribution to his top foreign policy advisers.<sup>5</sup>

### The Rush to a Summit

Khrushchev had wanted Kennedy to win because he wanted Nixon to lose.<sup>6</sup> Nixon was a known quantity, a man who sided with what the Kremlin consid-

hower emphasized the problem of the Communists," he said, "then it is Vietnam, Cambodia, Thailand and Laos. This was the domino theory. Cuba was not let the present government there go. Could we support guerrilla operations in Cuba? Univocal: "To the utmost."<sup>3</sup>

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ered the worst elements of the Eisenhower administration. The Soviet leader-  
 ship did not attempt to conceal its happiness at the change in administrations.  
 In a cable to the new president, Khrushchev suggested the possibility of "radi-  
 cal improvement" in U.S.-Soviet relations. The Kremlin had already symboli-  
 cally buried the old president by announcing that the U-2 affair of the  
 previous May would be consigned to the past.

But Khrushchev did not know much about Kennedy. Before the election,  
 the Kremlin received little from its principal sources of foreign political infor-  
 mation—the KGB and the Soviet foreign ministry—that was not readily avail-  
 able in the U.S. press. In an analysis of the senator just after his nomination by  
 the Democratic Party, the Soviet embassy described Kennedy as "a typical  
 pragmatist" and had a hard time placing him in any particular foreign policy  
 camp.<sup>7</sup> "[O]n relations between the USA and the USSR," Soviet Americanists  
 noted, "Kennedy's position . . . is quite contradictory." Although the candidate  
 chastised the Republicans for failing to come up with imaginative ways to im-  
 prove U.S.-Soviet relations, Kennedy was interested only in what Moscow  
 considered minor palliatives—arms control, for example, instead of disarm-  
 ment—and seemed not to reject out of hand the possibility of reversing the  
 tide of socialism in Eastern Europe and China. The embassy warned that be-  
 cause Kennedy believed in a strategic missile gap between the superpowers,  
 he was unlikely to engage in any meaningful negotiations before he had re-  
 stored the United States's "position of strength," a code word that implied a  
 continuation of the arms race. Both the Soviet ministry and the KGB in their  
 first assessments of Kennedy made a point of noting the strong anticommun-  
 ism of his father, Joseph P. Kennedy, the former U.S. ambassador to Great  
 Britain, who was friends with the notorious Senator Joseph McCarthy. Al-  
 though not explicit, the possibility of old Joe's having some nefarious influ-  
 ence over his son was left implied.

Initially the KGB had some expectation of better relations in the wake of  
 Kennedy's election. The Soviet foreign intelligence service chose to place the  
 young Kennedy in the Stevenson wing of the Democratic party.<sup>8</sup> Adlai  
 Stevenson had twice run unsuccessfully for the presidency against Eisenhower  
 and was associated with a less belligerent view of the Soviet Union and a com-  
 mitment to domestic reform, such as civil rights. Yet Kennedy's tough campaign  
 rhetoric caused a slight shift in the KGB's assessment. Indeed, Kennedy's in-  
 stincts in foreign policy might be closer to his father's than to Stevenson's. "Now  
 . . . the character of Kennedy's statements," the KGB reported, "is close to that  
 of the Democratic leadership, which lies somewhere between the moderate-lib-  
 eral faction and the reactionary faction of southern democrats."<sup>9</sup>

Khrushchev opted to test the new leader, to discern his real positions. The  
 immediate goal was to see whether he would be interested in a summit meet-  
 ing. Gromyko's people at the Foreign Ministry largely dismissed Kennedy as  
 "unlikely to possess the qualities of an outstanding person."<sup>10</sup> Yet Moscow was  
 drawn to the cult of the "new frontiersmen." These were the thousands of tal-  
 ented young men who came to Washington in 1961 to replace the generals of

the "I like Ike" army. Moscow had high hopes for the white-shirted leaders of this mini-revolution: Adlai Stevenson, Chester Bowles, G. Mennen Williams, Robert Kennedy, Jerome Wiesner, and Arthur Schlesinger, Jr. These "competent individuals," the KGB explained, were "the authors and advocates of many new ideas and plans in U.S. foreign policy."<sup>11</sup> Perhaps Kennedy, for all his own inconsistencies, would implement their policies.

Less than a week after the election, Averell Harriman, who had been Franklin D. Roosevelt's wartime ambassador to Stalin, was chatting with a group of Soviet diplomats, when one of them, an acquaintance from the days of the Grand Alliance in the Second World War, indicated in a semiofficial way that the Soviet leadership was interested in a "fresh start" in U.S.-Soviet relations. Harriman was not prepared to speak for the president-elect, but he suggested that Moscow could set the tone for an improvement of relations by releasing two American pilots in a Soviet jail after their RB-47 reconnaissance plane strayed into Soviet airspace and was shot down.<sup>12</sup>

Khrushchev viewed the discussion at the Soviet embassy as an opening to be explored. Three days after Harriman had his talk, the Soviet ambassador to the United States, Mikhail Menshikov, delivered a formal message from the Soviet leader to the president-elect. Khrushchev offered Kennedy congratulations on his electoral success and expressed a desire to return U.S.-Soviet relations to the way they had been during the time of Franklin Roosevelt.<sup>13</sup> "I told him," Harriman reported to the president-elect, "that you would want, if possible, to come to an understanding with Mr. Khrushchev for our mutual benefit, but that you would not appease nor make any compromises of principle."<sup>14</sup>

A week later the Kremlin used Menshikov again to let Kennedy know that Khrushchev wanted to arrange high-level negotiations between their representatives as soon as this would be convenient. Harriman suggested caution to Kennedy. Khrushchev, he reported, was displaying a "somewhat overly eager attitude."<sup>15</sup>

Kennedy expected Khrushchev to be interested in a summit. In the final weeks of the campaign, one of the Kennedy camp's biggest fears had been that, because of Khrushchev's evident desire for a meeting, Eisenhower would schedule a snap summit in October, sign a test ban agreement or some other major piece of bilateral diplomacy, and let Vice President Nixon bask in reflected glory. In late September the Kennedy camp sent Chester Bowles, a Connecticut congressman and future Kennedy undersecretary of state, to discourage Eisenhower's secretary of state, Christian Herter, from taking that step.<sup>16</sup> So, nothing that Harriman was telling Jack Kennedy two months later about Khrushchev's eagerness to go to the prom could have been a surprise.

The president-elect chose to slow the tempo of discussions with the Russians until after the inauguration. The election had been very close, and though Kennedy liked to say that "a margin of only one vote would still be a mandate,"<sup>17</sup> he lacked a clear sense of how he intended to improve relations

with the Soviets. At the same time, he did not want to discourage Khrushchev. He decided to send a private message of his own through his younger brother Robert F. Kennedy to assure the Soviet leader that his patience would be rewarded. There was no one whom John Kennedy trusted more than his former campaign manager and future attorney general, the thirty-five-year-old Robert Kennedy. The venerable Averell Harriman was a trustworthy democratic war-horse, a reliable fund-raiser, and an adviser to presidents; but Robert was the man to reveal Kennedy's inner thoughts when that was the president-elect's purpose.

On December 1, 1960, at 10:00 A.M., Robert Kennedy welcomed a Mr. B. of the Moscow newspaper *Izvestia* into the office of the transition team.<sup>18</sup> B., as the Kennedys probably guessed, was an undercover KGB officer in the New York *residentura*. His report of the meeting, reproduced below, went straight to Khrushchev. It represented the Kremlin's first inside look at the foreign policy thinking of the president-elect:

To Comrade N. S. Khrushchev:

We are reporting to you that on December 1, 1960, a member of the KGB *residentura* in New York met with the brother and closest adviser of the U.S. President Kennedy—Robert Kennedy. Having stressed that he was not merely expressing his personal opinion but the position of the future president, Robert Kennedy stated the following in the course of the conversation.

President Kennedy will pay a lot of attention to U.S.-Soviet relations. He considers that they could and should improve in the coming years. Kennedy intends to devote special attention to matters of disarmament, to the extent of reaching agreements, in as much as the Soviet Union had already made the serious concessions that had been hoped for in this area. Kennedy believes that a nuclear test ban treaty could be concluded as early as 1961, if both sides take additional steps to bring their positions closer together. In spite of the opposition of some groups in the United States, Kennedy does not intend to resume underground nuclear tests and or to break off the test ban negotiations in Geneva before a definitive exploration of both sides' points of view.

In principle, Kennedy would like to meet with you and hopes that his relations with the Soviet leader will be better than Eisenhower had. However, he will not agree to a summit if he doubts that positive results will ensue. In the first three or four months of his presidency, before he has presented his domestic program to Congress, Kennedy would not be able to participate in a summit.

Kennedy is seriously concerned about the situation in Berlin and will strive to find the means to reach a settlement of the Berlin problem. However, if in the next few months the Soviet Union applies pressure on

this question, then Kennedy will certainly defend the position of the West.

Recognizing the importance of the development of Soviet-American trade, Kennedy does not believe, however, that this question is a priority and suggests that it would be easier to resolve this puzzle after the resolution of the more important international problems. Kennedy intends to continue and broaden cultural exchanges between the U.S. and the USSR.

In the course of the discussion, Robert Kennedy recalled that in 1955 he visited the Soviet Union and that he had pleasant memories of this trip. He stated that he would very much like to visit the USSR again; however, he did not have any plans to do so in the near future. From the meeting, the KGB reporter gathered the impression that Robert Kennedy would accept an unofficial invitation to visit the Soviet Union. At the end of the conversation, Robert Kennedy remarked in passing that, in his opinion, the fundamental problem in the next few years would not be U.S.-Soviet relations, but instead Washington's relations with China.<sup>19</sup>

Over the course of this thirty-minute conversation, Robert Kennedy had outlined his brother's tentative design for a modest *détente* between the superpowers. As the Soviet Foreign Ministry had predicted, there were no revolutionary ideas here. But as the Soviets would discover, John Kennedy intended to push the ideas he did have very energetically. This would not be the last time that Robert Kennedy, on his behalf, appealed directly to Moscow for patience and understanding.

In Moscow, Khrushchev accepted the need for patience. Some other information had come in that reinforced Robert Kennedy's statement that John Kennedy was committed to better relations with Moscow. There was no harm in waiting.<sup>20</sup> Kennedy would be allowed to decide when to start talking about a summit again.

### Kennedy and Cuba

Cuba, however, was an immediate priority for John Kennedy. He believed that "time was running out" for the United States in Latin America and that though "the Cold War [would] not be won in Latin America, it [might] very well be lost there."<sup>21</sup> A few days before the inauguration, the United States had broken relations with Cuba. Kennedy had neither endorsed nor condemned Eisenhower's decision, which had been prompted by a Cuban demand that the United States dramatically reduce the size of its delegation in Havana.<sup>22</sup>

On coming to office, Kennedy had a good sense of what he wanted to do in the region. In general, he believed in reform from the top, in what he termed "executive vigor." In Latin America he looked for leaders who could improve living standards without denying civil liberties or courting the far left. He had no doubt about the basic aspirations of the people. "Poverty is not new to

Latin America. . . . The people . . . want better homes, better schools, and better living standards; they want land reform, and tax reform, and an end to corruption which drains off a nation's resources." Land reform was a precondition to the development of healthy Latin American polities. In these states, Kennedy observed, "archaic systems of absentee ownership still keep land in the grip of a few wealthy landowners, while the mass of the people struggle for a subsistence living as tenants."<sup>23</sup>

As for Cuba, Kennedy was not blind to the fact that economic injustice as much as anything else had propelled Castro's July 26 movement to power. "This concentration of land ownership," he argued, "was one of the principal grievances which underlay the Cuban revolution."<sup>24</sup> Consequently John Kennedy respected the magnetic attraction of Fidel Castro's message and believed that in order for the United States to compete in the region it would need a positive program of technical and financial assistance.<sup>25</sup> "The good-neighbor policy is no longer enough," Kennedy argued. Instead, in the course of the campaign he had suggested the Alliance for Progress, which he described as "an alliance of nations with a common interest in freedom and economic advance in a great common effort to develop the resources of the entire hemisphere, strengthen the forces of democracy, and widen the vocational and educational opportunities of every person in all the Americas."<sup>26</sup> Advocating greater U.S. foreign aid and economic assistance to Latin America, Kennedy sought to make the region more economically self-sufficient, by means both of stabilizing commodity prices for single-staple economies and of assisting efforts to facilitate economic diversification.

Kennedy inherited a Cuban policy whose goals were firm but whose means were in flux. Since March 1960 the Eisenhower administration had sought to overthrow the Castro regime through a combination of overt and covert acts. As of January 1961 the United States no longer had diplomatic relations with Cuba and engaged in very little trade with the island. But the source of dispute was the covert side of the ledger because the CIA's four-part program, which Eisenhower had approved following the *La Coubre* incident, was going nowhere.<sup>27</sup> As Castro consolidated his power in the summer and fall of 1960, it became increasingly obvious that the most important element of the program was part four, the creation of an "adequate paramilitary force." Yet the Eisenhower administration never could settle on a definition of what kind of force would be adequate to overthrow Castro. From the arrival of the first CIA instructors in Guatemala, in July 1960, until the end of the year, "adequate" was defined as a 300-man force that would be infiltrated in stages into the Escambray mountains. However, the events in the fall, including the October scare, had forced a reexamination of this approach. In the last weeks of the Eisenhower administration, the CIA was talking about building a 1,500 man guerrilla army in Guatemala.<sup>28</sup>

John Kennedy came to office just as the CIA was refining the second concept for submission to the U.S. military and the White House. CIA Director Allen Dulles had high hopes that the new president would endorse the ex-



panded paramilitary concept. Dulles had been impressed with what he took to be Kennedy's positive response to the description of the March 1960 program at his first detailed briefing on Cuban covert operations, on November 19. At the very first administration meeting on Cuba, chaired by the new secretary of state, Dean Rusk, Dulles was told that "in a day or two" he would know what Kennedy thought of the plan. Yet it was obvious from the assignments that Rusk distributed to the CIA and the Pentagon that the administration intended to continue Eisenhower's policy of using covert means to remove Castro.<sup>29</sup> Rusk asked the Pentagon to see what "support . . . might be provided . . . in the event that conditions [made] support necessary." The analysts at the CIA were to draft an estimate of "the effects of overt U.S. action in Cuba on the rest of the world," while the agency's covert operators were to report on the status of sabotage operations on the island.<sup>30</sup>

Within a few days the CIA and the Pentagon learned that Kennedy did not like the paramilitary program. The CIA outlined plans for a daylight landing near the town of Trinidad by roughly 1,000 trained Cuban exiles. Trinidad, with a population of 18,000, was situated along the coastal plain next to the Escambray mountains. The lesson of the autumn was that Castro's defensive forces were numerous and could be beaten only with a "shock." The CIA hoped that Castro's gradual creeping into the Soviet camp had sown enough popular discontent that a government in exile, which held a beachhead only two hundred miles from Havana, might be able to lead a massive counterrevolution. But the newly inaugurated president doubted the military viability of the beachhead and asked whether the CIA had vetted this program with the Joint Chiefs of Staff.

While the Joint Chiefs were looking at the plan, Kennedy wanted the opinion of his civilian advisers. On February 4 he turned to McGeorge Bundy, his national security adviser and the man who as a dean at Harvard had welcomed Castro two years earlier, to work up a list of options. Bundy assumed that Kennedy doubted the feasibility of the Trinidad plan. He himself had doubts that this was the best way to solve the Castro problem. But to ensure that the president was aware of the range of options for dealing with Castro, he put on top of Kennedy's reading pile a policy memorandum that argued strongly for the plan. The author of the memorandum was the strongest advocate of the paramilitary option in Washington, the deputy director for plans at the CIA, Richard Bissell. Bissell was a rare animal in Washington, a man who had managed to turn everything he touched to gold. In the late 1940s he had earned praise as a Marshall Plan administrator. After a short stint at the Ford Foundation, he was recruited back to government to oversee the development of the U-2, the high-altitude U.S. spy-plane that opened the first significant cracks in the secrecy surrounding the Soviet nuclear arsenal. Kennedy knew Bissell through the Georgetown social circuit, and it was common gossip that Bissell would be his choice to replace the legendary Dulles when he finally stepped down.

Despite his respect for Bissell, Kennedy still preferred the State Department's argument against the Trinidad plan to the case that Bissell made. In

been impressed with what he took description of the March 1960 pro-Cuban covert operations, on November 1960 on Cuba, chaired by the new secretary of Defense, Robert McNamara. He said that "in a day or two" he would see what "support . . . might be [made] support necessary." The analysis of "the effects of overt U.S. action in the agency's covert operators were to remain on the island."<sup>30</sup>

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the plan, Kennedy wanted the opinion of a retired general. He turned to McGeorge Bundy, his national security advisor. As a dean at Harvard had welcomed a list of options. Bundy assumed that the Trinidad plan. He himself had doubts about the military viability of the Castro problem. But to ensure that the president was prepared for dealing with Castro, he put on a memorandum that argued strongly for the plan. The strongest advocate of the paramilitary operation for plans at the CIA, Richard Goodwin Holman, a man who had managed to turn the tide in the 1940s he had earned praise as a diplomat at the Ford Foundation, he was the driving force behind the development of the U-2, the high-altitude reconnaissance plane. Kennedy knew Bissell through the common gossip that Bissell would be his national security advisor. He finally stepped down. McNamara still preferred the State Department's plan to the case that Bissell made. In

mid-February, Kennedy ordered that the operation be suspended pending further review, and on March 11 he set new conditions for this operation. He thought that the Trinidad plan was conceived without much attention to keeping the American hand invisible. In the staff work for the plan, there was ample evidence of the Eisenhower administration's intention to use U.S. military force if necessary. In light of his statements about the importance of Latin American sovereignty and his expressed desire for better relations with Moscow, Kennedy did not want the paramilitary action to be interpreted as a direct U.S. attack on Cuba. He set two new constraints to guide a revision of the plan. The attack had to be "an unspectacular landing at night in an area where there was a minimum likelihood of opposition." And that "[i]f ultimate success would require tactical air support, it should appear to come from a Cuban air base. Therefore, the territory seized should contain a suitable airfield."<sup>31</sup>

Kennedy's political antennae had failed him. He did not know it at the time, but the conditions he set forth sealed the fate of the Cuban paramilitary operation. The only areas that met both conditions were far from the Escambray or any other mountains. In the Trinidad plan, if the beachhead could not be held, then at least the exiles could escape to the nearby mountains and bolster the strength of local anti-Castro rebels. But Kennedy was asking the CIA to put hundreds of men secretly on a beach and leave them there to defend themselves.

Richard Bissell threw a new plan together in four days. Playa Girón, along the Bay of Pigs, was an isolated point on the southern coast of Cuba, where it was assumed an invasion could occur quietly. Unlike the first plan, this one did not require continuous U.S. air support, because it would take the Cuban military a while to reach the site. The president's conditions had been met, but the new plan entailed new risks. The isolated location could work to the plan's disadvantage if the beachhead was not firmly established before Castro's forces counterattacked. Moreover, an isolated struggle might not stir the mass Cuban uprising that many hoped would follow an invasion. Allen Dulles later testified that the CIA "either had to go ahead or we had the alternative of demobilizing these people, and to the world, it would have meant that we were not behind these people who were trying to overthrow Castro."<sup>32</sup> Neither of these reasons had anything to do with the likelihood that this new plan, code-named Zapata, would work. Nevertheless, Kennedy accepted the advice of his covert specialists and conditionally approved Zapata on March 16, reserving the right to cancel it up to forty-eight hours before the landing.

### "A Matter of Defending Soviet Territory"

In the weeks before Kennedy's inauguration, a second Cuban invasion scare, as intense for the Cubans and the Soviets as the false alarm in October, had gripped Cuba.<sup>33</sup> The scare was triggered by a KGB report of an imminent U.S. invasion that arrived in Moscow in late December from a CIA source.<sup>34</sup>

In response to this information and a spate of New Year's bombings in central Havana, Castro gave the U.S. government forty-eight hours to reduce its consulate and embassy staffs to eleven people, including local employees.<sup>35</sup> The demand had surprised Washington, prompting the severing of diplomatic relations on January 4, 1961.

As the Kennedy administration debated its Cuban policy, Havana and Moscow were still suffering from a lack of secret information about the United States's intentions. The Soviets and the Cubans reacted differently to the inadequacies of their spy services. After four months of bad predictions, the KGB initiated a campaign in January 1961 to improve its knowledge of U.S. policy on Cuba.<sup>36</sup> The Cubans, on the other hand, continued to believe the information that had been collected during the two invasion scares. Many in Havana, chiefly Fidel and Raúl Castro, concluded that the Americans did not execute their invasion plans in October 1960 and again in January 1961, because they were deterred by Soviet statements of support for Cuba.

With a new president in the White House, the Cubans could not agree among themselves what to expect from the United States. Castro took a relatively relaxed view of the new administration. He believed that even if Kennedy was as bent on removing him as Eisenhower had been, the Soviet Union's commitment to Cuba would continue to deter U.S. military aggression. Blas Roca and the communist leadership disagreed. They assumed that "Kennedy [had] decided to take action in March."<sup>37</sup> The strategy of the new administration would be to present an invasion of Cuba by a group of counter-revolutionaries as a *fait accompli* to the rest of Latin America at the upcoming inter-American conference, scheduled to open March 1 in Quito, Ecuador. "The U.S. government," Roca's assistant Aníbal Escalante reported to the Soviet ambassador, "will ask Latin American states to support tighter sanctions on Cuba in light of the 'civil war' taking place there."<sup>38</sup>

The Cuban communists were loath to complain about Fidel Castro, who in recent months had been following their advice especially closely. In October he had adopted the communists' block surveillance scheme after finally purging the secret police and security services of anticommunists. And there was a noticeable change in his ideas about economic policy. "In the past, Fidel Castro did not understand the importance of planning," one Cuban communist leader reported to the Kremlin in the spring of 1961. "Now Castro openly says that the Cuban economy should be planned." The PSP was pleased that Castro had accepted its plan for collectivizing agriculture and was ready to follow advice that the improvement of the country's manufacturing base be a priority in the new plan. Yet the communists worried that Castro was too careless in handling the U.S. threat. In listing the potential support for a counter-revolution in Cuba, Escalante stressed that there were Cubans who would assist any intervention, though the number was manageable. "Fidel Castro is strongly supported by 80 percent of the population. There are no more than 50,000-60,000 counterrevolutionaries in Cuba and only 7,000-8,000 outside

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the country."<sup>39</sup> However, Escalante and Blas Roca believed that the Cuban government would have to organize itself better to meet even this small chal- lenge. During the war scare of January 1961, it had mobilized 300,000 in the revolutionary militia. Yet there was no plan as to how that militia would be used in the event of an attack.

Raúl Castro agreed with Escalante and Roca that his brother needed a push to devise a contingency plan for defending the country. Fidel had approved sending a military delegation to Moscow in the spring to discuss additional weapons supply. Roca's lieutenant in the leadership of the communist party, Flavio Bravo was sent to represent Castro. Raúl, who may have personally chosen Bravo, spoke to the communist leader before he left for Moscow: "Convey to the Soviet comrades that they should approach the putting to- gether of such a plan as if it were a matter of defending Soviet territory."<sup>40</sup> Raúl and the PSP hoped that with Moscow's help, they could persuade Fidel Castro to take the threat of a U.S. attack more seriously.

Bravo, who received red-carpet treatment when he arrived in March, stressed that "John F. Kennedy [was] taking a more aggressive stance toward Cuba than Eisenhower." He said that, since taking office, Kennedy had "al- ready spoken out five times against Cuba." Fidel Castro believed that Kennedy would be restrained by the fear of sparking a world war, and it was thought that Cuba was not facing an imminent overt U.S. attack. Neverthe- less, the Cuban communists worried about what the counterrevolutionaries could achieve with U.S. material and logistical help. Bravo painted for the So- viets a dark picture of the internal situation. Citing a figure of 4,000-5,000 armed anti-Castro rebels roaming the countryside, he told them that the Cu- bians were "living in a period like your crusade against the kulaks in 1927-30."<sup>41</sup>

Khrushchev's representatives—his heir apparent, Frol Kozlov, and fellow presidium member Mikhail Suslov—assured Raúl Castro's representative of Moscow's continuing support. "[T]he USSR," Kozlov said, "is prepared to give Cuba whatever she needed"; and he promised that he would speak to Kremlin's defense chief, Rodion Malinovsky, about the matter "that very day." But there would be some strings attached. Moscow would be glad to help the PSP and Raúl design a military plan to protect Cuba from a U.S. attack, but both Kozlov and Suslov stressed that "this would be possible only if Soviet spe- cialists were sent to Cuba."<sup>42</sup>

### The Summit and the Bay of Pigs

True to his word in December, the new president returned to the matter of a summit soon after his inauguration. Summoning Llewellyn Thompson, Eisenhower's ambassador in Moscow (whom Kennedy would decide to re- tain), in February, Kennedy canvassed the opinions of the best Sovietologists in the U.S. government on the pluses and minuses of an early summit. The

group reinforced Kennedy's instinct to press on with a meeting.<sup>43</sup> Khrushchev first heard about the results of this policy review in March when Thompson carried back to Moscow an invitation to the Soviet leader to meet in a neutral city.

On April 1 Khrushchev told Thompson that he wanted to go ahead with Kennedy's suggestion of a summit meeting in late May, in either Vienna or Stockholm.<sup>44</sup> Kennedy summoned his aides and discussed with them a set of appropriate dates. June 3 and 4 seemed the most convenient because the president had already committed to a state visit to France on June 1.

News that Moscow was interested in a summit crossed paths with final preparations for a covert operation in Cuba. The tight circle of undersecretaries and CIA chiefs allowed into the planning had spent the month of March hashing out a plan for using the Cuban trainees whom the Soviets and Havana had been complaining about since October 1960. The Guatemalan government wanted them out, and the Cuban exile leadership was losing its patience.

The CIA presented Kennedy a fuller version of the Zapata invasion plan on Easter weekend, April 1-3. According to his inner circle, Kennedy decided to go ahead while at the southern White House in Palm Beach and returned to Washington full of determination. "He had made up his mind and told us. He didn't ask us," Bundy later recalled.<sup>45</sup> Kennedy kept a lid on his plan, not even telling his private muse and future biographer Theodore Sorensen what was up for Cuba. Sorensen picked up a "bare hint" at a meeting, but the president's only response was "an earthy expression" to complain that "too many advisors seemed frightened by the prospects of a fight."<sup>46</sup>

The summit likely weighed heavily on how the president dealt with the new phase of the Cuban covert plan. On the night of April 4, just after signing off on the dates for the summit, Kennedy stressed to the team overseeing the Cuban operation that there had to be even less "noise." In his mind, the only way to square this circle, to keep a two-track policy of getting the Soviets out of the Caribbean while bringing them into disarmament discussions, was to mask as much as possible U.S. involvement in ending Castro's revolution.

### Alekseev in Brazil

Paradoxically, as John Kennedy and his American national security chiefs were polishing plans for action in Cuba, the Soviets were becoming more relaxed about the security of Fidel Castro's regime. U.S.-Soviet discussions of a superpower summit and the lack of any new confirmatory information in March about Kennedy's intentions strengthened the Kremlin's prejudice against believing that the new administration would make the mistake that Eisenhower and his dark henchman Richard Nixon had flirted with.

With the threat of an invasion apparently receding, Aleksandr Alekseev, the KGB station chief and Fidel Castro's favorite Russian, left Havana for Brazil.

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"Brazil was one of those countries with which we needed to establish relations," Alekseev recalls today to explain his strange absence from Cuba in April 1961. He had befriended the new president of Brazil, Jânio Quadros, when Quadros was an opposition political figure. Alekseev had been Quadros's interpreter (Quadros knew Spanish; Alekseev did not speak Portuguese) when the latter visited Moscow and Leningrad in 1959. "I am with the Soviet Union," Quadros explained to the Soviets he met.<sup>47</sup> In 1960 Quadros, who also admired Fidel Castro's revolution, had resumed his acquaintance with Alekseev during a stay in Havana. "Just as soon as I am elected," Quadros said to Alekseev "I give you my word, you will be the first to get a visa," and with Quadros's election it looked as if Brazil was on the verge of opening up to the Soviets. "Everyone in Moscow knew about this invitation," Alekseev remembers with pride.<sup>48</sup>

Soon after Quadros's inauguration on January 31, 1961, the Kremlin moved to exploit Alekseev's unusual access to the new Brazilian president. "I was instructed to return to Moscow," Alekseev recalled later. Moscow wanted him to visit Brazil as soon as possible. Leaving Cuba in early April, Alekseev was confident that Castro had the situation well in hand. "The [invasion] routes were mined," Alekseev explained. As protection against an intervention, the Cuban army had prepared minefields near possible landing sites. Nevertheless, as Alekseev readily admits, neither he nor Moscow expected a major U.S.-backed incursion in April 1961. "I had seen the [U.S.] bombardments. . . . But why did we not believe that it would be such a large invasion, I don't know." Looking darkly through the mists of time, Alekseev can only recall, "We just did not believe it."<sup>49</sup>

The Cubans and Soviets viewed the United States through different glasses that first week of April 1961. What Fidel Castro thought of Alekseev's departure is unknown; but at this time Soviet and Cuban perceptions of the threat from Washington diverged radically. Havana had learned that Khrushchev and Kennedy were edging toward a summit, and Fidel Castro expressed concern to his inner circle that his allies in the Kremlin might sacrifice him on the altar of better U.S.-Soviet relations. Castro said nothing to the Soviets about his concerns, though he might well have informed Alekseev had the latter been in town. Instead, the Cuban communists carried this message confidentially to Ambassador Kudryavtsev on April 7.

Kudryavtsev alerted Moscow that some preventive damage control was required. The Cuban communists did not want Fidel Castro to know that they had conveyed his anxiety to Moscow. Couldn't the Kremlin do or say something to allay Castro's fear? Kudryavtsev asked Moscow on behalf of his informants. "Fidel Castro wants to know whether Comrade Khrushchev raised the issue of Cuba with the U.S. ambassador Thompson."<sup>50</sup>

With Alekseev in Brazil, Kudryavtsev was the principal point of contact between the Cubans and Moscow. The leaders of the PSP were as worried about a U.S. invasion as about Fidel's commitment to Moscow. Despite the silence

in Washington, they told the Soviet ambassador on April 8 that the danger of an invasion in support of the newly formed government-in-exile of José Miró Cardona was "very real." The "situation is more dangerous than in October 1960 or in January of this year."<sup>51</sup> The Cuban communists admitted that "the Cuban government does not have at its disposal definite information regarding when and from which points the invasion will take place. But the government considers the invasion inevitable."<sup>52</sup>

The Kremlin responded swiftly, putting Cuba on the agenda for the Presidium meeting scheduled for April 11.<sup>53</sup> Khrushchev and his colleagues discounted the Cuban communists' concerns. Just the day before, the Soviet Foreign Ministry had informed the U.S. embassy of the acceptability of a June summit in Vienna.<sup>54</sup> Moreover, no one had any firm evidence of an American plan to invade. Yet the Soviet leader could not ignore Havana's concerns. Khrushchev did not want bilateral negotiations with the Americans to create suspicions in the socialist camp, especially among the Cubans, who were its newest members. The Chinese had denounced Khrushchev for attempting a high-level exchange with Eisenhower in 1960; and the Kremlin did not want to give the Chinese an excuse to make trouble with the Cubans now.

To reassure Havana, Khrushchev ordered the preparation of a confidential summary for Castro of the portions of his talk with Thompson that concerned Cuba.<sup>55</sup> The Soviets chose a section where Khrushchev had attempted, in a rambling fashion, to reassure Thompson that the Soviet Union did not intend to make a military base out of Cuba. "We disagree with the US conception of Cuba," Khrushchev told Thompson. "The USA for some reason," he added, "believes that it has the right to put military bases along the borders of the USSR." By contrast, however, "[w]e do not . . . have a military base in Cuba, just friendly relations."<sup>56</sup>

The Kremlin's optimism about the situation in Cuba was put to the test only a day later, when the KGB passed on to Khrushchev a very serious report on the Guatemalan situation. The activity in the U.S. training camps in Guatemala was a barometer of Washington's intentions regarding Castro. On April 12, for the first time since the end of February, some serious warning signals came in. The network set up by the Guatemalan communist party, which since October 1960 had been feeding the KGB in Mexico, reported that the CIA had started the final preparations for the invasion of Cuba. The information, which was a few days old, predicted an attack any day. The Soviet government did not know whether Cuban sources had received this information. Thinking it serious enough, the KGB decided to tell Alekseev's stand-in at the *residentura* to pass it along to both the Cuban government and the PSP.

In the past whenever Khrushchev believed that Cuba was threatened, he had never hesitated to make a statement to defend the country or to use *Pravda* to warn the United States that he was watching. This time he and *Pravda* stayed silent. Khrushchev's silence suggests the possibility that he had prepared to abandon Cuba, realizing that if Kennedy indeed wanted to invade



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Cuba, he could prevail over Castro without the Soviet Union's being able to do anything. It also suggests, however, that whereas in October and January the Soviets had gone out on a limb and been proven wrong, the Kremlin now had doubts about its information.

Kennedy was probably the reason that Moscow did not take the warnings seriously this time. At a press conference on April 12, the same day that the Guatemalan information arrived, John F. Kennedy assured the world that the United States did not intend to invade the island: "there will not be, under any conditions, any intervention in Cuba by United States armed forces, and this government will do everything it possibly can—and I think it can meet its responsibilities—to make sure that there are no Americans involved in any actions inside."<sup>57</sup>

Curiously, the KGB had even better intelligence about Kennedy's intention, but it passed unnoticed by the Kremlin. Since the debacle of the fall of 1960, the Soviets had developed a source in or around the Cuban exile community in New York. On April 8 the New York station reported,

Manuel Varona, a representative of the Cuban government in exile, is conducting negotiations about an intervention in Cuba that will take place from April 10 to 11. 3,500 mercenaries will participate in the landing. They will defend some part of the island to create territory, which would allow the government in exile to proclaim itself the provisional government. Then the provisional government would appeal to Cuban people and the U.S. government to recognize them and to support them with military forces and to help them in all other respects. Varona asked for transport planes and submarines. In principle the U.S. accepted all his plans, though it did reject his requests for transportation to avoid the accusation that it participated in the invasion. Despite this, Americans promised him to help these groups financially.<sup>58</sup>

The KGB may have informed Khrushchev orally of this information. But unlike the warnings from Kudryavtsev and the information from the KGB station in Mexico, the Varona report did not land on Khrushchev's desk. It certainly would have reinforced Khrushchev's already strong assumption that Kennedy would not risk the summit on this adventure, but the size of the invasion that Varona described was three times the earlier estimate given to Moscow. This might have set off an alarm bell or two.

The timing of Kennedy's declaration played right into the Kremlin's efforts to mollify Castro. With Kennedy's words still ringing in his ears, Castro was informed by the Soviet ambassador of Khrushchev's statements to Thompson. Castro naturally concluded that Khrushchev's initiative of April 1 and Kennedy's more recent speech were linked, that once again Moscow's forthrightness had deterred American aggression.

On the night of April 13, Blas Roca and Fidel Castro discussed Khrushchev's



ing to the United States and the effect it might have on Kennedy's plans. Castro announced himself satisfied with the Soviet initiative, and Roca, at least, was assured that Khrushchev's personal intervention would work the same magic it allegedly had worked in 1960.<sup>59</sup>

The Cuban communist leader made the same point the next day, April 14, in a meeting in his apartment with the Soviet ambassador. Roca asked Kudryavtsev to convey to Khrushchev his "genuine and warm gratitude to Khrushchev for his assistance against the aggressive attacks from American imperialism." Roca stressed that Khrushchev's warning "would undoubtedly have a restraining influence upon the Kennedy administration." The Cubans thought that Kennedy's April 12 assurance was the product of Soviet declarations of support. "There are serious concerns in the U.S.," explained Roca, "that Kennedy's aggressive politics toward Cuba will lead to war."<sup>60</sup> Roca also gave credit to the Soviet space program. On April 12 the Soviet cosmonaut Yuri Gagarin became the first man to go into space. Roca felt that this achievement could only inspire more respect and fear from the Americans. It compels Washington, he said, "to stop rattling sabers."

The Kremlin and the Cubans could live with Kennedy's statement that "the basic issue in Cuba . . . is between the Cubans themselves." The socialist bloc was slightly more than halfway through a program of military assistance to Cuba. Cuba had received 125 of 205 tanks expected to be sent. It had already received 167,000 rifles and 7,250 machine guns; but 128 of the Soviet Union's largest howitzers were still in the pipeline. Much of the anti-aircraft and anti-tank support was already on the island. The greatest gap was assistance to the fledgling Cuban air force. Not one of the MiG fighters promised by the Soviet government had been sent. If Khrushchev had believed in the U.S. threat in the spring of 1961 as he had in October 1960 or would in September 1962, he might well have hastened these deliveries.

### The Attack

The Bay of Pigs, which would end as a military victory for the Soviet bloc, began as a Cuban intelligence surprise. Only hours after Blas Roca informed the Kremlin of his confidence that once again the American eagle and its allies had been restrained, B-26s piloted by Cuban émigrés began strafing Cuban airfields in the morning of April 15.

The Cuban brigade needed air superiority to have any hope of holding a beachhead in Cuba for more than twenty-four or forty-eight hours. A Pentagon inspection team that evaluated the CIA Cuban force in March had warned that "an aircraft armed with 50 caliber machine guns could sink all or most of the invasion force."<sup>61</sup> Reconnaissance missions flown by U-2s on April 8, 11, and 13 picked up that the Cubans had thirty-six combat aircraft, some of which were T-33 jets.<sup>62</sup> In the small Cuban exile air force created by the

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the same point the next day, April 14, the Soviet ambassador. Roca asked for "genuine and warm gratitude to the aggressive attacks from American planes" and his warning "would undoubtedly be in the Kennedy administration." The Cubans felt that the operation was the product of Soviet declarations in the U.S.," explained Roca, "Cuba will lead to war."<sup>60</sup> Roca also said that on April 12 the Soviet cosmonaut Yuri Gagarin had gone into space. Roca felt that this would increase respect and fear from the Americans. It was a "winning sabers."

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ilitary victory for the Soviet bloc, before 48 hours after Blas Roca informed the Cuban leadership of the American eagle and its allies. Cuban émigrés began strafing Cuban

ity to have any hope of holding a Cuba for four or forty-eight hours. A Pentagon report said that the CIA Cuban force in March had received 128 machine guns could sink all or most of the air missions flown by U-2s on April 15. They had thirty-six combat aircraft, some of which were the Cuban exile air force created by the

CIA, there were no jets.<sup>63</sup> The most powerful plane was the propeller-driven B-26, a World War II stalwart that was no match for the Cold War T-33. In the planning stages of the air component of this proxy war, the CIA assumed that Castro's few T-33s, which were trainers sent to the Batista government by the United States in 1950s, would not be armed.

The night of April 16 Kennedy alerted his advisers that he was suspending a portion of the original plan because of the effects it might have on his country's international reputation. The previous day's air attack had led to an embarrassing debate at the United Nations, where the U.S. ambassador, Adlai Stevenson, had been forced to lie about U.S. involvement. Kennedy decided that he could not risk another air strike before the émigrés had established their beachhead in the morning. This decision doomed the operation. The air strike on April 15 had eliminated only 60 percent of Castro's air force, which was more powerful than had been assumed. Without air superiority the expedition would be a sitting duck the next morning.

Moscow's national security apparatus began to mobilize to assess the situation as soon as the first reports of the B-26 bombing runs reached Moscow on April 15. "We were waiting . . . in general [for something to occur in Cuba]," recalls one member of the hastily established war room in the Lubyanka. Oleg Nechiporenko was a two-year veteran of the KGB when he was pulled in to monitor the events in Cuba. A former student of Spanish at the Soviet Academy of Foreign Languages, Nechiporenko was slated for a position in the KGB's large station in Mexico City. In Moscow, where only a handful of men in any of the ministries described themselves as Latin American experts, his linguistic ability qualified him for helping Aleksandr Shelepin, the KGB chairman, make sense of the evolving situation in Cuba.<sup>64</sup> "We were hearing by international radio [all available] informations, and all the cables which came we immediately gave to the chiefs."

"We put two maps on the wall, one where we plotted the movements as they were described on American radio and the other according to our own information," recalls Nikolai Leonov. Leonov, Raúl Castro's friend and one of the best-known Spanish linguists in official Moscow, was the other man brought into the KGB war room on April 16. Leonov had a deeper knowledge of Cuba than Nechiporenko did, having visited the island. But at that moment what the Soviet leadership needed was less analytical capability than aural comprehension of Spanish.<sup>65</sup>

The first intelligence information from the field on April 17 gave Moscow cause for concern. The Cuban defense forces were taken by surprise. Like Moscow, Castro had no idea where the attack would occur. The Cuban communists reported that about one thousand counterrevolutionaries had landed at Playa Girón and forced the small Cuban garrison stationed there to retreat to the interior. Apparently the brigade's operational objective was the airfield at Cienfuegos, sixty miles east of the landing area.<sup>66</sup> The Castro forces should

have been able to deal with a thousand invaders. But later in the day Blas Roca came to the KGB station to warn that it seemed that an airborne assault had occurred at the same time as the landing. These forces landed twenty-five miles behind the beaches in an area called Covadonga, with the intention of intercepting Cuban forces sent south through the major railroad junction at Aguada de Pasajeros. Did this mean that Kennedy had broken his word and that American special forces were in Cuba? The Cuban communists also reported, without comment, that the U.S.-supported José Miró Cardona was calling for an uprising.<sup>67</sup>

The good news for the Kremlin was that the Cuban air force was starting to hit the counterrevolutionaries on the beaches. Moscow had promised MiG fighters, but these had not arrived in time. Fortunately for the Cubans and the Kremlin, the Cuban T-33s and Sea Furies were proving effective. By April 18 the Cubans were reporting that the invaders were finding their ability to broaden the beachhead hampered by a lack of supplies.<sup>68</sup> There was also word that Fidel Castro had stayed in Havana but was in control of the Cuban military response.

Leonov recalled that U.S. radio broadcasts described the campaign in terms more pessimistic for the exiles than what Moscow received from the Cubans or their own people on the island. On April 18 the fight was still going on. The Cubans reported that it was proceeding on four fronts, and on only one of these was the U.S.-backed group retreating. Moscow was also informed of the opening of a new front. Apparently there was a small invasion at the western tip of the island, in the province of Pinar del Río, with which the Cubans seemed to be dealing effectively.<sup>69</sup> While the situation remained confused in Cuba, Leonov and Nechiporenko stayed nights in the Lubyanka to follow events.<sup>70</sup>

Washington learned that the invasion was doomed before Moscow did. By the evening of April 17, the CIA was reporting to Allen Dulles that the brigade was trapped on the beaches. The president's decision to cancel the second strike had eliminated any chance that Castro's air force would be grounded before the landings began.<sup>71</sup> This left enough of Castro's planes in the air to attack the Cuban émigré air force and the U.S.-backed armada. The T-33s shot down six of the B-26s in the CIA's Cuban air force, and another two were lost to antiaircraft fire. The most telling blow came from T-33 attacks that sank two ships in the operational convoy, one of which carried the brigade's ammunition and communications. The beachhead would have been difficult to hold under any scenario; but the CIA had war-gamed this exercise assuming that all of the ammunition would make it to shore under U.S. protective air cover.

The next morning Kennedy was told that the operation was teetering on the brink of collapse. "[T]he situation in Cuba is not a bit good," McGeorge Bundy warned Kennedy as he headed into a meeting of his Cuban crisis

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operation was teetering on the is not a bit good," McGeorge a meeting of his Cuban crisis

team.<sup>72</sup> "The Cuban armed forces are stronger," Bundy explained, "the popular response is weaker, and our tactical position is feebler than we had hoped."<sup>73</sup> The disaster in Cuba affected Bundy, formerly a skeptic, who was now recommending to Kennedy that unmarked U.S. Air Force jets be sent into Cuban airspace to destroy Castro's air force, so that the Cuban brigade would have a fighting chance on the beaches.

The briefing was just as dreary as Bundy had warned. The Cuban group had lost the battle on one of the beaches after Castro committed twelve Soviet-made tanks to flush them out. Meanwhile, additional tanks and Castro's remaining planes were pounding the other beachhead. "Nobody knew what to do," the chief of naval operations, Admiral Arleigh Burke, recalled of this moment.<sup>74</sup> Even the CIA's Richard Bissell, who had relentlessly urged covert action on the new administration, was dumbfounded. Everything seemed to have gone wrong. Burke, whose ships were off the coast of Cuba watching the disaster unfold, stayed quiet. Occasionally his self-control did break down and he would interject "Balls!" to remind everyone that he was seething with anger.

Burke caught Kennedy's attention, who was looking for someone with Washington experience and combat savvy to get him out of this mess. Kennedy brought Rusk, McNamara, Dulles, Lemnitzer, and Burke into the Oval Office after the noon meeting. Rusk irritated him by suggesting the United States sit on its hands and let the operation die. Kennedy wanted action and called Burke in for a private meeting a short while later. Could the admiral arrange for the *Essex*, the aircraft carrier off Cuba, to fly a team over the combat area to bring back a report? Burke worked quickly, impressing Kennedy.

The president caucused with his brother. Robert had known about the CIA's plan in January but had not directly participated in any of the meetings that reshaped it. It is likely that the president kept him generally informed; in the first months of the administration, however, Robert Kennedy had to master the levers at the Justice Department and probably appreciated not having the extra responsibility. In a crisis, though, he was the president's chancellor. "Robert Kennedy called me up," Burke said, "and said the President is going to rely upon [me] to advise him on this situation." Burke warned the attorney general that this would involve bypassing his bosses, the chairman of the JCS and the secretary of defense. Robert Kennedy agreed, and twenty-five minutes later the president called to assure a surprised Burke that this is what he intended.<sup>75</sup>

Kennedy came to understand, perhaps with Burke's coaching, that if this mission was to have any chance of succeeding, he would have to risk direct U.S. involvement. "Prepare unmarked Navy planes for possible combat use," read the top-secret telegram from the JCS operation room. Kennedy stood next to Burke as the admiral called the order into the Pentagon. The Kennedy

administration was not optimistic that the situation could be turned around. Included in this order was an instruction to prepare for the possible evacuation of the anti-Castro units.<sup>76</sup> Kennedy also had Burke tell the CIA to instruct the Cuban exiles to dissolve into guerrilla-sized groups. "If CEF [Cuban expeditionary force] cannot hold beachhead or fight their way inland," Burke cabled for Kennedy, "it would be desirable for them to become guerrillas and head for known destination and be supplied by air."<sup>77</sup> Kennedy did not understand that this was an impossibility. Not only had the CIA not prepared its Cuban invaders for this eventuality; but the most recent intelligence showed that there were only 850 guerrillas operating within a hundred-mile radius of the beaches and that the Cuban brigade would have to leapfrog Castro's mechanized reinforcements to reach those groups.<sup>78</sup>

Kennedy agonized over sending U.S. pilots into Cuba. Finally, after a meeting that started at midnight and lasted until nearly 3 A.M., April 19, Kennedy okayed a limited operation for later that morning. Six "unmarked" jets were permitted to fly over the beaches "to defend CEF forces from air attack." These planes were not to attack any Cuban targets on the ground or to go looking for a fight. The Cuban émigrés had planned an airdrop for 6:30 A.M., and the U.S. planes were to chase away any of Castro's planes that tried to interfere.<sup>79</sup>

The minor air operation failed later that morning because of a timing error, and soon the White House was forced to accept the hopelessness of the operation. At noon the commander of the special naval task force covering the Cuban operation reported that the CIA's Cubans held a beachhead of one-fourth to one-half of a mile along a single beach to a depth of about a quarter of a mile. The original mission involved creating lodgments on three beaches; but the group had lost its hold on one beach on the first day and never made it to the third beach. Now the remnants of the expeditionary force on the last beach were surrounded and "under artillery fire with tanks and vehicles to both east and west."<sup>80</sup> By 1 P.M., April 19, the JCS concluded that there was nothing left to do but evacuate those Cubans who could be rescued. "God be with you," the Pentagon blessed the commander in chief, Atlantic, Admiral Dennison.<sup>81</sup> Ultimately only 14 of the exiles were rescued, and 1,189 surrendered to Castro's military.

Amid the crumbling of Operation Zapata, Robert Kennedy dictated a letter to steel his brother's resolve. As the final cables were sent out on April 19, the president had gone to the family quarters of the White House to be alone with his wife, Jacqueline. Too excited to sob or rest, Robert spun ideas about a second try. "Our long-range foreign policy objectives in Cuba are tied to survival far more than what is happening in Laos or the Congo or any other place in the world." The attorney general advised his brother not to let the Bay of Pigs disaster stand in the way of eliminating Castro. John Kennedy had opposed using U.S. forces to overthrow Castro. His brother respected this caution, but warned, "The time has come for a showdown for in a year or two years the

situation could be turned around. To prepare for the possible evacuation had Burke tell the CIA to instruct paratrooper groups. "If CEF [Cuban expeditionary force] fight their way inland," Burke told them to become guerrillas and retreat by air."<sup>77</sup> Kennedy did not understand why the CIA not prepared its Cuba. The most recent intelligence showed that within a hundred-mile radius of the bay, we have to leapfrog Castro's mechan-

ism into Cuba. Finally, after a meeting at nearly 3 A.M., April 19, Kennedy decided on the plan. Six "unmarked" jets were permitted to fly over CEF forces from air attack. These jets were on the ground or to go looking for a target for airdrop for 6:30 A.M., and the U.S. forces that tried to interfere.<sup>79</sup>

the next morning because of a timing error, despite the hopelessness of the operation. The naval task force covering the Cubans held a beachhead of one-fourth mile to a depth of about a quarter of a mile with lodgments on three beaches; but on the first day and never made it to land the expeditionary force on the last day. Under heavy fire with tanks and vehicles to support them, the JCS concluded that there was no chance of rescue. "God be with the men who could be rescued." God was with the men. Under the command of the commander in chief, Atlantic, Admiral Thomas, 1,189 were rescued, and 1,189 surren-

dered. Robert Kennedy dictated a letter to the men who were sent out on April 19, the day after the White House to be alone with the men. Instead, Robert spun ideas about a secret rescue. The factives in Cuba are tied to survival. The men who fled to the Congo or any other place in Africa. Robert's brother not to let the Bay of Pigs become a disaster. John Kennedy had opposed the plan. His brother respected this caution, but he did not. Within a year or two years the

situation will be vastly worse." Securing the support of most of Latin America was essential to the future success of a military intervention. Robert Kennedy advised his brother to consider covert operations, such as faking a Cuban attack on Guantánamo, to gain hemispheric support. Robert was insistent. With cool prescience, he warned, "If we don't want Russia to set up missile bases in Cuba, we had better decide now what we are willing to do to stop it."<sup>82</sup>

In front of the press a few days later, John Kennedy took personal responsibility. "There's an old saying," Kennedy explained, "that victory has a hundred fathers and defeat is an orphan."<sup>83</sup> The president genuinely believed himself largely at fault. He always understood that the Trinidad plan was better from a military standpoint than the Zapata project, but political considerations had invalidated Trinidad. Kennedy blamed himself, however, for calling off the second air strike. He had not understood how essential air superiority would be to the success of the entire operation. He wished that the CIA and the JCS had stressed this factor in their conversations with him. But he also should have asked. Much of his other criticism—that the guerrilla option was a fantasy he had been led to believe in—was outweighed by the mistakes made in the air war. The Cuban expeditionary force's ability to spark a general uprising or to recruit ordinary Cubans was never tested, because the establishment of a secure beachhead was never possible.<sup>84</sup>

### They Were Lucky

After the Bay of Pigs the Cubans propagated a myth about the performance of their security forces in April 1961. In an interview with the Castro biographer Tad Szulc in the 1980s, Castro's longtime interior minister Ramiro Valdés stated that "Cuban intelligence was able to track invasion preparations step by step, from Miami to the training camps in Guatemala."<sup>85</sup> Valdés confirmed a common assumption among Cuba watchers: "We were very seriously infiltrated in the counterrevolutionary bands."<sup>86</sup> Soviet documents show this not to have been true. As Castro would privately lament to Khrushchev as late as May 1963, two years after the Bay of Pigs, the Cubans were actually not very good at infiltrating the Cuban émigré movement abroad. They felt confident they could control those who worked in Cuba, but despite the cliché that everything was "an open secret" in Miami's Little Havana, Castro's men had to admit in 1961 that there was still much that they did not know about the activities of their greatest enemies—Manuel Ray, José Miró Cardona, and Tony Varona.<sup>87</sup>

The Soviets and the Cubans thought they had barely escaped disaster in April 1961. As the fight subsided on the beaches, the Castro brothers requested support from the KGB. The intelligence failure had been harrowing. Though Raúl Castro had initiated widespread intelligence cooperation in the fall of 1960, the KGB had kept the number of its "counselors" in Cuba intelli-

gence low. In light of the Bay of Pigs near-miss, Raúl Castro asked that this number be significantly increased. The Soviets complied very quickly.

With the full agreement of the Castro government, Moscow put the Cuban security services into receivership. On April 25, 1961, less than a week after the CIA brigade had been mopped up on the beaches, the KGB chief, Shelepin, requested authorization to send to Cuba "an additional 8 KGB employees . . . with the necessary technical equipment, costing 171,000 Rubles [roughly U.S.\$180,000]" in order "to satisfy the request of Cuban leadership for intelligence cooperation."<sup>88</sup> Meanwhile, the KGB station in Havana suggested that Manuel Piñeiro, the head of the Cuban G-2 (military intelligence), name seven of these new KGB men to head the various departments of Cuban intelligence.<sup>89</sup>

Once back in Cuba, Alekseev assumed control of the negotiations with the heads of the Cuban services to hammer out the role these KGB "counselors" would play. Symbolizing his new stature in the leadership, Anibal Escalante acted as Castro's representative in these discussions on the new shape that Soviet-Cuban intelligence cooperation would take. Only six months before, Raúl Castro had described a triumvirate of Fidel, himself, and Valdés as the three men who could speak about such delicate matters with Moscow. With Escalante and the Cuban intelligence chiefs, Alekseev negotiated an agreement governing the broadening of intelligence cooperation and the sharing of responsibility for work against the United States and the Cuban emigration. Moscow and Havana anticipated an expansion of the Cuban intelligence community.<sup>90</sup> There were already seventeen Cubans in Soviet intelligence schools, and the Cuban government wished to increase that number by fifty.<sup>91</sup>

Moscow was eager to assist the Cuban secret services, but Alekseev found that he had to rein in the Cuban communists, who sensed an opportunity to act unilaterally in the aftermath of the Bay of Pigs. Blas Roca and Escalante prepared on their own a plan to assassinate the leading members of the counterrevolution. Manuel Ray, the minister of the interior in Castro's first cabinet, was their primary target. Assuming that the Soviets might raise objections, Roca and Escalante even tried to conceal the plan from Alekseev. They were stopped, however, when Alekseev was warned by the deputy minister of the interior. Alekseev sent the two Cubans the message that in Moscow's view "it was probably not the time to take these measures."<sup>92</sup>

The Soviet military acted defensively in light of the Bay of Pigs. Evidently Fidel's success had been due to the overwhelming firepower he was able to bring to bear on the tiny beachhead. His Soviet-made T-34 tanks and the 122-mm Howitzers had pounded the counterrevolutionaries into submission when they themselves ran out of American ammunition. Yet the Red Army felt it had to draft a statement of what it had provided to the Cubans, lest perhaps Fidel rail against Moscow for not providing the MiGs in time to minimize the threat posed by the U.S.-backed invasion. While Alekseev was hammering out the details of the KGB's reform of the Cuban security apparatus, Khrushchev's



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minister of defense prepared for the Presidium a list of every piece of war  
matériel that Moscow had provided the Cubans since 1959.\*

What were the consequences of the Bay of Pigs? The United States did not  
understand that the Bay of Pigs attack came at the end of the fourth invasion  
scare in less than a year. Although the Soviet Union had not completed its  
shipments of war supplies to Castro, it had sent enough to equip the battle  
group that reclaimed the beachhead. The advantage of a year's preparation for  
an attack was nearly neutralized by the inefficiency of the Castro regime and  
the corrosive effect of three earlier nonevents. In April 1961 the Cubans and  
the Soviets were convinced that Kennedy would be deterred from providing  
significant assistance to the counterrevolutionaries. In effect, they were right  
in that John Kennedy did not authorize the air coverage that the beachhead  
needed to have any chance at survival. Nevertheless, the invasion of fifteen  
hundred men was much larger than the Cubans or Khrushchev had expected.  
After surviving this close call, the Soviets did what the Cuban communists  
had been advocating for some time—they took a commanding role in the Cu-  
ban security services.

The attack permitted Castro to reveal to the Cuban people his desire of a  
socialist Cuba. Having only hinted to Soviet representatives in the spring of  
1960, and privately committed himself to the rank and file of the communist  
party in November 1960, Fidel told his people and the world of his intention  
on April 16, 1961. The attack also softened the effect of that announcement  
on his stature at home. The U.S. action confirmed the enemy image that  
Castro had employed to push ever more radical solutions to Cuba's problems  
of development in 1959 and 1960. From April 1961 on, the events at the Bay  
of Pigs served as the great unifying symbol of a movement. The choice of  
communism that had been made by Raúl Castro in the early 1950s, by Che in  
1957, and by Fidel in late 1959 or early 1960 could now be presented as the  
only possible response to the crime of the Yankees.

The most tragic consequence of the Bay of Pigs was the ascendancy of  
Aníbal Escalante and a Cuban security service dominated by the Soviet  
Union. For over a year Fidel Castro had backed away from initiatives that  
could have transformed Cuba into a police state. Confronted with an increase

\* As of the end of April 1961, Cuba had received from the USSR, Czechoslovakia, and  
China a huge amount of military technology: 125 tanks (IS-2M and T-34-85), 50 self-  
propelled Arams SAU-100 guns, 428 field artillery pieces (from 76 mm to 128 mm), 170 57  
mm antitank guns, 898 large machine guns (82 mm and 120 mm), 920 antiaircraft guns  
(37 mm and 12.7 mm), 7,250 smaller machine guns, and 167,000 pistols and rifles, all of  
which came with ammunition. The Bay of Pigs crisis had occurred before the Soviets could  
complete their military supply program for Cuba. According to a May 4, 1961, report by  
Soviet Defense Minister Malinovsky, the Cubans were also scheduled to receive 41 jet  
fighters and reconnaissance aircraft (MIG-19s and MIG-15s), an additional 80 tanks, 54 57  
mm antiaircraft guns and 128 field artillery pieces (including the mammoth 152 mm  
guns).



in counterrevolutionary activity in the fall of 1960, however, Castro had taken the first important steps. The Bay of Pigs operation accelerated these changes, creating a momentum toward the building of a surveillance state that Fidel Castro had once considered avoidable. Escalante and his Soviet discussion partners, Kudryavtsev and Alekseev, were probably right to assume that a socialist revolution would be met by violent internal opposition; but the Kennedy administration's investment in a big, awkward, and ultimately ineffective operation removed the last major inhibitions holding Castro back from a domestic crackdown.

The Bay of Pigs had brought John Kennedy the worst possible outcome: a coup-proof Cuba in a Caribbean even more unwilling to approve the use of outside force. He now faced a communist state, a short flight away from Miami. The question that the world asked in the aftermath of this personal debacle was whether the United States could come to terms with a Soviet beachhead in its backyard. Not only the fate of six million Cubans but the very nature of the rivalry between the superpowers rested on the answer to that question.