We cannot let the present government there go on.
—President Eisenhower to President-Elect Kennedy, 19 January 1961

6

THE BAY OF PIGS

"Before dawn Cuban patriots in the cities and in the hills began the battle to liberate our homeland"—so read the press bulletin issued by the Cuban Revolutionary Council but written by CIA officer David Atlee Phillips.[1] The landing had begun in the predawn hours of 17 April 1961, two days after eight Cuban-piloted B-26 bombers had set out from Nicaragua to destroy Cuba's air force. The damage had been incomplete, and now, at dawn, the Cuban air force began its counterattack, disabling two of the brigade's ships before they could unload their cargo, and the assault began to disintegrate. Early the next morning, national security adviser McGeorge Bundy warned President John F. Kennedy, "I think you will find at noon that the situation in Cuba is not a bit good."[2]

That was an understatement. "They are in a real bad hole," reported the chief of naval operations, Arleigh Burke, after rushing to the White House for the noon meeting. "We got over there in the Cabinet Room. The President was talking with CIA people, State Department people and Rostow and a lot of other people. They were talking about Cuba. Real big mess." The Joint Chiefs of Staff may have approved the invasion, but Admiral Burke's immediate reaction was to make certain that the Department of Defense not take the blame, dictating a memorandum for the record during the ride back to the Pentagon: "Nobody knew what to do nor did the CIA who were running the operation and who were wholly responsible for the operation know what to do or what was happening. A lot of things have happened

and they have caused to happen and [that] we the JCS don't know anything whatever about. We have been kept pretty ignorant of this and have just been told partial truths." Admiral Burke failed to mention that his navy was involved up to its scuppers and that he had been among the first senior officials to propose the adventure: more than a year earlier, on 26 February 1960, he had sent the State Department a "paper indicative of current Navy thinking" that included a discussion of how "the U.S. could assist rebel groups covertly to overthrow the present government."[3] A navy task group under the command of Admiral John Clark had escorted the CIA's brigade to the battle site and had turned over the landing craft to the invaders, and on the morning of 19 April, Clark's carrier, the *Essex*, had launched navy fighters to protect rebel planes from Castro's air force. Below the flight deck, two thousand U.S. Marines had been issued live ammunition and were ready to fight should JFK permit U.S. troops to enter the battle.[4]

But the nation's new president, John Kennedy, would not allow the marines to be deployed, and the navy fighters came too late to be useful, so Admiral Clark's principal role was to receive and forward reports on the debacle. Sitting offshore at 11:18 A.M. on 19 April, he received a message from the beach: "Please send help. We cannot hold." Thirteen minutes later, he received another: "Out of ammunition. Men fighting in water." A half hour after that, Clark reported that the area held by the brigade "appears to be one quarter to one half mile along the beach to a depth of about one quarter [mile] under artillery fire with tanks and vehicles to both east and west. Believe evacuation impossible without active [U.S.] engagement with Castro forces." Then the brigade's radio operator sent his final message: "Am destroying all equipment and communications. Tanks are in sight. I have nothing left to fight with. Am taking to the woods. I cannot wait for you." A few minutes later Clark radioed the Pentagon, "Castro is waiting on beach."[5]

That evening CIA director Allen Dulles told Richard Nixon, "This is the worst day of my life"; Attorney General Robert Kennedy thought that Dulles "looked like living death." Dean Rusk complained that the Bay of Pigs was "one hell of a way to close out my first hundred days as secretary of state."[6]

"Castro is far better organized and more formidable than we had supposed," presidential adviser Arthur Schlesinger Jr. wrote in his diary on Day 2 of the three-day debacle. Cubans clearly had not been sitting idly while U.S. voters passed the torch to the Kennedy generation. As JFK was receiving his party's nomination, Fidel Castro was telling Cubans that "our

enemies are used to threatening countries, they are used to trampling on the sovereignty of nations and issuing orders. But there are no Yankee soldiers commanding our armies anymore, and there are no workers without weapons to defend themselves." During the preceding year, Cuba had established diplomatic relations with every communist government except that of East Germany and had signed cooperative accords with all but Albania, in the process doubling Cuba's credit lines and disposing of 70 percent of the 1961 sugar harvest. Then, two days before Kennedy's inauguration, Banco Nacional president Che Guevara had returned from a three-month tour of communist countries, his briefcase bulging with trade agreements. The U.S. press had occasionally noted Guevara's travels, including his Beijing speech characterizing the United States as an imperialist power and his Shanghai address announcing that communism "has defeated capitalism in all fields."[7]

But this was to be expected from the Argentine adventurer, always considered a dyed-in-the-wool communist; Fidel Castro was the person watched most closely, and his problem was perceived not so much as communist leanings as mental imbalance: the CIA's first JFK-era report began with the premise that "no sane man undertaking to govern and reform Cuba would have chosen to pick a fight with the US," especially since Washington had done nothing provocative—the breakdown in relations "is not a function of US policy and action, but of Castro's psychotic personality. It is evident, on the testimony of his supporters at the time, that Castro arrived in Havana in a high state of elation amounting to mental illness." From there, things went downhill, as Castro "became convinced that the US would never understand and accept his revolution, that he could expect only implacable hostility from Washington. This was the conclusion of his own disordered mind, unrelated to any fact of US policy or action."[8]

The principal concrete problem in early 1961 was that Cubans were exporting their revolution to the rest of Latin America—"Cuba becoming a center for Latin American Communist activities" is how the CIA had begun its National Security Council briefing a year earlier. According to the U.S. embassy, no sooner had Castro reached power than he announced that "Nicaraguans should take to the mountains and fight for the freedom as Cubans had done, and could count beforehand on complete support of Cuban people." Within months, Cuba had supported *Granma*-like invasions not simply of Nicaragua but also of Panama, the Dominican Republic, and Haiti, and at 1960's 26th of July celebration, Castro had promised

"to continue making the nation the example that can convert the Cordillera of the Andes into the Sierra Maestra of the hemisphere." Three weeks later he told another audience, "Our slogan is: 'Today our country is free forever, and someday all the Americas will be free forever.'"[9]

In mid-1960 President Eisenhower had told the British prime minister, Harold Macmillan, that "this kind of change, when it brings Communism in its wake, is intolerable from the standpoint of our national interests and that of the liberal democratic Christian tradition which we all share."[10] So when the president discussed Cuba with the president-elect on 19 January 1961, a day before the transition, Eisenhower told JFK directly, "We cannot let the present government there go on," and Treasury Secretary Robert Anderson added that "in the final analysis the United States may have to run Castro out of office."[11] The Joint Chiefs of Staff told the new secretary of defense the same thing a week later—"The primary objective of the United States in Cuba should be the speedy overthrow of the Castro Government, followed by the establishment of a pro-U.S. Government." Then the chiefs handed Secretary of Defense Robert McNamara their view of the options, an elaborate table with escalating steps, from Step 1, economic pressure, to Step 7, a U.S. invasion. Step 3 was to "train and equip small vol[unteer] force Cuban exiles to invade, establish a center of resistance for anti-Castro Cubans to rally to establish pro-U.S. Govt."[12]

After this meeting McNamara drove across the Potomac to the White House, where JFK and his other senior advisers were waiting to be briefed by CIA director Allen Dulles. Bundy's notes indicate that "the judgment expressed without dissent was that Cuba is now for practical purposes a Communist-controlled state," so the discussion focused on how to overthrow its government. Restraining voices came from the State Department's Rusk and Thomas Mann, who warned that a U.S. invasion would have "grave political dangers to our position throughout the Western hemisphere," which prompted President Kennedy to ask the chair of the Joint Chiefs what he thought of Step 3, the proposal to use the exiles being trained by the CIA in Guatemala. General Lyman Lemnitzer responded that any such exile invasion "would have very little chance of success," while the minutes indicate that Dulles and aide Tracy Barnes "took a very optimistic view of the force's ability to land and hold a beach head." The president asked the two sides to see if they could produce a single conclusion, then ended the meeting with his first directive about Cuba: "A continuation and accentuation of current activities of the Central Intelligence Agency,

including increased propaganda, increased political action and increased sabotage." Clearly anxious to do something, JFK asked Bundy a few days later, "Have we determined what we are going to do about Cuba?"[13]

At the same time, the CIA had set out to convince the Joint Chiefs to endorse the agency's plan. Painting the rosiest possible picture, a CIA briefer "emphasized that the proposed strike could be conducted with no overt U.S. military support other than the provision of one LSD, and that the force once committed would not have to be evacuated in the event of inability to hold the initial objective area, as it could, if required, disperse and continue to survive." The CIA emphasized that "the likelihood of success was very high in terms of staying in the initial objective area long enough and in sufficient control to permit the introduction of a 'Provisional Government' and provide a rationale for the subsequent employment of overt military force, if desired."[14]

One flaw marred this rosy picture: Step 3, a "surprise" attack, had recently been featured on the front page of the *New York Times*. The first specific information had come from the *Hispanic American Report*, a news digest published by Stanford University's Latin American studies program, whose director, Ronald Hilton, had learned about the CIA's facility: "Reliable observers in Guatemala say that without doubt there is in Retalhuleu a large and well-fortified base where Cuban exiles are being trained to invade Castro's fortress. . . . It is generally believed among responsible Guatemalans that there is only one possible source for the funds necessary for such a major project, namely the U.S. Government acting through the C.I.A." Hilton's scoop had been picked up by *The Nation*, although it, too, had a limited readership, and the cover was blown off the invasion preparations only when the *New York Times* ran its story on 10 January 1961: "U.S. Helps Train an Anti-Castro Force at Secret Guatemalan Air-Ground Base." There, on the front page, was a map pinpointing the U.S. facility.[15]

As the Joint Chiefs had warned Secretary McNamara, the operation was a security nightmare—any journalist could have uncovered the story simply by talking with Guatemalans living near the training base: "Firing, explosions, aircraft orbiting over an objective area, parachute drops, and an abnormal number of unfamiliar aircraft in the area are a dead giveaway." Indeed, the reporter would not have needed to visit the area, since "leaflets have been circulated in Guatemala City by the Communist Party giving many of the details of the activity. Although there are some inaccuracies in this material, much of it is accurate." In fact, the reporter would not have needed to leave the United States, for leaks were also coming out

of Miami—newspapers in March quoted both Cuban opposition leader Tony de Varona's promise that an invasion would come "very soon" and another exile leader's declaration that "today we stand on the threshold of an adventure far greater than has yet been written in Cuban history." Ten days before the invasion, the *New York Times* reported that in Miami "the preparations against Dr. Castro are an open secret. They are discussed in the streets, Cuban cafes and restaurants and almost everywhere that two or more Cubans congregate." After giving an interview to yet another reporter whose questions indicated an exceptionally clear picture of the entire operation, Schlesinger warned President Kennedy that "if an enterprising magazine writer could pick all this up in Miami in a couple of weeks, Habana must be well posted on developments."[16]

Several participants blamed the invasion's failure on these security breaches and especially on the Miami chatter—what the CIA's inspector general called "the gregariousness of Cuban exiles." This was not a new charge; at the first meeting of what was to become the agency's Bay of Pigs task force, Colonel J. C. King had warned that "he knew of no Latin American country whose people were less secure operationally than Cubans." General David Gray agreed ("Cubans cannot keep quiet"), as did Grayston Lynch, one of the two CIA officials most directly responsible for the brigade, who wrote that "the average Cuban is a highly emotional, vocal, and thoroughly likable individual. Consequently, as an intelligence operative, he is his own worst enemy. When entrusted with a most secret matter, he will solemnly agree never to tell a living soul, even under the pain of death, and he truly means it. But all too soon, he discovers, he will have to tell someone or he will explode from the effort of holding the secret in." And the Cubans were not the only talkative participants. The British picked up on the plan before any Cuban (or even President Eisenhower) had seen it; in late November 1959, Great Britain's Foreign Office informed the country's Washington embassy about "various pieces [of] information that have reached us" and asked the ambassador to snoop around: "The US authorities may be contemplating trying to stimulate or support an anti-Castro movement along the lines of the action they took in Guatemala some years ago. . . . Can you find out?"[17]

Now, seventeen months later, JFK was worried by what he read in the newspapers, and he asked his principal aides, including McNamara, "whether there had been any statements by Castro indicating knowledge of the plan." Two weeks earlier, the Joint Chiefs had warned the defense secretary that "it can . . . be presumed that Castro knows practically all

about the operation *except* when, where, and in what strength." McNamara had apparently not heard the warning, however, for his response to JFK's question "was in the negative."[18]

But of course Castro knew; everyone knew. As early as August 1960, Cuban intelligence knew that 45 military advisers, many of them U.S. citizens, had begun training as many as 185 "old Batistianos and simple mercenaries" in Guatemala, and the Guatemalan communist party soon was providing Cuba with regular reports on the training camp via the Soviet embassy in Mexico City. By the time of JFK's inauguration, Cuban intelligence had produced an exceptionally detailed report on the CIA's training facilities. A month earlier, on 31 December 1960, Cuba had requested an urgent meeting of the U.N. Security Council to discuss a "sinister plan" to invade Cuba by "war criminals who have sought refuge in the United States." The meeting had begun on 4 January, barely two weeks before Kennedy's inauguration, with Foreign Minister Raúl Roa laying out Cuba's detailed charges that the United States was training "mercenaries" in Guatemala; Roa specifically named the Retalhuheu airfield. U.S. ambassador to the United Nations James Wadsworth had replied that Roa's charges "are empty, are groundless, are false, are fraudulent." Cuba's leaders, he continued, "have been crying 'wolf' for the past six months over an alleged 'imminent invasion' of their country, and thereby are fast making themselves ridiculous in the eyes of the rest of the world." The Security Council adjourned without taking action.[19]

Meanwhile, preparations continued. After the November election, a lame-duck President Eisenhower had told his senior advisers that he wanted "all done that could be done on the Project with all possible urgency." By this time, CIA officials had set up the Retalhuheu base and were training Cuban exiles, and the senior trainer, marine colonel Jack Hawkins, a respected World War II veteran of guerrilla warfare in the Philippines, was telling officials in Washington about "the superior characteristics of the individuals" who had been selected, insisting that they "would have no difficulty inflicting heavy casualties on a much larger force."[20] But in January, just days before JFK's inauguration, a representative from the Joint Chiefs warned CIA officials that Cuba's "200,000 militia each with a sub-machine gun is, in itself, a pretty strong force if they do nothing more than stand and pull the triggers," to which the agency responded that "less than 30 percent of the population is still with Fidel," and "in this 30 percent are included the negroes, who have always followed the strong men in Cuba, but will not fight." At the same time, an interdepartmental group concluded that there

was no longer "any hope of overthrowing the Castro regime with economic warfare measures alone, even if they include an effective blockade."[21] A week later, President Eisenhower dropped a year's worth of preparation into the lap of his successor.

THESE PREPARATIONS WERE BEING OVERSEEN by the CIA's deputy director for plans, Richard Bissell, the heir apparent to Allen Dulles as director of central intelligence. Bissell operated through a special Caribbean unit—Branch 4 of the Western Hemisphere Division (WH/4), led by J. D. "Jake" Esterline, an Office of Strategic Services veteran with experience behind enemy lines in Burma who had been the army's chief instructor in guerrilla warfare before entering the CIA, where his first responsibility had been to help overthrow the Arbenz government in Guatemala. As a branch chief, Esterline should have reported to division chief J. C. King, but as Esterline later explained, "J. C. was sort of gently eased out of things. . . . Our orders came directly from Bissell."[22]

Bissell, in turn, dominated every detail. "His mind was swift and penetrating, and he had an unsurpassed talent for lucid analysis and fluent exposition," recalled Arthur Schlesinger. "He had extraordinary gifts of exposition. We all listened transfixed . . . fascinated by the workings of this superbly clear, organized and articulate intelligence, while Bissell, pointer in hand, would explain how the invasion would work." Richard Goodwin characterized Bissell as "a cultivated man with impeccable credentials—good school, good family, good war—a social acquaintance of many Kennedy intimates, including the president's own family." But it was not simply that he could talk comfortably and confidently to the Kennedy elite; his successful management of the U-2 project had also given him a reputation for getting things done, and in early 1961 McGeorge Bundy had suggested that Kennedy name Bissell undersecretary of state for political affairs. "The man who fills this job will have to be an active and decisive person, quite different from the ordinary foreign service type," Bundy wrote. Kennedy demurred, perhaps because Bundy added that "if Dick has a fault it is that he does not look at all sides of the question."[23]

Bissell unquestionably had the leading role in convincing JFK to go ahead with the exile invasion—White House logs indicate thirteen informal Oval Office meetings between the two men in the three months before the invasion; as Bissell's secretary told Seymour Hersh, "He was there all the time." One of Bissell's senior CIA colleagues, Robert Amory, noted that "Kennedy was extremely fond of Dick Bissell, had a very high regard for

him. I think he regarded Dick as probably one of the four or five brightest guys in the whole Administration." "Kennedy was seduced," added Arthur Schlesinger. "All of us—Kennedy and Bundy and the rest—were hypnotized by Dick Bissell to some degree, and assumed that he knew what he was doing."[24]

And Bissell's vision was easy to endorse. The CIA had run up a string of covert successes in the postwar era—in Greece, the Philippines, Iran, and of course Guatemala, all balanced by only one failure, the 1958 effort to unseat Indonesia's Sukarno. As the agency had grown accustomed to quiet, inexpensive victories, the executive branch had grown accustomed to action unfettered by public debate and congressional consultation. A few lies might be needed to deflect inquiries from the press, but no one worried about getting caught—seven years had passed since the Guatemala coup, and nothing had yet been published to challenge the State Department's denial of any complicity.[25]

U.S. officials were therefore free to focus on the planned invasion, where one key question had always been how the Cuban population would react to the landing of a paramilitary force. The plan the CIA outlined in its pre-inaugural briefing of Secretary of State Dean Rusk called for the U.S.-trained exiles "to seize and defend a small area."

> It is expected that these operations will precipitate a general uprising throughout Cuba and cause the revolt of large segments of the Cuban Army and Militia. The lodgements, it is hoped, will serve as a rallying point for the thousands who are estimated to be ready for overt resistance to Castro but who hesitate to act until they can feel some assurance of success. A general revolt in Cuba, if one is successfully triggered by our operations, could serve to topple the Castro regime within a period of weeks. If matters do not eventuate as predicted above, the lodgement established by our force can be used as the site for establishment of a provisional government which can be recognized by the US, and hopefully by other American states, and given overt military assistance. The way will then be paved for United States military intervention aimed at pacification of Cuba, and this will result in the prompt overthrow of the Castro government.[26]

Rusk was probably alerted by the CIA's string of caveats ("it is expected . . . ," "it is hoped . . . ," "if matters do not eventuate as predicted . . ."), but the agency's briefing also contained a counterbalancing string of optimistic revelations, including news that its effort to create a civilian Demo-

cratic Revolutionary Front (Frente Revolucionario Democrático [FRD]) had yielded "excellent results," but that assessment was not simply optimistic; it was dead wrong. The CIA had assigned the job of creating this unified exile political organization to Howard Hunt, later made famous by Watergate, and he held FRD leaders in contempt: "I considered them shallow thinkers and opportunists," he wrote. "For Latin American males their caliber was about average; they displayed most Latin faults and few Latin virtues." This evaluation probably helps explain why, as the CIA's inspector general subsequently concluded, "as the project grew, the Agency reduced the exile leaders to the status of puppets."[27]

The CIA also told Rusk that the U.S. propaganda offensive (nine hours of daily broadcasting via Radio Swan) had fueled Cubans' disaffection, adding that more than words were being sent: "We have delivered, via twelve maritime missions, over 15,000 pounds of arms ammunition and demolition materials to resistance elements in Cuba. As of 13 January, we had dropped over 36,000 pounds of arms, leaflets and food on thirteen overflights"; most important, 560 Cuban personnel were now training in Guatemala. Additional recruits would soon be available, the CIA added, and "with the recent acquisition of 37 U.S. Army Special forces instructors, training should be completed by our target date." On the single occasion when CIA briefers were more candid (in mid-February they admitted that they had only "a good chance of overthrowing Castro"), they followed this cautious evaluation with a definite, "or at the very least causing a damaging civil war."[28]

The Joint Chiefs continued to oppose the project, but no one in the Pentagon seemed willing to lie down in front of the CIA's truck, and Defense officials eventually accepted Bissell's rosy scenarios, which were buttressed by a series of optimistic reports: "The opposition forces in the Escambray are enjoying great popularity with the Cuban people," the agency asserted confidently on 10 March, and a few days later it estimated "that Castro had the support of fewer than 20 per cent of the people and that fewer than 10 per cent of these supporters were true *fidelistas*." Then came the information that "disenchantment of the masses has spread through all the provinces. Spokesmen of opposition groups say that Santiago de Cuba and all of Oriente Province is seething with hate."[29] By early February, the chiefs were softening, telling Secretary McNamara that "timely execution of this plan has a fair chance of ultimate success"; at an interdepartmental meeting four days later, the representative of the Joint Chiefs of Staff "indicated he was confident that the strike force would be able to hold the beachhead at least six days." Even without an uprising, "the main body of the landing

party could retreat to the mountains and maintain themselves there indefinitely." By mid-March, the chiefs were advising McNamara "that a decision to proceed with the operation be made at the earliest practicable date."[30]

Plan opponents were at an overwhelming disadvantage after the Pentagon conceded. "Here we were," Schlesinger noted years later, "a bunch of ex-college professors sitting around faced by this panoply of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, Allen Dulles, a legendary figure, and Dick Bissell, the man who invented and promoted the U-2. It was rather difficult even to open one's mouth sometimes, in the face of these guys." And at a meeting held the day before the inauguration, one of the few five-star generals in the nation's history had told a lieutenant (junior grade), "We cannot let the present government there go on"; Kennedy, Arthur Schlesinger wrote, would have had a difficult time explaining why he had canceled a military expedition "advocated, sanctioned, and supported by the general who commanded the largest successful amphibious landing in history." And, Schlesinger continued, CIA director Allen Dulles "kept emphasizing what he called the 'disposal problem.' . . . What Dulles did not add, but what Kennedy fully understood, was that the domestic political implications of Kennedy's cancellation of this expedition would be very considerable." Bissell ended one mid-March memo with the vague threat that if the invasion were to be scrapped, "the alternative would appear to be the demobilization of the paramilitary forces and the return of its members to the United States. It is, of course, well understood that this course of action too involves certain risks."[31]

But at this point the administration was not especially concerned about domestic politics, nor was it merely a victim of Eisenhower-era momentum, and the upcoming failure was not simply the result of misleading reports from Bissell's CIA.[32] The documents suggest that President Kennedy and most of his key advisers exuded the same can-do attitude as Bissell. They were the people who had defeated Hitler and Tojo, and Thucydides was right: Cubans would be no problem.

Although the Kennedy inner circle was poised to act, some senior officials nonetheless tried to stop the train after it had left the station. Schlesinger told Kennedy that he would back a "swift, surgical stroke," but the agency's plan "seems to me to involve many hazards; and on balance . . . I am against it." U.S. allies would interpret the invasion as unprovoked bullying, he warned, and the United States would find itself on the same moral plane as Moscow; in the end, "Cuba will become our Hungary." This message must have come through, for a week later JFK told Richard Goodwin

that he adamantly opposed the use of U.S. troops: "I'm not going to risk an American Hungary. And that's what it could be, a fucking slaughter."[33] Assistant Secretary Thomas Mann was also opposed: the plan would not work, he said, primarily because a popular uprising against Castro was unlikely, so "we would, I believe, be far better off to do whatever has to be done in an open way and in accordance with the American tradition."[34] Only Senator J. William Fulbright and Undersecretary of State Chester Bowles consistently opposed the operation on principle. "The Castro regime is a thorn in the flesh; but it is not a dagger in the heart," Fulbright told Kennedy. "To give this activity even covert support is of a piece with the hypocrisy and cynicism for which the United States is constantly denouncing the Soviet Union in the United Nations and elsewhere. This point will not be lost on the rest of the world—nor on our own consciences for that matter." Bowles said the same thing.[35]

With these two exceptions, the argument made by the plan's opponents was not that overthrowing Castro's government was wrong but either that it would fail or that it would damage U.S. relations with the rest of the world, especially Latin America—as Rusk worried, "We might be confronted by serious uprisings all over Latin America if U.S. forces were to go in," and Mann added that "the effect on our position of hemispheric leadership would be catastrophic." So, McGeorge Bundy warned the president,

> when you have your meeting this afternoon on Cuba, I think you will find that there is a divergence of view between State on the one hand and CIA and Defense on the other. Defense and CIA now feel quite enthusiastic about the invasion from Guatemala—at the worst they think the invaders would get into the mountains, and at the best they think they might get a full-fledged civil war in which we could then back the anti-Castro forces openly. State Department takes a much cooler view, primarily because of its belief that the political consequences would be very grave both in the United Nations and in Latin America.

Writing just before leaving for his post as ambassador to India, John Kenneth Galbraith weighed in on State's side, reminding Kennedy that "Dulles got Guatemala at the price of losing all South America."[36]

But this argument was undermined by reports that many Latin American leaders were every bit as enthusiastic as the CIA. At their 19 January meeting, President Eisenhower had told Kennedy that "we are constantly getting the private opinions of the heads of Latin American governments that we should do something," and in February, Guatemala's Miguel Ydígo-

ras Fuentes urged JFK to unleash the Cubans being trained in his country—when a new Cuban government is installed, he wrote, "the people of Latin America will recover their morale and will have the United States and yourself as their saving leader who fulfills its undertakings." The CIA's Office of National Estimates agreed that *overt* intervention "would remind many people of the Soviet intervention in Hungary," but "most Latin American governments would at least privately approve of *unobtrusive* US support for an opposition move against Castro." Schlesinger heard the same thing when he sounded out elite opinion during a three-week trip to South America in February: Peru's Víctor Raúl Haya de la Torre had "an exceedingly sharp condemnation of Castro," Argentina's Arturo Frondizi believed that "Castro was a threat to the hemisphere," and the attitude of Bolivia's Víctor Paz Estensorro "may be described as including a strong private condemnation of Castro, a fervent hope that the US might rid the hemisphere of him, and a profound disinclination to identify himself publicly, except in the most marginal way, with anti-Castro action." For leaders such as Paz, a covert invasion by Cuban paramilitary forces would be an ideal alternative to either a continuation of the Cuban revolution or a U.S. invasion.[37]

A day after receiving Schlesinger's report, President Kennedy gathered with his senior foreign policy advisers to hear Bissell present the CIA's plan. Aware of the undercurrent of opposition, Bissell's deputy, Tracy Barnes, had warned his boss that "our only chance is to be very firm in our position and be very strong in urging the need for the proposed action." Rising to the challenge, Bissell was at his reassuring best, telling JFK that "the assault force was to consist of an amphibious/airborne assault with concurrent (but no prior) tactical air support, to seize a beachhead contiguous to terrain suitable for guerrilla operations. The provisional government would land as soon as the beachhead had been secured. If initial military operations were successful and especially if there were evidence of spreading disaffection against the Castro regime, the provisional government could be recognized and a legal basis provided for at least non-governmental [i.e., covert CIA] logistic support."[38]

Worried that an amphibious landing with air support would tie the operation too obviously to the United States, Kennedy requested a plan where the U.S. hand would be less obvious, and Bissell went back to his office to tinker with the details, making the landing in darkness and having the ships away from the area by dawn. He also switched the invasion's location from Trinidad to the more isolated Bay of Pigs. These changes secured McGeorge Bundy's endorsement; the CIA, he told Kennedy, had "done a

remarkable job of reframing the landing plan so as to make it unspectacular and quiet, and plausibly Cuban in its essentials. . . . I have been a skeptic about Bissell's operation, but now I think we are on the edge of a good answer. I also think that Bissell and Hawkins have done an honorable job of meeting the proper criticisms of the Department of State."[39]

When JFK went around the table at one final meeting with his advisers on 4 April, only Senator Fulbright and Secretary Rusk were opposed, and Rusk's negative vote was not strongly asserted—"I have always had a deep regret that I did not oppose the Bay of Pigs more forcefully," he lamented years later. "Rusk had plenty of private misgivings," wrote Schlesinger in his diary, "but he never, to my knowledge, opposed the operation, never argued against it, never told the President to call it off." Two days after the invasion's collapse, JFK commented, "There is only one person in the clear—that's Bill Fulbright. And he probably would have been converted if he had attended more of the meetings." With varying levels of enthusiasm, all the others advised the president to go ahead—"Let 'er rip" was the vote of the most experienced person at the table, Adolf Berle.[40] The next day, Schlesinger handed JFK his memo indicating that "on balance . . . I am against it," but on 11 April, Robert Kennedy took Schlesinger aside and told him that "the president has decided to go ahead and there is no point in upsetting him further by continuing to raise questions." That left Schlesinger with little choice but to concede: "From that point on, my negative memos would only be irritating."[41]

PRESIDENT KENNEDY IMMEDIATELY ACCEPTED responsibility for the failure, but he also appointed a commission chaired by General Maxwell Taylor to determine who *really* was to blame. In addition to its chair, the Taylor Commission (or Committee) was composed of Attorney General Kennedy, CIA director Dulles, and Admiral Burke. Meeting secretly, it heard testimony from more than fifty witnesses at twenty hearings over the course of the next month.[42] CIA inspector general Lyman Kirkpatrick also launched an internal agency investigation, which was far more critical—so critical of the CIA, in fact, that deputy director C. P. Cabell advised Dulles to destroy the inspector general's report: "This is not a useful report for anyone inside or outside the Agency." Instead, Dulles added a long rebuttal drafted by Bissell's deputy, Tracy Barnes, calling it "Part 2 of 2 Parts" to ensure that the inspector general's report would not stand alone in the historical record.[43] (The single surviving copy did not see the light of day until declassified at the request of the National Security Archive in early 1998, thirty-six years

after it was written.) Barnes and other CIA officials who participated in the failed project generally criticized any assessment that faulted their preparation or execution. Howard Hunt, for example, wrote that the purpose of the Taylor Commission was "to whitewash the New Frontier by heaping guilt on CIA" and that all of the critical comments in the memoirs of Kennedy-era authors combined to create "an unparalleled campaign of vilification and obloquy that must have made the Kremlin mad with joy."[44]

But what exactly *had* gone wrong? The CIA had told Kennedy officials before the battle that the rebels were "the best-trained men in Latin America," and just before the attack, Colonel Hawkins, a much-decorated combat hero, had reported that

> these officers are young, vigorous, intelligent and motivated with a fanatical urge to begin battle for which most of them have been preparing in the rugged conditions of training camps for almost a year. I have talked to many of them in their language. Without exception, they have utmost confidence in their ability to win. They say they know their own people and believe after they have inflicted one serious defeat upon opposing forces, the latter will melt away from Castro, who they have no wish to support. They say it is Cuban tradition to join a winner and they have supreme confidence they will win all engagements against the best Castro has to offer.

"I share their confidence," Hawkins added. "The Brigade is well organized and is more heavily armed and better equipped in some respects than U.S. infantry units. The men have received intensive training in the use of their weapons, including more firing experience than U.S. troops would normally receive."[45]

The brigade's fighters clearly possessed much bravery, but some had been braver than others. When the battle had obviously been lost early on 19 April, a Cuban patrol boat had approached one of the brigade's disabled ships, the *Houston*, grounded one hundred yards from the beach. Firing from the shore, brigade members killed four of the six Cuban militiamen in the patrol boat, and a CIA observer reported that the remaining two Cubans, taken prisoner, "were executed because of the logistical problems they made for the survivors." Then the *Houston*'s captain saw his escape route: he grabbed the captured patrol boat and, joined by the commander of the brigade's Fifth Battalion, the chaplain, and three doctors—all officers—fled to the open sea after "bidding their men to scatter and make out

for themselves." The CIA observer hypothesized that this type of leadership "might indicate a reason why the 5th Battalion seemed reluctant to go ashore." At the same time, Admiral Clark was trying to convince the undamaged ships to return to the battle and unload their supplies. Two of them did so, but two others continued southward, with one captain radioing that "he would have trouble with his crew if he attempted to turn north." He eventually turned the boat around, but the fourth boat was 218 miles south of the Bay of Pigs by noon on the second day of the three-day battle.[46]

The story was the same when it came time to evaluate the performance of the Cuban pilots: before the battle, Colonel Hawkins reported they were "motivated, strong, well trained, armed to the teeth, and ready." He considered the crews "equal to the best U.S. Air Force squadron." But a U.S. contract pilot told a different story in a postbattle debriefing:

> MR. [ROBERT] KENNEDY: You say then that you did not find the Cuban pilots to be very good?
>
> MR. HAYDEN: No. When the chips were down and the going was tough, they found excuses NOT to do the job.
>
> MR. KENNEDY: What percentage would you say did do their job?
>
> MR. HAYDEN: I'd say that not over 35 per cent of them did.

Stanley Beerli, an air force colonel on loan to the CIA as chief of air operations, interrupted to point out that "in our early missions, we had some Cuban crews making as many as three passes over heavily defended targets," to which Hayden replied, "That was in the early days when they smelled victory. When the going got tough, we had trouble even getting them into the aircraft. On D+2, it took us several hours to get some of their crews in the aircraft, and then they aborted the mission." Beerli eventually admitted that his gung-ho Cuban pilots "were good until things started going wrong," and by the morning of 19 April, "he had to beg them to go."[47] The CIA's independent assessment included the information that "on D plus 1 it became necessary to utilize American civilian pilots to protect the beachhead area due to the fact the Cubans were either too tired or refused to fly" and that "on the morning of D plus 2 American pilots again were pressed into service for protection of the beachhead area for two reasons (1) the reluctance of the Cuban pilots to fly more combat sorties without air to air cover and (2) the Americans were attempting to build morale and develop a will to win."[48]

Ignoring these efforts to shift the blame to the brigade's fighters, both the CIA's inspector general and the Taylor Commission instead pointed to a basic conceptual flaw, and here the inspector general pulled no punches:

> The fundamental cause of the disaster was the Agency's failure to give the project, notwithstanding its importance and its immense potentiality for damage to the United States, the top-flight handling which it required—appropriate organization, staffing throughout by highly qualified personnel, and full-time direction and control of the highest quality. . . . Insufficiencies in these vital areas resulted in pressures and distortions, which in turn produced numerous serious operational mistakes and omissions, and in lack of awareness of developing dangers, in failure to take action to counter them, and in grave mistakes of judgment. There was failure at high levels to concentrate informed, unwavering scrutiny on the project and to apply experienced, unbiased judgment to the menacing situations that developed.

Kirkpatrick argued that this problem had arisen with the radical shift away from a "long, slow clandestine build-up of guerrilla forces" to what actually happened thirteen months later. Because the operation was a special project, few were privy to this evolution; the plan evolved within the confines of a "complex and bizarre organizational situation" where no one had the knowledge, the opportunity, and the nerve to stand up and tell Bissell that he was creating "an overt military enterprise that was too large for the Agency's capabilities."[49]

After making this central point—Bissell had mismanaged the overall effort—the inspector general added a frank criticism of lower-level CIA personnel: "In many cases, the reason for assigning a given person to the project was merely that he had just returned from abroad and was still without an assignment"; worse yet, the CIA units asked to supply personnel "had in some instances given the project their disposal cases." Of the forty-two officers who held the principal operational jobs in WH/4, seventeen were ranked in the lowest third of their respective grade, nine were in the lowest tenth, and "some of the people who served the project on contract turned out to be incompetent." Almost none of the hundreds of agency personnel working directly with Cubans spoke Spanish or had any knowledge of Latin America, and some openly sneered at the people they were training. "They considered the Cubans untrustworthy and difficult to work with. Members of the Revolutionary Council have been described to the inspectors as 'idiots' and members of the brigade as 'yellow-bellied,'

[while] some of the contract employees, such as ships' officers, treated the Cubans like dirt." The inspector general concluded that "the Agency, and for that matter, the American nation is not likely to win many people away from Communism if the Americans treat other nationals with condescension or contempt, ignore the contributions and the knowledge which they can bring to bear, and generally treat them as incompetent children whom the Americans are going to rescue for reasons of their own."[50]

Both the inspector general and the Taylor Commission also placed some blame on President Kennedy for dictating crucial details, beginning with his veto of a landing at the populated region around Trinidad, directly adjacent to the Escambray Mountains where guerrilla operations might have been possible, and insistence on a less favorable but nearly deserted site where U.S. assistance would be less obvious. CIA officials did not complain at the time JFK made his decision, but when subsequently asked why the more remote site had been selected, Jake Esterline shot back, "There was no other goddam place." JFK's 11 March veto of Trinidad came at the insistence of Dean Rusk and Thomas Mann, both of whom expressed concern that deniability would be impossible as long as the air strikes were coming from outside Cuba: Mann "hammered at the point repeatedly and wanted to know if there wasn't some area where they could land on a ready made area." The Bay of Pigs had a landing strip marginally adequate for use by the rebels, while Trinidad did not. At one earlier meeting, Rusk had asked if perhaps the CIA could drop a bulldozer near Trinidad and quickly construct a runway, prompting Esterline to reply sarcastically that "if I ever make a suggestion like that to Mr. Dulles, I should be summarily fired." That, Esterline noted "is the last time I ever went to a meeting with Mr. Rusk."[51]

More important than the site selection was Kennedy's decision to whittle away at the plan, constantly reducing the scope of U.S. involvement. The Taylor Commission concluded that "the leaders of the operation were obliged to fit their plan inside changing ground rules laid down for non-military considerations, which often had serious operational disadvantages." Writing in retirement, the CIA's Dulles concluded that "among the Pres[idential] advisers there were enough Doubting Thomas to dull the attack, but not enough to bring about its cancellation."[52] The ostensible goal was to maintain plausible deniability, and administration officials continually rejected CIA requests for more obvious U.S. involvement, beginning in January, when the secretary-designate, Rusk, turned down Bissell's request to use the Opa Locka airfield in southern Florida for support flights, and ending three days before the assault, when the State Department rejected

the CIA proposal to use sonic booms to scare the Cubans because such booms could come only from U.S. aircraft.[53]

At the same time, everyone directly involved in the operation considered plausible deniability an impossible condition. A senior CIA official remarked, "You can't say that fifteen hundred Cubans got together in a sort of Michael Mullins Marching and Chowder Society and acquired aircraft and ships and ammunition and radios and so on and so forth all by their little selves. The American hand would clearly show in it." This was also the view of the admiral who loaned the brigade its landing craft after dutifully painting out any identifying marks: "There was nothing on them that said U.S., but I don't know who would have thought they belonged to anybody else." Those who took this position included former president Eisenhower, who accepted JFK's invitation to talk immediately after the invasion: "I was astounded, I said, 'Mr. President, how could you expect the world to believe that we had nothing to do with it? Where did these people get the ships to go from Central America to Cuba? Where did they get the weapons? Where did they get all the communications and all the other things that they would need? How could you possibly have kept from the world any knowledge that the United States had been assisting the invasion?" But all of these comments came after the fiasco. No one warned President Kennedy before the invasion that denial would be impossible. Clearly grasping at straws, Arthur Schlesinger was typical when he suggested to JFK that it would be possible "to show that the alleged CIA personnel were errant idealists or soldiers of fortune working on their own."[54]

The crucial change dictated by the quest for deniability was a series of decisions limiting air support. "By holding back air support," Richard Nixon wrote, "Kennedy had doomed the operation," but Nixon failed to note that the first limitation was imposed by the Eisenhower administration, when Undersecretary of State Livingston Merchant told the Special Group "that it would be impossible politically to carry out three days of pre-invasion bombing."[55] Bissell accordingly revised the plan to include bombing only one day before the invasion, although this reduced the probability that all of Castro's air force would be destroyed before the invasion and although everyone directly involved in the project continued to insist that wiping out all of Castro's planes was essential. A few days after Bissell's revision, the CIA's briefing notes for secretary-designate Rusk included the flat assertion that "control of air and sea in the objective area is absolutely required. The Cuban Air Force and naval vessels capable of opposing our landing must be knocked out or neutralized before our amphibious shipping makes its

final run into the beach. If this is not done, we will be courting disaster." At a 1996 conference, Esterline seemed surprised that his message was not passed to the president: "It never occurred to me before that Dick Bissell might not be relaying what we were saying to Kennedy—what was so desperately vital to the success of this thing. And we—believe me—we didn't spell it out just once, we spelled it out every day as we went along."[56]

Had Eisenhower and Kennedy not reduced the prelanding bombing, it is unclear whether a sufficient number of Cuban exiles could have been recruited to fly the aircraft. To train Cubans to operate a thirty-plane air force, the CIA brought more than 150 U.S. personnel to an airfield at Nicaragua's Puerto Cabezas, but the agency, worried that the Cuban pilots "may lack the motivation to take the stern measures required against targets in their own country," soon requested permission to use U.S. pilots.[57] Deniability dictated that U.S. personnel not be authorized to fly the planes in combat.

Then President Kennedy decided to cancel air support by U.S. Navy pilots on the morning of the invasion, thereby signing what Esterline saw as the brigade's death warrant: "It was totally predictable. If we didn't have air superiority for a couple of days, until things could happen inside Cuba, we were dead." Calling JFK's decision a "devastating blow," Dulles wrote, "Had I known that there might be no second air strike at the Bay of Pigs and that no air cover would be provided, my judgment would have been very similar to the estimate I gave at the time of Guatemala—some chance of success with the air cover, none without it."[58] Hunt also viewed the destruction of Castro's air force as "basic to the success of the entire invasion," and Barnes agreed: "The plan that was appraised was modified by elimination of the D-Day airstrike. Had the Cuban Air Force been eliminated, all these estimates might have been accurate instead of underestimated." Grayston Lynch described hearing that JFK had canceled the air support as "like learning that Superman is a fairy."[59]

In the end, the few air attacks that were permitted proved inadequate. The first came on 15 April, two days before the invasion, and U.S. officials subsequently could not even agree on their purpose: the CIA's Esterline believed that they had sought to destroy Castro's air force on the ground, but the Joint Chiefs' Lemnitzer insisted that "they were never intended to accomplish the destruction of the Castro air force. They were to lend plausibility to the story that the strikes had been launched from within Cuba."[60] The 15 April attack failed to meet either objective. Twelve of Castro's eighteen planes were knocked out of combat, leaving him with two T-33 jet trainers, two British propeller-driven Sea Furies, and two or

three B-26s, while what little air cover Kennedy permitted was plagued by snafus—a last-ditch attack by rebel bombers on 19 April was to have had protection from U.S. fighters from the *Essex*, but, depending on whose story one selects, they were either flying too high to be of help or were over the beach at the wrong time. "Inexplicably sloppy performance on the part of the Navy," concluded CIA historian Jack Pfeiffer.[61]

One fact is indisputable, however: since the pre-invasion strikes on 15 April met with only partial success, without air cover the rebels were at a dramatic disadvantage in their slow-moving ships and their exposed positions on the beach. As Esterline had argued, "We've got to have control of the air, or these ships which are deck-loaded with gasoline can't operate, because they could go all of 5 to 6 knots per hour, 5 to 6 knots." But even if these problems had not existed, a team of three officers who conducted an evaluation of the volunteer force in early March had warned that "the odds are about 85 to 15 against surprise being achieved in the attack against Castro's Cuba. If surprise is not achieved, it is most likely that the air mission will fail. As a consequence, one or more of Castro's combat aircraft will likely be available for use against the invasion force, and an aircraft armed with 50 caliber machine guns could sink all or most of the invasion force." He was right. Castro's two T-33s, each with two .50-caliber machine guns, inflicted the heaviest damage on the brigade.[62]

PERHAPS THE MOST intriguing explanation for the invasion's failure, this one not mentioned by either the inspector general or the Taylor Commission, was that it was never intended to succeed—that at some point in the plan's evolution, the invasion became little more than bait, designed to lure Kennedy to commit to battle; then, when standing at the edge of failure, he would have no choice but to authorize the use of U.S. troops and thereby to end the Cuban Revolution. Arthur Schlesinger took this view: "Dickie Bissell was prepared to accept any reductions, any changes, in the plan so long as it went forward. He was convinced, I believe, that if it failed, military intervention would follow."[63] Although Schlesinger publicly stated this belief at an academic conference held decades after the invasion's failure, he twice warned the president before the invasion: on 31 March that "the real belief [of Miami's exiles] is that the logic of the situation will require the US to send in Marines to make sure that the invasion is a success," and on 5 April that "if the landing fails to trigger uprisings 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."[64]

Bissell denied that he had been involved in any such bait-and-switch subterfuge, but few mortals writing for the historical record would volunteer that they had engineered a military debacle while simultaneously deceiving their commander in chief. Bissell also varied his story: in his 1975 oral history, he downplayed the need for the local support that he had previously considered crucial ("We didn't look for any help from the locals in that [initial] phase"), and he outlined a scenario that had never before been mentioned: if "you had a beachhead that couldn't be dislodged, then that might have been the time to press, through diplomatic channels, for a cease fire and a supervised election." In the end, Bissell may not have known exactly what he had expected to occur. "After he was fired, Bissell spent much of his time contriving ingenious justifications," White House aide Richard Goodwin later wrote. "As obsessively as the Ancient Mariner, he recounted his sad tale of promises broken, decisions not taken, fatal hesitations—all fabricated to divert attention from his own fabulous staggering miscalculation."[65]

Since even Bissell seemed so uncertain, Schlesinger's bait-and-switch hypothesis would be little more than speculation had not Dulles left behind some supporting evidence—handwritten notes in the Allen Dulles Papers uncovered by Lucien Vandenbroucke. There the CIA director admitted to having failed to be completely candid with the president about "the realities of the situation" and conceded that the CIA's plan had some holes in it:

> We did not want to raise these issues . . . which might only harden the decision against the type of action we required. I have seen a good many operations which started out like the B of P—most under complete secrecy—non-involvement of the US [and] initial reluctance to authorize supporting actions. This limitation tends to disappear as the needs of the operation become clarified. [We] felt that when the chips were down—when the crisis arose in reality, any action required for success would be authorized, rather than permit the enterprise to fail.[66]

Was this the thinking as the CIA prepared its invasion? All the major participants are now dead, and barring the discovery of some new documents, the truth will never be known for certain. The fact that there was no plan for the next steps—for how to proceed after the beach had been secured—

may have indicated nothing more that the belief that Cubans would rise up and join the invaders. But securing the beach may have been when Dulles, Bissell, and others expected JFK to send in the marines waiting offshore on the *Essex*. "The whole plan of the CIA . . . was Phase 2, the U.S. invasion," argued both Philip Brenner and Piero Gleijeses at a 1996 conference, and theirs is a convincing argument.[67]

SOME COWARDICE, much inadequate staffing, many White House demands for deniability (which changed the site and limited the air cover), and JFK's refusal to be led into a commitment of U.S. forces—all of these factors help to explain the invasion's failure. But their explanatory power pales in comparison to the one crucial miscalculation: Cubans, the CIA believed, would welcome the invaders. Eleven days before the invasion, the agency reported,

> It is generally believed that the Cuban Army has been successfully penetrated by opposition groups and that it will not fight in the event of a showdown. It is also certain that the police, who despise the militia, will not fight. The morale of the militia is falling. They have shown little wish to fight. . . . It is generally believed [redacted] that approximately 55 to 80 percent of the militia units will defect when it becomes evident that the real fight against Castro has begun.

And this was not the first such prediction. Since mid-1960, the CIA had been reporting on "mounting evidence of internal dissatisfaction and mounting opposition to the Castro regime," on "an encouraging upswing . . . noticeable in the number of prominent defectors," and on the Catholic Church becoming "increasingly outspoken against Communism in Cuba." By the time Kennedy's staff was preparing to move into the White House, Bissell's deputy, Barnes, was explaining that "basic to the plan is the expectation that . . . the landing in force will encourage and produce active internal opposition to Castro." But in describing one planning meeting, the CIA's Hunt asserted that "neither during this nor other meetings was it asserted that the underground or the populace was to play a decisive role in the campaign. The contrary has been alleged by many writers who did not take part in our councils."[68]

Two separate reports suggest that Barnes was correct and Hunt was mistaken. One came from information provided by five Bay of Pigs participants who managed to escape capture, work their way to Havana, and sneak into the Brazilian embassy. After debriefing the men, the embassy reported

to Itamaraty that an uprising had been promised: "It was constantly said that as soon as their landing took place, numerous supporters, among the troops of the revolutionary Government, and the great number of uprisings in the Cuban interior, would make the work of the invaders significantly easier." A Canadian embassy report was identical: "Captured prisoners stated that a fundamental postulate of the operation was the expectation of anti-Castro uprisings throughout Cuba and the defection without a fight of a large proportion of the Cuban armed forces."[69]

Back in Washington, Secretary Rusk told the Taylor Commission that an internal uprising had been considered "utterly essential," and McGeorge Bundy filled in the plan's details: the invaders simply needed to win the first battle, thereby demonstrating that they "were better fighters, with better equipment," just as Colonel Hawkins had assured everyone. Then, after that initial showing, "defections would begin; uprisings would occur in other parts of the island, and so on." Obviously, commented Marine Corps Commandant David Shoup, Admiral Clark "wouldn't be taking 30,000 additional rifles if we didn't think there was going to be somebody to use them." He never expected the small paramilitary force to "overthrow Castro without support. They could never expect anything but annihilation."[70] In his memoir, the CIA's inspector general, Kirkpatrick, concluded that the expectation of local support had been a simple error of judgment, which led to "a complete miscalculation by the CIA operators of what was required to do the job."[71]

Many factors no doubt contributed to the defeat, but the fundamental flaw—the bedrock error—was the failure to understand that the Cubans would fight back. "What could they have thought of us Cubans?" asked Fidel Castro. "Who would believe that a people would be so stupid to receive them with open arms?"

> We are going to give them all a medal and say thanks to [Nicaragua's Luis] Somoza [for allowing the use of Puerto Cabezas], the State Department, Mr. Kennedy, and Mr. Dulles for being so noble and so democratic and respectful of international laws and human rights, for preparing this group to liberate us from agrarian reform and urban reform and from all these teachers and literacy workers. Come again to bring the Yankee administrators; come again to close the beaches, to form aristocratic clubs, to give us unemployment, to bring back the soldiers for the barracks which have been transformed into schools, to bring lower wages and higher prices. Come again to exploit and rape.[72]

In the end, the United States was left with nothing but lies, a policy captured best by Arthur Schlesinger, who on 10 April wrote to JFK that "if some of our representatives cannot evade in debate the question whether the CIA has actually helped the Cuban rebels, they will presumably be obliged, in the traditional pre–U-2 manner, to deny any such CIA activity." He encouraged JFK to prepare an evasive answer for Cuba's inevitable claim that the invasion was U.S.-assisted, and "when lies must be told, they should be told by subordinate officials."[73]

Thus, in response to a request from an Alabama newspaper, the Department of Defense "categorically denied that any elements of the Alabama National Guard, units or individuals, had participated as such in any training program for anti-Castro rebels." The "as such" was crucial: the Pentagon knew that the CIA had hired independent specialists to train the Cuban pilots, that all of them happened to be members of the Alabama Air National Guard, and that four guard members had been killed during bombing runs in Cuba.[74] Others were clearly unwitting participants in the denial. Famously, U.N. ambassador Adlai Stevenson was misled into the most mortifying moment of his public career. A week before the first air strike, Schlesinger had flown to New York to brief Stevenson, arriving late, during the middle of Tracy Barnes's explanation that, yes, a group of Cubans was about to invade their homeland, and, yes, the U.S. had assisted with funds and training, but, no, the United States was not going to be involved. Neither Barnes nor Schlesinger made any effort to tell Stevenson the truth: that the entire effort was a CIA operation. Schlesinger's diary characterized this incomplete briefing as "an unfortunate misunderstanding," noting that Stevenson opposed the operation but "is prepared to try and make the best possible U.S. case."[75]

A week later, on Saturday, 15 April, a Cuban pilot climbed into a B-26 with Cuban air force markings and took off for Miami from the Puerto Cabezas air base, the existence of which Barnes had failed to mention to Ambassador Stevenson. Before landing, the pilot, Mario Zúñiga, opened his canopy and fired a few rounds from his pistol into one of the two engines, then landed his crippled aircraft, told U.S. immigration officials that he had defected from Castro's air force, and requested asylum. At that moment, eight exile-piloted B-26s were bombing three different Cuban airfields, seeking to knock out Castro's air capability.[76]

By 10:30 A.M., Cuban foreign minister Raúl Roa was standing before the U.N. General Assem-

bly's First (Political) Committee was quickly scheduled for later in the day, and at that meeting, Roa charged the United States with bombing Cuba from bases in Guatemala and the United States. Stevenson insisted that the bombing had been done by defecting Cuban pilots. Holding up a picture of Zúñiga's aircraft, he pointed to "the markings of Castro air force on the tail, which everyone can see for himself. The Cuban star and the initials F.A.R. (for Fuerza Aérea Revolucionaria) are clearly visible." "Entirely false" was how Guatemala's U.N. envoy characterized Roa's claim that the invading forces had been trained in his country.[77]

Within hours, the cover had been blown (the eight machine guns on Zúñiga's B-26 were mounted in the nose cone; the six machine guns on Cuba's B-26s were mounted on the wings), and on Sunday evening Stevenson fired off a telegram to Secretary Rusk, the first two words of which were "Greatly Disturbed." Stevenson went on to say that he "had definite impression from Barnes when he was here that no action would be taken which could give us political difficulty." Now, Stevenson continued, "no one will believe that bombing attacks on Cuba from outside could have been organized without our complicity." Still unaware that the United States had engineered the entire episode, Stevenson added, "nor can I understand if we could not prevent such an outside attack from taking place at this time why I could not have been warned and provided pre-prepared material with which to defend us." Early the next morning, 17 April, a few hours after the brigade had landed, McGeorge Bundy flew up to New York to apologize and tell Stevenson the truth. With his mission accomplished, Bundy telephoned Rusk to report that the ambassador had agreed "to pick up the pieces and to see where he can go," but, Bundy noted, "there is a morale problem."[78]

If such a problem indeed existed, Stevenson initially hid it well. Later that day, when Foreign Minister Roa told the General Assembly that Cuba was being invaded "by a mercenary force organized, financed and armed by the Government of the United States and coming from Guatemala and Florida," Stevenson replied that Roa's charges were "totally false," a reply seconded once again by the Guatemalan representative, who added that his country "had never allowed and would never allow its territory to be used for the organization of acts of aggression against its American sister republics." Two days later, Stevenson cabled Rusk to say that he, too, was now ready to lie: "Having started this operation and having already paid heavy political price for it, I hope we will use covert means to maximum, to make it succeed and succeed fast. . . . Overt aid, if decided upon, must

be based on sound legal position even if it is fiction."[79] A few hours later the invasion collapsed, making Stevenson the final senior official to climb aboard a sinking ship.

Cuba, in contrast, now claimed a solid triumph, as Richard Goodwin reported after a meeting with Che Guevara several months later: "He wanted to thank us very much for the invasion—that it had been a great political victory for them—enabled them to consolidate—and transformed them from an aggrieved little country to an equal." The day after the defeat, JFK told a gathering of newspaper editors that his patience was "not inexhaustible," adding emphatically that his government "will not hesitate in meeting its primary obligations which are the security of our Nation." But the administration clearly wanted the topic off the front pages: the minutes of a National Security Council meeting two days later "noted the President's view that there should be no further discussion outside the Government of the meaning of recent landings in Cuba, since the object now is to move forward."[80]

But what about the 1,179 prisoners? Cuba offered to exchange them for five hundred bulldozers, an idea that appeared to emerge unrehearsed from one of Fidel Castro's speeches: "Thousands and thousands of tractors have been distributed," he told the audience of peasant farmers, focusing on Cuba's agrarian reform, but "there are still not enough tractors to break all the ground." The prisoners' labor could help: "The least they can do is earn the bread they eat [and] if imperialism does not want its worms to work, let it exchange tractors and machinery for them." More specifically, he suggested, "let them send 500 bulldozers and we will return" the prisoners. Castro then asked for a vote: "If the peasants here are in agreement with this proposal, let them raise their hands. Good."[81]

Confusion immediately arose over the type of implement demanded. Castro had first used the Spanish word "*tractores*," then had switched to the English "bulldozers," and then had used "*tractores*" again but described bulldozer-like equipment: "The tractors must be of the tread-type, not with rubber tires, and the good ones that are used for building roads." Whatever the model, a "Tractors for Freedom" fund-raising committee was quickly assembled, cochaired by Eleanor Roosevelt, Milton Eisenhower, labor leader Walter Reuther, and banker Joseph Dodge, who informed the Cuban government that they would solicit private donations for the tractors.

The Cubans immediately sent ten of the prisoners to the United States to negotiate with the committee, but the talks hit snag after snag. The first occurred just an hour after the men arrived in Miami, when they were refused

rooms at the Dupont Hotel because one of the ten was insufficiently Caucasian. The negotiations dragged on while Republicans objected to what they considered blackmail and while the fund-raising committee, claiming a heretofore unrecognized expertise in tropical farming, discussed the type of tractors that would be most appropriate for Cuba. In June, the committee telegraphed the Cuban government, "We are willing to make available 500 agricultural tractors with plowing accessories, disks, and harrows of the types needed the most to increase Cuba's agricultural production and raise the standard of living of the Cuban people."[82] Meanwhile, all of the captives were sentenced to thirty years in prison.

The committee then sent a group of agricultural experts to Havana, and by that time the central question was not the type of equipment Cubans should or should not want but whether the payment would be an "indemnity" for harming Cuba, as the Cubans insisted, or a "ransom" for the prisoners, as Washington preferred. Unable to reach an agreement, the experts returned to the United States, and in late June, the committee disbanded, returning unopened envelopes containing donations from more than seventy thousand citizens. Only in December 1962, after the missile crisis, were the prisoners exchanged for about sixty million dollars in food and medicine.[83]

IN THE MEANTIME, Cuba's revolutionary government had a solid victory. Arthur Schlesinger had warned JFK that the operation "would fix a malevolent image of the new Administration in the minds of millions," and as Schlesinger soon discovered while traveling in Europe, the invasion had done just that. It also tapped into the deepest well of Cuban nationalism, creating what probably stands as the most enthusiastic May Day audience in any country's history. "Rights do not come from size," Fidel Castro told the crowd. "Right does not come from one country being bigger than another. That does not matter. We have only a limited territory, a small nation, but our right is as respectable as that of any country, regardless of its size."[84]