

**Communication Breakdown:
The Failures of the Bay of Pigs Invasion**

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Introduction

The Bay of Pigs Invasion is considered to be one of the largest failures in American foreign policy history. One of the main reasons the operation failed so miserably is because of the organizational structure of interconnected government agencies which led to multiple breakdowns in the planning and execution of the invasion. The CIA, State Department, and White House all had different motives and political agendas when dealing with the invasion. Since this was the case, there were multiple instances where information vital to the success of the operation was withheld from various individuals, including the President of the United States John F. Kennedy. Had the U.S. government had better communication between the different agencies, the Bay of Pigs Invasion likely would have been cancelled well before the operation was executed.

Historical Background

Planning for the Bay of Pigs Invasion was initiated by the CIA, at the direction of the Eisenhower administration, following the collapse of the United States-backed Cuban dictatorship of Fulgencio Batista in 1959 ("Bay of Pigs Invasion"). The goal of the operation was to overthrow Fidel Castro, the new communist leader, by inciting a revolution within the nation. The operation was largely planned by the CIA, who trained over 1,000 Cuban exiles, known as Brigade 2506, in Guatemala training camps for over

a year. Once prepared, the Cuban exiles would invade the south-central coast of Cuba. A smaller team would invade the eastern coast in order to create confusion, while paratroopers would be dropped into Cuba in an attempt to disrupt Cuban transportation. There was also planned U.S. air support for the Cuban invaders ("The Bay of Pigs").

On April 15th, 1961 eight U.S. WWII B-26 bombers disguised as Cuban aircrafts, flown by Cuban exiles, bombed Cuban airfields but missed many of their targets. The planes then landed in Florida as if they were flown by Cuban defectors. The press released photos of the clearly U.S.-built planes to the public and the cover story was blown. President Kennedy cancelled a second planned airstrike following this misstep. On April 17th, the Cuban exiles invaded the Bay of Pigs. They were immediately met by a strong resistance from the Cuban military. Cuban planes destroyed the exile's escort ships and air support ("The Bay of Pigs"). By April 19th, Brigade 2506's stronghold was captured by Cuban forces and the operation had failed.

The operation was not immediately favored by President Kennedy, who only allowed the invasion to continue after he was assured it could not be traced back to the United States (Anderson 743). The CIA-planned invasion differed greatly from the executed invasion. First, as mentioned, there was more planned air support but that was cancelled by President Kennedy. Second, the operation relied heavily on the Cuban people to join the invasion and revolt against the Castro regime, but this ultimately did not happen. Third, the CIA plan did not take into account the possibility that the Cuban military would be prepared for the "surprise" invasion of the Bay of Pigs ("The Bay of Pigs").

Multiple Failures

Examining what went wrong with the Bay of Pigs Invasion is difficult, because there are many components and actors involved. First, this paper will examine simply what went wrong, and then examine what contributed to these errors. The failures of the invasion can be explained by more than one error, though they are all largely connected to a simple breakdown in communication.

Cuban Support

As previously mentioned, one of the reasons the operation failed is because the CIA overestimated the discontent of the Cuban people in respect to Fidel Castro's rule. The operation relied heavily on both the Cuban people and members of the Cuban military joining the invasion and revolting against the Castro regime. Without this support, the idea of 1,400 men defeating the entire Cuban military was impossible. Phillip W. Bonsal, the last American Ambassador to Cuba, later wrote about the invasion that, "[The CIA and Kennedy] underestimated the fanaticism and combative spirit of those who supported Castro unconditionally. The notion that this support would melt away and that tens of thousands of Cubans would defect or refuse to fight . . . was simply wishful thinking" (Gomez).

The U.S. also failed to include all Cuban exiles in the invasion. Only supporters

of the U.S.-backed former dictator Batista were included in the operation, while members of the People's Revolutionary Movement, likely the most capable anti-Castro group, were excluded ("Bay of Pigs Invasion"). This severely weakened the strength of Brigade 2506. Had the United States government simply included all anti-Castro groups, the outcome of the invasion could have been greatly different.

The U.S. was looking to install a Batista-friendly government and ignored the possibility of involving other Cubans. The U.S. often tries to install governments that they know will be friendly to them. This is an organizational tactic that often fails for the U.S., as seen throughout U.S. history – Pahlavi with Iran, Batista with Cuba, Saddam with Iraq, etc. This type of maneuver is an attempt by the United States to install governments which they can work with and it's ultimately for personal benefit. However, there are also long term consequences for these actions.

In a CIA memorandum, the United States ultimately concluded that both, 1) "The short life of the beachhead was not sufficient to trigger an immediate popular reaction, and Castro's repressive measures following the landing made coordinated uprisings of the populace impossible" and that, 2) "The effectiveness of the Castro military forces, as well as that of his police measures, was not entirely anticipated or foreseen" (United States).

Failed Air Support

The invasion that was planned out by the CIA called for the use of strategic air

strikes against Cuban airfields prior to the invasion. After the failed bombings on April 15th, President Kennedy cancelled the the second set of planned air strikes to avoid further embarrassment (“The Bay of Pigs”). Kennedy reversed his decision later and ordered the bombers to attack more targets in Cuba (again prior to the invasion). However, the pilots were unable to drop a single bomb on the Cuban targets due to fog and cloud cover (Cottle and Julio).

The plan originally called for the use of airstrikes on the invasion date as well, but following the public outrage after the April 15th bombings, President Kennedy cancelled any further air support by the United States. He had stated many times publicly that the United States would not engage Cuba, so any more show of force could completely destabilize the Cold War equilibrium. He did not want anyone knowing the United States was involved in the planning and execution of this operation (Anderson 743).

During the deliberations of whether or not to provide Brigade 2506 with air support during the invasion, President Kennedy actually stated that the United States would not support the invasion through the air unless it was deemed to be a “tactical necessity.” However, when Secretary of State Dean Rusk relayed this sentiment to the CIA, he excluded the the “tactical necessity” portion and said the United States would be launching no further air strikes against Cuba (Lynch 78).

The last attempt to help the Cubans with air support was on April 19th, during the final day of the invasion when six fighter jets were used to protect a exile-flown bomber and friendly ships. The air support, however, was extremely limited and was completely destroyed after arriving to Cuba an hour earlier than scheduled. This critical error was

likely caused by a failure by the planners to account for the time zone difference between Cuba and Nicaragua, causing the planes to arrive an hour early (Cottle and Julio).

A CIA memorandum on the invasion stated that, “The leaders of the operation did not always present their case with sufficient force and clarity to the senior officials of the Government to allow the latter to appreciate the consequences of some of their decisions ... in particular to the circumstances surrounding the cancellation of the [air] strikes” (United States). In other words, the air strikes likely could have occurred had those pitching the plan to the President and his administration stood more firmly behind their beliefs.

Lies and Manipulation

Another huge failure during the Bay of Pigs Invasion was lying and manipulation by key figures involved. As already previously mentioned, Dean Rusk relayed President Kennedy’s message to only use air support when it’s a “tactical necessity” as, basically, don’t use air support. When extremely vital information like this is altered, it has a profound impact on the success of the operation.

The President and the CIA were also withholding information from individuals. They purposefully left U.S. Ambassador to the United Nations Adlai Stevenson out of the loop on the invasion plans. Following the April 15th bombings, Stevenson’s aide contacted the State Department to find out if the United States was indeed involved with

the actions. The State Department, after consulting with U.S. Attorney General Robert F. Kennedy, stuck to the cover story that indeed Cubans had defected from Castro's regime, bombed Cuban bases, and landed in Florida. On the floor of the United Nations, Stevenson defend the UNited States and denied any role in the bombings of Cuba. (Lynch 76). Stevenson would later learn that President Kennedy referred to him privately as "my official liar" (Halperin 98).

The President was also having information withheld from him. It was clear to many in the CIA and in the President's own administration that both the Soviets and the Cubans were aware of the planned invasion. Secretary of Defense Robert MacNamara later recalled, "If I had been a Cuban leader, I think I might have expected a U.S. invasion ... There were covert operations. The Cubans knew that. There were covert operations extending over a long period of time" (Brenner). However, this information was never relayed clearly to the President, so the element of surprise was lost on invasion day.

Multiple manipulations led to further changes in the operational plan for the Bay of Pigs Invasion, many of which greatly altered the outcome of the invasion. Had Kennedy's message of "tactical necessity" been relayed to the CIA, then the outcome may have been different. had the U.S. looped Adlai Stevenson in on the planning of the invasion, he may have been able to warn them of the diplomatic consequences of such a drastic action against a sovereign nation. And finally, had the President been told of the prior knowledge of the invasion by the Cuban government, he may have very well cancelled the operation completely.

Organizational Implications

In a CIA memorandum assessing the failures of the operation, there were multiple points concerning the organizational structure of the entire operation and the direct influence it had over the failure of the invasion.

First, the CIA concluded that, “Operational restrictions designed to protect its covert character should have been accepted only if they did not impair the chance of success” (United States). This is basically saying that all information should have been shared between branches of government despite the covert nature of the operation, so long as the information did not limit the chance of the mission succeeding. This appears to be directly referencing the decision to withhold information from Stevenson about the invasion.

Second, the CIA concluded that, “The operation suffered from being run from the distance of Washington” (United States). Had the operation been based out of a location closer to the invasion, there would not have been as much confusion concerning the progression of the invasion and the need for air support.

Third, the CIA concluded that, “There was a need for a formalized procedure for interdepartmental coordination and follow-up with adequate record-keeping of decisions” (United States). This is saying that the different departments within government needed a system where decisions were shared with all individuals instead of just one individual relaying a message to another, and to another, and to another. For

example, had Kennedy's decision to support air strikes that were deemed a "tactical necessity" been relayed to more than one individual directly, it would have been known by more than one individual and therefore wouldn't have been manipulated.

Finally, the CIA concluded that, "We do not feel that any failure of intelligence contributed significantly to the defeat" (United States). While it may be true that a failure of intelligence did not contribute to the defeat, the lack of communication about the intelligence ultimately caused the defeat entirely. The CIA knew information, like the fact that the Soviets and Cubans knew of the invasion before it even happened, but didn't relay that information to the appropriate individuals.

Individual Actors

Understanding why both individuals and organizations made irrational decisions in the planning and execution of this operation is difficult. Ultimately, much of it can be attributed to human error and multiple different political agendas being in play at once. Examining the different individual actors gives us a picture as to why this operation failed on such a large scale.

The CIA

As previously mentioned, the CIA was the organization tasked with planning and executing this operation. In the planning phases, they failed to adequately calculate the

amount of Cuban citizens who would revolt against the Castro regime during the invasion. Ultimately the CIA wanted to go forward with this operation as quickly as possible, so they didn't invest enough time in the planning stages to figure out how much Cuban support for Castro there really was.

The CIA was invested in this operation heavily by the time it was executed, so they weren't looking to abort the mission until it was through to the end. This caused issues when the operation began to fail almost instantly. Likewise, even though they knew the Cubans had been tipped about the operation, they continued with it anyway. The time invested in this operation was too much for them to abort it that late into the planning stages, so they went ahead with it.

Kennedy Administration

Like the CIA, the Kennedy Administration also had their own political motives. During the election, John F. Kennedy stated on multiple occasions that he would stand up to Soviet aggression. What better way to do this, Kennedy thought, than to try to overthrow a Soviet-backed government in the Western hemisphere. However, once the operation began to falter, unlike the CIA, Kennedy realised that it had become a political mistake to carry out this operation in Cuba. This is why he decided to pull air support from the operation.

Kennedy also lied to his Ambassador to the U.N. because Kennedy had, on multiple occasions, stated that the United States would not support an invasion or

invade the country of Cuba. Of course, that was not true, but Kennedy didn't want to create a global crisis over the Bay of Pigs invasion.

Secretary of State Dean Rusk also had a large influence on this operation, and was looking out for what he believed was in the President's best interest when he relayed the "tactical necessity" message to the CIA without telling them the President had given the go-ahead to use air support if deemed absolutely necessary. Rusk knew this operation was going to backfire on the global stage, so he began to take steps to lessen its impact.

Conclusion

Multiple failures and a breakdown in communication ultimately led to the failure of the Bay of Pigs Invasion. Several revisions to how the operation was planned and executed would have needed been made in order for this to succeed. Clearly, the air strikes would have aided the Cuban exiles invading Cuba. However, the failure to use air strikes, as well as to adequately gauge the popularity and strength of the Castro regime, falls completely on the lack of communication and clear cut directives.

The Kennedy administration and CIA realized that they had failed miserably with this operation. For a candidate who campaigned on the promise to stand up to the Communists in the world, this was a terrible setback for John F. Kennedy's administration. However, organizational changes were made and the next large scale foreign policy issue dealt with by the Kennedy administration, the Cuban Missile Crisis,

was handled much more gracefully.

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