

CHAPTER SIX ; CASTRO'S CUBA ; "I don't run for the office of the presidency to tell you what you want to hear. I run for the office of President because in a dangerous time we need to be told what we must do if we are going to maintain our freedom". This was a theme of many of Kennedy speeches during the 1960 presidential campaign.CHAPTER SIX  
CASTRO

"I don't run for the office of the Presidency to tell you what you want to hear. I run for the office of President because in a dangerous time we need to be told what we must do if we are going to maintain our freedom". This was a theme of many of Kennedy speeches during the 1960 presidential campaign. "When Jack laid it out like that", remembered William Manchester, an old friend of the future president, "you felt challenged. We were perhaps the last liberal patriots to stride down the campaign trail. This was our country, and it was on the wrong track, and we were going to set it right."<sup>1</sup>

The Kennedy family was reared in a competitive ethos. Rose Kennedy, the family matriarch, once said revealingly that her husband "likes the boys to win at sports and everything they try. If they don't win, he will discuss their failure with them, but he doesn't have much patience with the loser." Their father, Joe, Roosevelt's ambassador to Britain 1937-40, was tough, ambitious and dictatorial. He had made several dubious fortunes, one from bootlegging during Prohibition, which he was determined to use to advance his sons' political careers.

The Kennedys were Irish, Catholic and south Boston in origin and although Jack had been to Choate and Harvard, in the 1940's when Jack and Bobby started out on the political train, the Catholic-Irish label was still a stigma in many parts of the U.S. and were used against Jack during the 1960 campaign. The determination to prove the doubters wrong, the drive to win, the belief in muscular *laissez faire* - all these factors ensured that the Kennedy White House would be action-oriented.

There was not much difference in substance between Kennedy and Eisenhower in foreign policy, but Kennedy thought that his predecessor had been too cautious. Kennedy was a young and vigorous cold war warrior, willing to rethink traditional arguments and positions in the struggle against communism. He was fascinated by the opportunities which American power and influence offered him, a fascination all the more potent because of his lack of experience. Rejecting his father's isolationism, he was very much a product of the post-war era, a period in which New Deal principles of mobilisation were put into action in foreign policy. He was influenced by the ideals of Woodrow Wilson and FDR but he was determined to make his own mark.

The excitement generated by a new activist President found ready echoes in the CIA. Dulles quickly realised the kind of impression the agency would have to make on a White House concerned with vigour and management. He and his director of plans, Richard Bissell, moved rapidly to demonstrate their power and skill to key Kennedy officials. They invited a dozen White House aides close to the President to dinner with ten top CIA men. As one of the Kennedy aides present recalled:

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1 William Manchester, *One Brief Shining Moment: Remembering Kennedy* (London, Michael Joseph, 1983), p. 120.

"After most had relaxed with several cocktails, the inside stories of past secret exploits were recounted: it was heady wine. Bissell was asked to introduce himself and talk about his work. 'I'm your man-eating shark', he said. CIA man Robert Amory thought that Bissell had set just the right note ... Before long, McGeorge Bundy reported to Amory that the President had said, 'By gosh, I don't care what it is but if I need some material fast or an idea fast, CIA is the place to go. The State Department takes four or five days to answer a simple yes or no.'"<sup>2</sup>

It was indeed heady wine, all the more heady because the Kennedy brothers were in love with all the mystery and glamour of clandestine operations. Not for nothing were Ian Fleming's James Bond thrillers among the President's favourite books.

## THE BAY OF PIGS

One of the first items on Kennedy's foreign policy agenda was the newly-established regime of Fidel Castro in Cuba. Castro's predecessor, the dictator Fulgencio Batista, had been supported by the U.S. government although Batista ignored advice to reform his government and its pervasive corruption. In January 1959, not entirely to American surprise, Batista was overthrown by Fidel Castro who had been waging a long guerrilla campaign against Batista's regime.

At first Castro was something of an unknown quantity. A CIA man, Jerome Droller, met him in 1959 but did not think he was pro-communist, a view shared by others in the agency. However, over the next year Castro turned increasingly left and American anxiety mounted. He confiscated \$1 billion worth of U.S. property and when no compensation was offered the U.S. retaliated with a ban on imports of Cuban sugar. More ominous were Castro's moves towards the Russians. In 1960 he met Khrushchev for the first time at the United Nations and made a four-and-a-half hour speech accusing the Americans of economic aggression. He agreed to exchange Cuban sugar for Russian arms, while Khrushchev declared that if the U.S. took any hostile action against Cuba he would "support Cuba with rocket fire". Castro also began sending out guerilla invasion teams to the Dominican Republic, Panama, Haiti and Nicaragua. In January, 1961, just before John Fitzgerald Kennedy's inauguration, Castro ordered the U.S. Embassy staff in Havana to be cut from eighty-seven to eleven. In one of his last acts in office, Eisenhower ordered diplomatic relations with Cuba to be severed.

Plans to oust Castro had been in preparation for a full year before Eisenhower left the White House and were in place by the time Kennedy took office. They reflected the same tangled, lurid, and occasionally comic developments which were to dog the agency's long involvement with Cuba. The CIA had prepared a plan for Castro's "elimination" as early as December 1959, and in January 1961 Kennedy directed that the agency should start "covert contingency planning to accomplish the fall of the Castro government". In March Colonel J C King, chief of the CIA's western hemisphere division in the directorate of Plans, had organised a task force and had made it clear that

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<sup>2</sup> Harris Wofford, *Of Kennedys and Kings: Making Sense of the Sixties* (New York, Farrar, Straus & Giroux, 1980), p. 358.

assassination was being considered. In July the CIA station in Havana was given authorisation to assassinate Castro's brother, Raul, but the authorisation was withdrawn within hours of being granted. Such stop-go, last-minute orders were to be a marked feature of the whole Bay of Pigs operation.

Soon after the cancellation of the assassination plan, an even more sinister and murky thread was woven into the anti-Castro plot which was to have far-reaching repercussions - the Mafia connection. In September 1960 Robert Maheu, a former FBI officer turned private investigator and occasional CIA go-between, approached three prominent underworld figures, John Rosselli, Santos Trafficante and Sam Giancana, offering them \$150,000 to kill Castro.

The Mafia connection bristled with danger. There was the deeply unsavoury background of the trio. In the 1920's Rosselli was a member of Longy Zwillman's gang in New Jersey. He then joined up with Al Capone in Chicago where he became an expert in extortion and racketeering. After Capone's arrest he moved westwards to Hollywood where he got involved in union racketeering and was sentenced to ten years for extortion. Giancana was another member of the Capone gang and was a prime suspect in the St Valentine's Day massacre of the Bugs Moran gang. Trafficante had strong links with Cuba where he had a thriving pornography business under Batista's regime, undisturbed by the authorities.

Their backgrounds were bad enough but what was worse was that one of Jack Kennedy's many mistresses, Judith Campbell, was also Giancana's mistress. Giancana was not slow to sniff the blackmail potential of that relationship, particularly since the new president's brother Robert, appointed attorney general, was determined to crack down on organised crime and had targeted Giancana. The Mafia connection was soon discovered by J Edgar Hoover who told Richard Bissell on 18 October 1961 that Giancana and his friends were being indiscreet about their Castro assassination plans. Although several attempts were made to kill Castro over the next few months by means of poison pills, none of them succeeded because the Cubans involved got "cold feet".

Assassination was one track but from March 1960 onwards plans were also being prepared for a major covert operation. Bissell's directorate of Plans was in charge. He described the outline succinctly:

"What was approved was a plan to take about twenty-five Cuban refugees, young and well-motivated, and train them in sabotage and communications techniques - train them to be guerillas - then to insert them into Cuba. In the first class there were twenty-five, and in subsequent classes there might have been thirty to forty-five, not more than that. The design was a classic World War II underground activity. Our operation was to train eventually up to seventy-five or more individuals who would first of all have communications techniques and equipment, and second, have some skill in sabotage. Their primary function was to enter the country, join guerilla groups or resistance groups already there, and put them in direct communications with an external headquarters, partly to exercise command control and partly to enable them to receive logistic supplies by boat and aircraft".<sup>3</sup>

But was a "classic World War II underground activity" really suitable for Cuba in 1961? Kermit Roosevelt's warning in 1953 that covert actions must be

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<sup>3</sup> Interview, 18 July, 1983

finely geared towards particular conditions in the country concerned appeared to have been forgotten. Colonel King and others in the western hemisphere division had failed to take into account the importance of social reform in Central and Latin America and the role it had played in Castro's coming to power. This myopia also existed in the White House. Arthur Schlesinger, Jr., one of Kennedy's advisers, recalled that a cold-war atmosphere pervaded White House discussions about Latin America, with the result that the communist threat to Latin America was seen in the same terms as the Nazi menace in the 1930's. Latin America was regarded with such contempt that it was seen as an obvious target for any totalitarian bully. There was little understanding in Washington that Latin American resistance to U.S. power and influence meant that Latin Americans would "talk" communism, because communism was the great rival to the United States. The Soviets did understand this, and helped: they did not export Marxism, they exported organization.

Munich and appeasement were powerful historical precedents in the Kennedy White House. The new administration was determined not to give in to threats or intimidation: it would meet them head on.<sup>4</sup>

There were others in the agency who recognised that Castro was something new in Latin American politics and that he would not be dislodged as easily as Arbenz. In any operation against Castro, it was clear that there was no chance of any uprising against him, first because he had by now firmly consolidated his power and second because he was genuinely popular.

It was this and other reasons which made several officials in Plans increasingly doubtful of the efficacy of a major operation against Castro. Their doubts were realised when some of the first trainees were infiltrated into Cuba at the end of 1960. Many of them were picked up and most of the air drops also ended up with Castro's forces.

After Kennedy came to power, plans to undermine Castro changed dramatically and became focused on an overt military operation. It was devised by Tracy Barnes, Bissell's special deputy who had been in charge of the Guatemalan coup and by a marine colonel, Jack Hawkins, who was temporarily assigned to the CIA at Allen Dulles' request to give military advice. They did not make a good team. Their plans were logistically weak, and took for granted that the United States would intervene directly if necessary. Barnes was blithely optimistic of success while Hawkins simply did what he was told, sticking closely to his military textbook.

The new plan provoked even more criticism within the agency. Richard Helms, Bissell's chief of operations, thought it had got out of hand and complained that Bissell had made sure that other senior agency officials, notably Robert Amory of intelligence and Sherman Kent of estimates, were kept away from it. Helms was also concerned at the lack of security which had reached farcical levels of incompetence. A CIA courier had lost a briefcase full of top secret papers including a list of agents and contacts in Cuba. On another occasion a secretary, whose brother was in the FBI, was staying in a hotel room next to that of the CIA linkman with the Cuban exiles in Miami. When she overheard the CIA man discussing the operation she made notes which she passed on to her brother. They eventually found their way to Hoover's desk. The FBI director

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<sup>4</sup> Schlesinger, *A Thousand Days*, p 177

promptly passed them on to the agency, no doubt with considerable satisfaction. It was hardly surprising that Helms told friends to have nothing to do with the operation. Relations between him and Bissell disintegrated, which did nothing for the overall coherence of the anti-Castro plan. At this point Allen Dulles should have intervened: he was DCI and had ultimate responsibility for its activities. If such an important affair as the Cuban operation seemed to be breaking down, it was up to him to fix it.

But where was Dulles? At crucial stages while the plan was evolving the fact remains that he was simply not around. It was not that he was against the operation: on the contrary, Dulles believed that the plan would both establish the CIA's reputation with the new President and get rid of Castro. But Dulles should have seen to it that Amory and Kent were involved in the planning. His successor as DCI, John McCone, was certainly of this opinion and made sure that in future their involvement in operations planning became an established part of CIA methodology.

Faced with these inter-office intrigues, Bissell and Barnes pressed ahead with their plans for the operation. The principal points were clear: there would be a landing to establish a beachhead with a defensible perimeter; the landing force would have its own air defence; once the beachhead was secure the Cuban government-in-exile, consisting of anti-Batista, anti-Castro democrats waiting in Florida, would return and be recognised by the U.S.; once this government had established itself, its army, with some overt American support, would advance on Havana and take over the country. Bissell told Kennedy and his national secretary adviser, McGeorge Bundy, that the exiles had a "good fighting chance, and no more". This was a point of considerable controversy after the failure of the operation when critics accused the agency of misleading the White House about the possibility of an extensive anti-Castro uprising. But this prospect, although discussed in the agency, had never been seriously entertained by either Bissell or Dulles.

In retrospect Dulles placed most of the blame for the subsequent failure on vacillation by the White House where Kennedy's lack of military experience and his growing sensitivity to the political hazards of the operation had increasingly serious consequences. More likely, Kennedy simply would not accept that a full U.S. military operation would be necessary to achieve victory; the Bay of Pigs planners, in contrast, probably assumed that Kennedy would send in the marines if necessary. Kennedy refused to be led by the nose, and the result was disaster.

It had been Kennedy's decision to go for a military rather than a traditional covert operation, but he was anxious that it should not be seen to have American backing. Given the scale of a military operation, however, this was virtually impossible. What kind of cover stories could explain away the B-26 bombers which were providing air support? An American connection would be obvious to everyone.

Kennedy's solution to this was to reduce the role of air support. As the time drew near for the start of the operation in mid-April, 1961, major changes like this were introduced almost casually. David Atlee Phillips, who had been closely involved in the anti-Arbenz coup, arrived at the War Room one day at the beginning of April and found that the landing place for the Cuban-exile task force had been changed from the coastal town of Trinidad to the Bay of Pigs, a hundred

miles along the Cuban coast, because Kennedy thought there would be fewer people there and thus that the landing could be more secret. He was also astounded to hear that the first ships to land would be carrying tanks. "Tanks!" Phillips exclaimed when he was told. "We're going to mount a secret operation in the Caribbean with tanks?"<sup>5</sup>

As the countdown to the operation on 17 April 1961 proceeded, there was more and more conflicting pressure. Senator William Fulbright and Arthur Schlesinger, Jr., advised against the operation as did Adlai Stevenson, U.S. Ambassador at the U.N., and Chester Bowles, under secretary of State. Dulles and Bissell argued that any further delay would be fatal, and that the operation either had to start or be cancelled. The Cuban exiles in the task force, "La Brigada", pressed for the operation to go ahead from their bases in Guatemala where they had been trained.

The operation was based on two key objectives: the destruction of Castro's air force, which had been concentrated at one base, and U.S. air support for the invading task force. The first air strike was due to take place on 15 April, but in order to prepare the cover story that the United States was not involved in the invasion, Kennedy made a speech on 12 April stating that the U.S. had no intention of intervening militarily in Cuba. The following day he ordered that the air strike must appear as if it had originated in Cuba with defecting pilots. This was done, but when two B-26 bombers arrived at Key West in Florida, having supposedly attacked their own air fields in Cuba, one reporter noticed that the machine guns had tape on them: they had never been fired. The Cuban Ambassador at the United Nations made a furious denunciation of the attack, claiming that it was an American plot. Adlai Stevenson, unaware that the invasion was proceeding, poured scorn on the Cuban allegations.

At midday on 16 April, the last moment at which the operation could be cancelled, Kennedy gave the final go-ahead but with the critical proviso that there were to be no air strikes after the first one. Why did the President do this? Various sources have ascribed the decision to bitter opposition from Stevenson, who found out that the invasion was imminent but was unable to have it cancelled, and from secretary of State Dean Rusk who warned that air strikes would have a bad effect in the rest of Latin America.

For everyone in the agency the cancellation of air support dealt a body blow to the success of the invasion. Richard Helms said that once the air cover was removed:

"they denuded [the operation]. Whether it would have worked according to the original plan I have no idea. But one thing is for sure: it had no chance of working the way it was finally whittled down."<sup>6</sup>

Bissell was even more forthright about the vacillation in the White House. He succeeded in convincing Kennedy to allow some more air strikes, but these were then either cancelled or much reduced in the number of planes that flew:

"So from an expectation of some forty sorties, we were down to eight or nine actually accomplished. I cannot avoid the impression that if we'd had anything like the forty sorties, we really would have knocked out Castro's air. We would have been effective by a factor of four. I think that did have a definite bearing on

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5 The Night Watch, pp 102-3

6 Interview, 26 July, 1983

the outcome."<sup>7</sup>

Even Castro agreed. Some years later when asked by a reporter why the Americans failed, he replied "they had no air support".

Bissell, aware that the prospects of success were receding with the air strike restrictions, did his best to persuade people not to quit, arguing that the operation was too far advanced to be abandoned:

"[We never] seriously contemplated calling the whole thing off. This is probably where we made the big mistake. But one becomes emotionally and psychologically committed, and things have a momentum of their own."<sup>8</sup>

When "La Brigada" landed on Monday 17 April at Zapata on the Bay of Pigs, Castro's air force, unopposed, sank two brigade transports, one of which was carrying most of the task force's ammunition. On Tuesday morning, after urgent requests, Kennedy approved an air strike but low clouds protected the targets. Three B-26s were shot down and others were damaged. On Tuesday night when the President was hosting a black-tie dinner for congressmen, Bissell asked to see him and pleaded with him for two hours to send more air support. But once again, faced with opposition from Dean Rusk and other civilian advisers, Kennedy compromised: U.S. navy planes could protect Brigade B-26s but they could not fire at Cuban planes or ground targets.

Besides the problems with air support, the Brigade was also experiencing major difficulties with the terrain. Shoals and reefs had not been properly charted because of the last-minute change of landing area, and this impeded the landing craft. When the Brigade did land, they found that Zapata was marshland and were soon bogged down. They fought for three grim days before surrendering to Castro's army. One hundred and fourteen were killed and many others wounded, of whom thirty-six died later in Cuban camps. Some of those captured were to spend over twenty years in Cuban jails.

The decision to withhold air support - the immediate cause of the failure - was part of a much wider miscalculation which Bissell, Dulles and others acknowledged. This was the extraordinarily naive assumption that, as Bissell said, "If an operation couldn't be tied in a court of law to the U.S. government, it would be disclaimable, and that was important".<sup>9</sup> For his part, though Dulles (and others in the CIA) had doubts about the deniability of the operation from the American point of view, Bissell had believed that once it was underway the President would do what was necessary to help it succeed.

Bissell and Dulles were held responsible for the fiasco. Dulles resigned as DCI in November, 1961. Bissell also submitted his resignation. President Kennedy said to Bissell, "In a parliamentary government I would resign. In this government the President can't and doesn't and so you and Allen must go." Bissell was later asked to stay on as deputy director for science and technology by the new DCI, John McCone, but decided to leave as planned.

## POST MORTEM

In the immediate aftermath of the Bay of Pigs, Kennedy displayed the same

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7 Interview, 18 July, 1983

8 Interview, 18 July, 1983

9 Interview 18 July, 1983

vacillation as he had while it was in progress, alternately blaming himself and the agency, threatening to redefine its mandate, reduce its budget, restrict the directorate of Plans and transfer paramilitary operations to the Department of Defense. In the event he did none of these things but no one in the agency was under the illusion that the debacle at the Bay of Pigs was anything other than a watershed for the CIA. There was a pessimistic belief that the agency's luck had simply run out at last, if it hadn't been the Bay of Pigs it would have been something else. They had grown too cocksure, too certain of success under Truman and Eisenhower. Now the day of reckoning had come. Kermit Roosevelt's warning about covert operations rang in many CIA ears.

There were three separate reports into the failure of the Bay of Pigs. Robert Lovett, who had served on Eisenhower's board of consultants on foreign intelligence activities, told Kennedy that the CIA was badly organised, amateurish and too costly. General Maxwell Taylor chaired a commission of inquiry that pinpointed the administrative failures in the operation and the White House's vacillating role. Most controversial of all was the report of the CIA's inspector general, Lyman Kirkpatrick, who incisively blamed the agency and its leading personnel. It remains under lock and key.

Kennedy wanted his brother Robert to run the CIA after Dulles, but Bobby refused, arguing that it was a bad idea to appoint him to a nonpolitical post. John McCone, a Republican who had been an assistant to James Forrestal in 1947, became the new DCI. McCone was a devout Catholic and an equally devout cold warrior. Nevertheless, the President made sure that his brother as attorney general played a key role in thoroughly supervising the whole intelligence community, and Bobby Kennedy became the effective head of covert operations. Bobby Kennedy was the driving force in toughening up the agency and making it more effective. Despite the Bay of Pigs, the brothers both realised that alone of the government agencies, the CIA had been willing to act and to do what the President wanted. They saw the Bay of Pigs as a failure of management, not of policy.

The agency never recovered from the light that was cast upon it in the wake of the Bay of Pigs. It had thought of itself as a secret service in the British tradition: it found it was not.

## THE CUBAN MISSILE CRISIS

The most serious implications of the Bay of Pigs were felt immediately in Anglo-Soviet relations, as Kennedy and his advisers had feared. The Soviets read the new president as weak and indecisive because of his failure to force the Bay of Pigs operation through to success, and quickly moved to take advantage of this.

Khrushchev's belligerent boasting and truculence increased the tension dramatically. He told every western visitor to Moscow that Russian missiles were ready to force the Western allies out of West Berlin. There were incidents in Berlin which led to fears that the situation would explode. In August 1961 the Berlin Wall was constructed.

On 22 April, 1961, just three days after the surrender of the Cuban task force, Kennedy met Eisenhower to ask his advice about the Soviet reaction. Eisenhower advised him to keep his position strong at the conference table and to



"let the enemy see that our country was not afraid. We believe in what is right and attempt to insist upon it."<sup>10</sup>

Khrushchev and Kennedy met for the first time in Vienna in June, 1961, two months after the Bay of Pigs. It was a bruising encounter which left Kennedy in no doubt as to Khrushchev's contempt for him and his government. Nursing his wounds, he told the distinguished columnist James Reston somewhat ruefully: "I think he did it because of the Bay of Pigs. I think he thought that anyone who was so young and inexperienced as to get into that mess could be taken, and anyone who got into it, and didn't see it through had no guts. So he just beat the hell out of me. So I've got a terrible problem. If he thinks I'm inexperienced and have no guts, until we remove those ideas we won't get anywhere with him. So we have to act ... Now we have a problem to make our power credible, and Vietnam looks like the credible place."<sup>11</sup>

The Soviet arms buildup in Cuba had commenced in 1960 with considerable shipments of conventional weapons for the Cuban army, along with Soviet technicians and training personnel. By early 1962 the Russians had supplied the Cubans with sixty MiG jets. Between July and mid-September the CIA reported that about seventy ships had delivered various types of military supplies and construction equipment and SA-2 surface-to-air missiles. It was in August 1962 that a U-2 spyplane on a reconnaissance flight over the island took photographs of a surface-to-air missile site under construction. On 14 October another U-2 flight brought back evidence of a ballistic missile site under construction at San Cristobal. This immediately set the alarm bells ringing at the CIA and the White House was alerted that a major crisis was at hand.

The agency's handling of the crisis helped it to win back all the reputation it had lost the previous year. The new DCI, McCone, had already warned that president in September that in his opinion the Soviets were not just installing anti-aircraft missiles. He pointed out that anti-aircraft missiles were defensive, and that therefore they were there to defend something more sinister. When this was confirmed, McCone's stock at the White House soared. The work of Ray Cline, deputy director of intelligence, and his analysts, was equally impressive. If the President was going to order the removal of the missiles, he must have accurate information. Cline coordinated the vast mass of technical, diplomatic, military and counter intelligence material.

Colonel Oleg Penkovsky had been passing Soviet military information to the west for over a year. This enabled the CIA to provide specific details about the capabilities of the various types of Soviet missiles. Cline was also shown the closely guarded Kennedy-Khrushchev correspondence that took place during the crisis and in which the Soviet leader made various demands.

Cline's material was submitted to the special "Excom" group (executive committee of the National Security Council) which was set up on 16 October 1962 and which for the next thirteen days monitored developments and advised the president. Within Excom there was a clear division of opinion about what should be done. The CIA and the Joint Chiefs of Staff favoured a military attack on Cuba. Robert Kennedy, George Ball and Robert McNamara favoured a blockade of Cuba, believing that this course of action would also help to defuse

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10 Eisenhower Diaries, New York, 1981, pp 386-7

11 David Halberstam, *The Best and the Brightest*, pp 96-7

tension. McCone gradually accepted this view.

On 22 October Kennedy gave a dramatic televised address to the nation, revealing the findings of the U-2 reconnaissance flights and demanding the removal of the missiles. In the meantime, he announced, there would be a naval blockade of Cuba to ensure that no further weapons were brought in. One hundred and eighty U.S. warships circled the island. Khrushchev replied on 26 October offering to remove the missiles in return for a pledge not to invade Cuba. The next day there was another message, this time demanding the dismantling of U.S. missile sites in Turkey. The Excom group, prompted by Robert Kennedy, decided to answer the first reply and ignore the second, although Kennedy later removed the sites in Turkey. Sixteen Soviet ships, some with crated missiles on their decks, turned round in mid-Atlantic and headed for home.

## OPERATION MONGOOSE

The humiliation of the Bay of Pigs and the near miss of the missile crisis helped to revive the idea of Castro's assassination. Kennedy mentioned it hypothetically to Tad Szulc of the New York Times seven months after the Bay of Pigs. Szulc told the President that the removal of Castro would not necessarily lead to any major political change in Cuba, adding that in his view the U.S. should not be party to political murders. Kennedy said he agreed. "We can't get into that kind, or we would all be targets," he said to Szulc. But there is clear evidence that the Kennedy administration was involved in plots to kill Castro.

In October and November 1961 Richard Helms, giving evidence to Congress fourteen years later, recalled that the CIA was instructed to draw up plans to get rid of Castro. These plans would obviously have to be covert because 'nobody had any stomach anymore for any invasions or any military fiascos of that kind'. The atmosphere, Helms remembered, "was pretty intense ... Nutty schemes were born of the pressure ... No doubt about it, it was white heat."<sup>12</sup>

The driving force behind plans for the assassination of Castro, and plans for the disruption of the Cuban economy, Operation Mongoose, was Robert Kennedy who had announced in January 1962 that it was a "top priority ... all else is secondary."<sup>13</sup>

The Mongoose team, led by Bill Harvey, came up with no less than thirty-three different plans to deal with Castro which became increasingly desperate and bizarre as failure followed upon failure. There was an exploding seashell which would be placed on the sea floor near the place where Castro was known to swim; impregnating Castro's wet suit with poison coating; dusting Castro's shoes with thallium salts in the expectation that this would cause his beard to fall out and so destroy his charisma. A mistress of Castro agreed to give him two poison capsules and hid them in her jar of cold cream. They melted. Another more creative plan involved an attempt to convince Cuba's large Roman Catholic population that the Second Coming was imminent but only if they got rid of Castro first. A U.S. submarine was to surface off Havana and shoot star shells into the night sky, heralding the return of the Lord. The theology was even more dubious than the plan itself. It was sheer opera buffe.

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12 Church Committee, *Alleged Assassination Plots*, p. 334.

13 *Ibid*, p. 336.

Other attempts were more serious. In 1963 at least six major CIA operations were carried out in Cuba aimed at disrupting the government and damaging industry and agriculture. In the autumn of 1963, a major in the Cuban army close to Castro, Rolando Cubela, who had been working for the CIA since 1961, was given encouragement to launch a coup and attempt the assassination of Castro and other Cuban leaders. On 22 November 1963 he was given a poison pen device which he rejected in favour of something more sophisticated but he was also told that he would be given rifles with telescopic sights. That day Kennedy was assassinated in Daly Plaza, Dallas.

Castro was with a French journalist when he heard the news of Kennedy's murder. "Es una mala noticia" ["It's bad news"], he kept repeating, saying that while he held Kennedy responsible for everything, nevertheless Kennedy had come "to understand many things over the past few months"<sup>14</sup> Kennedy's death was unpleasantly close to the murky story of the attempts to kill Castro. It led to all kinds of horrifying speculations. Was it a Mafia job? Was it retaliation by Castro? For a time Lyndon Johnson thought this was the case. What about Lee Harvey Oswald's contacts with the anti-Castro Cubans, contacts which were never revealed to the Warren Commission? Could it have been a CIA-inspired murder, with the agency seeking revenge for the Bay of Pigs? Bobby Kennedy took this thought so seriously that he asked John McCone to convince him it was not so.

After Kennedy's death there were no further direct CIA attempts to kill the Castro. But the Cuban connection provided the agency with a number of freelance agents who were to be involved in operations worldwide.

## CHE

Cuban exile pilots, trained for the Bay of Pigs and for Mongoose missions into Cuba, later flew in Africa and the Far East on CIA missions. Others became important operatives in the Spanish speaking world, notably in Latin America.

Felix Rodriguez was such an operative. His family had prospered under Batista - his uncle had been the Minister of Public Works - and settled in Mexico when Castro took over. Aged seventeen in 1959, Felix joined the Cuban exile anti-Castro movement. He trained as a guerrilla in the Dominican Republic. Six weeks before the Bay of Pigs in 1961, he was one of thirty-five "Grey Team" exiles in seven five-man groups infiltrated into Cuba. After the failure of the invasion, he successfully escaped from the island to become a CIA freelance agent. In 1967 he was an adviser to the Bolivian army chasing Che Guevara.

Che had been the second figure in the Cuban revolution that brought Castro to power in 1959. In 1965 he left Cuba, going to Latin America to stir up revolutions. In 1967 he was reported to be in Bolivia, and on 9 October that year was captured by a unit of the Bolivian army to which Felix Rodriguez was attached. Che could have been a formidable enemy indeed if he had not lost all tactical judgement and tried to campaign on the alti plano, the open country of Bolivia. Helicopters and airplanes could - and did - shadow him: it was not like fighting in a jungle. To cap it all, he was asthmatic, and going up to that height was not good for him.

The Bolivian high command ordered Che to be shot the same day that he

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<sup>14</sup> Schlesinger, Robert Kennedy and his Times, p 701

was captured: they were fearful that if he lived he might successfully foment revolution at a later date. Rodriguez carried the death order:

"'Comandante,' I said, 'I have done everything in my power, but orders have come from the Supreme Bolivian Command...'

His face turned as white as writing paper. 'It is better like this, Felix. I should never have been captured alive.'

When I asked him if he had any message for his family, he said, 'Tell Fidel that he will soon see a triumphant revolution in America.' He said it in a way that, to me, seemed to mock the Cuban dictator for abandoning him in the Bolivian jungle. Then Che added, 'And tell my wife to get remarried and try to be happy.'

Then we embraced, and it was a tremendously emotional moment for me. I no longer hated him. His moment of truth had come, and he was conducting himself like a man. He was facing his death with courage and grace."<sup>15</sup>

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15 Felix I. Rodriguez and John Weisman, *Shadow Warrior* (New York, Simon & Schuster, 1989), p. 169.